

## Chris Williamson – Master Chartered Architect 2023-24



The first time I was invited to come along to a livery event, I didn't have the confidence to make it through the door. I looked through the window and saw robes, medals, important looking people, a grand space – I didn't think I would fit in, so I left. I was about 30 and it would be some years later before the opportunity presented itself again. This time, I'm glad I made it over the threshold, grateful for the years of friendship, the professional experiences and purpose that have followed.

But I'm reminded of this moment as I think about my year ahead as Master, and the priorities that I hope will define my term. The first is social mobility, and making younger and more diverse members of our profession welcome. According to research by the Sutton Trust, architecture is among the least socially diverse. Only around 15% of architecture students come from non-professional backgrounds – we must provide more opportunities and more role models. Education plays a big part, and this will be the focus of my year.

My mum may have been too proud to let me have free school dinners, but she was also too sensible to give up my fantastic free education at Ilkeston Grammar School, for which I will always be incredibly grateful. But in the 1970s, architecture – indeed any profession – wasn't suggested to many capable children because of their background. So I enrolled on a graphic design course, before begging Leicester Polytechnic to let me switch to architecture after reading, one wet Wednesday lunchtime, the book *'Your Architect'* by Derek Senior and David Rock. It is pertinent, therefore, that the guest speaker at the Initiation Lunch is Kate Cheyne, Head of the School of Art, Design and Architecture at De Montfort University.

Studying to be an architect is a financial burden on its own, but after this comes the need for professional experience, internships, clients, networks... barriers for many who might be the first in their family to go to university, the first person they know to become an architect. Through partnerships with other organisations and liveries, through our events, our work with schools, our education and charitable activities, we need to show what's involved in a career in design. How you become an architect – step by step – what we do, and why it matters. I'm proud to be part of the Company's mentor programme, which is going from strength to strength.

Another huge challenge for architects, and all involved in the industry, is the environment. My few decades in architecture have taught me that many things repeat: recessions, crises at the RIBA, design trends, political policy and, unfortunately, concern for climate change. When Andrew Weston and I were at Leicester School of Architecture, we both won awards for designs associated with energy conservation. But when we set up Weston Williamson in 1985, it was difficult to convince clients that sustainability was an issue. Now it is irrefutable. It is the single most important challenge facing our profession – and, indeed, humanity. But as Charles Eames said, "without problems there is no design."

The final thing I'd like to consider: what should we expect from a professional membership organisation today? Take, for example, the RIBA. During my time as RIBA's International Vice President, I gained an insight into some of the challenges. As a member myself, I empathise with the frustration in paying for accreditation that ultimately offers only a club, not a qualification. I believe that is something the education system must address with a commitment to supporting lifelong learning, not just a lunchtime CPD from a manufacturer. There are many changes proposed, with ARB potentially taking a greater role.

I firmly believe that there is a huge opportunity for organisations like the RIBA and the WCCA to engage in online, life-long learning modules. Given the global challenges we face, these must be as relevant in Shanghai and Seattle as they are in Spitalfields. I also believe that within the City of London, our Architects' Company is leading the way in promoting quality in architecture, and showing the value of a membership body. The livery companies were established to set and maintain the highest standards, and to help students and apprentices continually improve. I believe that these attributes are more important now than ever.

I'm looking forward to a diverse, engaging awards and events programme at Temple Bar over the next twelve months. We have a great programme of talks and lectures, which will contribute greatly to a thought-provoking curriculum, and practice visits to many of our members to learn from our peers. Our Masters' overseas trip will actually be the one Valerie organised during her time as Master, but was unable to instigate due to Covid in both 2020 and 2021. So all of Valerie's hard work and organisation will not have been in vain, and will be utilised on our trip to Lisbon. Professor Stuart Russell, who gave the brilliant 2022 Reith Lecture, has agreed to give our annual lecture on the fascinating subject of Artificial Intelligence, which will have immense implications for architecture.

I might not always feel comfortable in the robe or leading a procession, but I greatly respect the traditions of the Architects' Company and value its role in bringing people together from all walks of life with a shared passion and purpose. My career at Weston Williamson has been about such connections; designing the spaces and infrastructure that catalyse opportunity, economic and social development through transport – but it has been equally important to me to provide an environment where young architects, from all walks of life, can flourish.

Thanks are due to Chris Dyson for the dedication he has given to the WCCA this Wren 300 year as Master. His will be a hard act to follow. Thanks also to a number of past Masters who I have learned a lot from. I look forward to working with them all, and the Wardens, on behalf of the Architects' Company for my term. In that regard, congratulations to Nigel Thompson on being elected Master Parish Clerk – out of interest, Nigel is one of the most senior of our members, with a membership number of 011. Only James Thomas (at 002) is above him, with David Cole-Adams snapping at his heels at 014! These were among the select group who were present at the founding meeting. Lots to live up to. It's an exciting time ahead and I am very honoured to play a part.

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