

TONY FRETTON

PUBLISHED IN

10x10. Ed. Phaidon. Londres, 2005

I met Tony Fretton years ago in Lisbon. His reserved character suits the architecture he makes. The ideas on which his work is based are peculiar. His understanding of Architecture as performance or his social sense, or the ideas behind the technology we use are habitual terms of his discourse.

His relationship with artists such as Donald Judd, Sol Le Witt, or Mark Pilmott is well known, and their influence can be seen in a veiled fashion his constructed work.

Some people call Fretton an “artist”. I prefer to see him as a unique and magnificent architect.

The Lisson Gallery, his best-known work, continues to overcome us with its strength. It is not that it opens onto the street; rather it seems as though the street opens to the gallery. It is that strong. It meets the requisites that Fretton imposes for the transformation of the spaces by the user, for the possession of the space by the visitor to the gallery. And when he explains how “the building’s volume rhymes with its surroundings without differences among buildings, objects or open spaces”, it is true. Continuity in the concatenation of spaces, the street and the surroundings included, is produced in a surprising manner. Not even a sign. And the gallery nonetheless continues to impose itself, despite its small size.

His red house in Dorset, Faith House, made out of red marble, was declared the best building in England in 2002 by the English newspaper The Guardian. Is it a house? A temple? A place for meditation? Everything is possible in Fretton’s architecture. The small piece emerges in a garden in a mysterious manner. Strong, radiant and red.

The project for the English Embassy in Warsaw won a contest held in 2003, winning over other wonderful proposals by Adjaye, Chipperfield and Benson & Forsyth. The project is very complete. Two strong volumes: one closed to the street, private, for the ambassador’s residence, the other, larger, more public, open to the street, veiled by a wall of translucent stone (alabaster?), the embassy itself. The operation is completed by an entrance patio and the garden behind which conserves part of the former. The high volume of the Embassy part of the building, with the large skylight recalls the lovely project that Fretton presented for the Tokyo Forum that, while being the best, did not win. It is in its entirety a delicate exercise of light. And it possesses the ambiguity typical of all Fretton’s designs.

Years ago, David Turnbull wrote an interesting text in which he summed up Fretton’s spirit, materialized in his designs, as of the conjunction of the ordinary with the extraordinary. I believe this describes our architect well, as he makes an ambiguous and at the same time radical architecture. Extraordinary.

David Vargas, an Italian architect and critic, said that Tony Fretton is an architect that “listens to the place”. I think he is right. And afterwards, Fretton responds to the place, to

the preexisting, with his own and powerful voice that resounds strong in the agitated panorama of contemporary architecture. Fretton continues to follow his own path with an architecture very much his own, capable of seducing those of us who love beauty, capable of changing the world.