Jerwood Applied Arts Prize 2005: Metal

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Jerwood Applied Arts Prize 2005: Metal
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Exhibition Tour

A touring programme is planned for this year's Jerwood Applied Arts Prize exhibition. Please contact the Exhibitions Department at the Crafts Council for details.

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JERWOOD
CHARITY

Zoka Zola in conversation with Helen Clifford

Creative Relationships: An Architect's Point of View

'Our buildings are made of metal but this is not something that many people would think about; metals are the real building blocks of architecture, providing a support to more visible materials'
– Ron Arad, foreword to Chris Lefteri, *Metals: Materials for Inspirational Design, 2004.*

One of the key issues in contemporary metalwork is its place within the urban and rural environment. Many metalworkers – such as Chris Knight, Steven Follen and the jeweller Wendy Ramshaw – experiment with larger-scale work, grilles, gabbion seating and gates, making their mark on the land and cityscape. *The Jerwood Applied Arts Prize 2005: Metal* provides an opportunity to explore the relationship between metalworkers and planners, makers and architects. One architect particularly interested in the involvement of craftspeople in architecture is Zoka Zola. She studied architecture at Zagreb University in Croatia, and at the Architectural Association in London, qualifying as an architect in 1990. She established her own studio in London the same year, and approached the Crafts Council with a design for the 1993 exhibition Twentieth Century Silver. Zoka moved to Chicago in 1997 where she is currently working on a zero-energy house. In the following interview with Helen Clifford she explains her relationship with metalworkers, and explains her great optimism about their future role within architectural pratice.

HC: Zoka, how did your design for *Twentieth Century Silver* represent your architectural principles?
ZZ: The design received the Beeby Award first prize for contribution to the building industry in the United Kingdom. Although other contestants submitted much larger projects the jurors explained that their decision was based on the way this exhibition employed a combination of materials (polycarbonate sheets were used in the building industry for the first time), and for the way I worked with the skills and strengths of people and the characteristics of materials. These criteria of excellence, and how the architect manages them, are central to my practice.

Twentieth Century Silver
1994
Crafts Council Exhibition
Photograph: Dennis Gilbert

HC: How do you see your relationship with craftspeople, especially metalworkers, within your projects?
ZZ: From an architect's perspective, craftspeople represent a reservoir of skilled people, ranging from roofers to metalworkers. It is the architect's responsibility to make the most creative use of these skills, drawing together their abilities into a single successful project.

HC: Can you give me some practical examples of these relationships?
ZZ: The roofer knows how to lay materials to make the roof waterproof. Recently I was watching a roofer in action. I was fascinated with this skill, as he folded this modified bitumen membrane and worked out the difficult geometry of the roof slope with mastery. My relationship with this roofer was one of utmost respect, and professional comradeship.

Street Lamp, Chicago
Photograph: Zoka Zola

Let me give you another example. Another aspect of my work is an interest in public spaces and urban furniture. By urban furniture I mean benches, railings, dust bins and street lamps. Urban furniture is, as I am sure every metal worker is aware, very often not really designed, or rarely designed well. In the same way that cities need good buildings, master planning and open spaces, so they need good street furniture. This is a job that craftspeople do well. I designed some railings for my own home in Chicago. The metalworker who made the railings had pride in his craft. His ability to translate my design into three dimensions inspired respect, it involved complex decisions. These railings had numerous hidden mathematical problems with little room for error. I helped a bit and the railing was done, many parts done over and over again – and we would figure out things in the workshop. Without the metalworkers' knowledge of their craft the railing could not be created.

Stair rail at Pfanner House, Chicago
2002
Photograph: Doug Fogelson

HC: How do architects approach the problem of making?
ZZ: Some advanced programmes for teaching architects include training in welding and making structures in metal. However I personally prefer to work in collaboration with people who are better at making than I am, who have the skills of working with specific materials. Training architects to build things with their own hands, or to find where and how to find people who can execute a job, represent the two ways of joining skills to the solving of architectural problems. I am always actively looking for people who can do good work in anything related to architecture.

HC: How do architects find skilled craftspeople to work with?
ZZ: The Bartlett School of Architecture, London, where I taught, created a source book of people who could make things for architects, and places from where they could be sourced. It was an invaluable guide, it could be a model for other such publications (both printed and on the internet) that would in turn forge closer links between architects and makers. We need a grass-roots directory with names, biographies, and images – something like the online Crafts Council Index, of craftsmen and women who can work with architects. This could be launched in conjunction with websites like www.archinect.com or www.europaconcorsi.com.

HC: You have experience of both British and American architectural practice. Is there any difference in their use of craftspeople?
ZZ: In the UK, it is easier to find these craftspeople than it is in the US. Maybe this is because of the specific market and support forces in Britain? When the role that these craftspeople play in architectural projects begins to decline, as it has in the US, architects miss them very much. Without craft, the building industry is 'stiff', it weakens its ability to innovate, to modify, to test new ideas. It does not have the knowledge, the courage, or the money, to change its mode of production.

HC: How do you foresee the future involvement of craftspeople within architectural projects?
ZZ: Craftspeople can extend their range of work by working with industry on prototypes. Any inventive process creates prototypes, test pieces, and one-offs. This process could be greatly informed and improved with the knowledge and the physical work of a craftsperson. This could apply to the production of street lamps, railing, awnings, shading louvres, mobile solar devices, fasteners, metal stairs, window profiles and many other things. Let us take as an example the production of steel lamp posts imitating the cast iron posts of the turn of the last century. Why take this re-productive route? Because there are few designers to help them create 'modern' lamps that represent today's rather than yesterday's design. And if the industry does have designers to help them create such new designs, it needs to invest large amounts of money to make tools for this new design. It lacks the confidence that this new design will sell better than the design they have already. A craftsperson can help this manufacturer, by helping develop tools and the pilot project, to bridge the gap that industry – which is too inert, too large or too awkward – cannot cross on its own.

Roofers, metalworkers, and prototype makers who execute architects' or designers' ideas, are not – I assume – what the readers of this catalogue have in mind when they contemplate the future of craft in the UK. But to an architect these are the people who make innovation possible. They need to be involved in mapping our way forward.

HC: Are there other architects who share your ideas about the involvement of craftspeople and the balance of fulfilling a technical problem and imaginative creative problem-solving? Is there a forum for discussion and exchange of ideas?
ZZ: It is not a topic I hear being discussed.

HC: Are there examples of other architectural projects that have involved imaginative metalwork that you admire?
ZZ: Almost daily, I see Anish Kapoor's Cloud Gate at the Milllennium Park in Chicago, made out of polished stainless steel, which is now being re-welded into a monolithic object. I think this is the closest example I can give you.

HC: Do the metalworkers in your projects get separate recognition for their role?
ZZ: When publishing or submitting a project I am only asked to list the names of the photographer, the contractor and the engineer. I feel there should be flexibility in crediting: I want to list only individuals, or organisations who actually contributed. I feel that it will be easier to do this in the future.

HC: Could you summarise your optimism for the future of collaborative development and interchange between architects and makers.
ZZ: Firstly, I foresee that industry will become 'mass customised', which means that tools will be flexible and computer-driven to produce potentially unique products. Secondly, the development of nanotechnology in material science will accelerate enough to be able to give us materials with properties we have never had before. For example, one day we will have metals much stronger than titanium, or more workable than lead. With these two technological developments we will be able to make things using industrial techniques that are more than standardised metal sections welded or bolted together.

Without metalsmiths these two technologies cannot advance in the same way, or with the same speed. They need to be part of the team, because metalsmiths understand the nature of their materials and understand their workable properties better, or in a different way than the scientists, designers and architects. They are the most exciting part of the way we will build our world in the future, because they are the closest to the nature of metal, its weaknesses, strengths, and its potential.

Contributor –
Zoka Zola, RIBA, AIA

After graduating from the Architectural Association in 1990 Zoka Zola worked and taught in London where she established her own studio. In 1993 she designed the exhibition *Twentieth Century Silver* for the Crafts Council. She has lectured world wide and is currently designing a zero-energy house in Chicago, where she has worked since 1997.

#61 Organism
2003
Junko Mori
Photograph: Junko Mori