

IGOR MARKO ⁰⁰

THIS SLOVAK ARCHITECT OF PUBLIC SPACES IS TRANSFORMING BRITAIN'S RIVERSIDE AND SKYLINE, WITH GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF INTERACTION AND LIVEABILITY



Architect and urban designer Igor Marko brings an arts background and a commitment to community involvement to visionary public space projects. Operating at the crossroads of architecture with urban design, landscape, branding, lighting and art, Igor formed a multi-disciplinary practice with a focus on "liveability" in cities. He came from grey Slovakia in the mid-1990s to the colourful and diverse metropolis of London. At a café on Jubilee Place, we are in sight of One Canada Square, the tallest tower of London's Canary Wharf business and financial district; its trademark "halo" was one of the early projects of his team, known then as Art2Architecture. Igor rolled in to talk to BOND, with funky hair, thin moustache and, looking youthful in a stylish combination of black jacket and narrow trousers, standing out amongst the undistinguished bankers. His answers to the questions are clear and full of passion.





"I think the world is on a tipping point. Look at all the social, political and ecological changes across the world since the millennium," he says. "We are now operating in an age where everything is constantly changing. In the turbulent market, our ability to communicate is crucial for survival. Nobody can tell whether the current role of an architect as such will survive. On the other hand, I believe that it is a unique chance for us to become truly entrepreneurial."

"Architecture is an incredibly challenging profession, so for me the process of developing and growing never stops. Our profession is adapting to the current global circumstances. Architects no longer just wait for clients, but often create their own briefs, and then pitch to a client. Our role is not only that of designers, but also initiators of change. Architects have a lot of catching up to do if they want a leading position in shaping the future of our cities. I believe that the only way to do this is to build connections between architecture and business in an entrepreneurial way."

Why did he become an architect? "I grew up in an architectural and artistic family. Our apartment



was like the centre of a parallel universe, a place of constant change, creative energy and discussion. Architecture was my choice of reason, although in my heart I was more drawn to art, which became apparent during my studies, so I naturally gravitated towards projects on the borderline of architecture and other creative disciplines. Beyond the circle of my colourful family universe was a sad, grey timelessness, where socialism was the only reality. After the Velvet Revolution [the fall of the Communist regime in 1989], the transition period into capitalism didn't bring the anticipated change. There was little potential to translate our creativity into practice. Going abroad for inspiration seemed a natural thing."

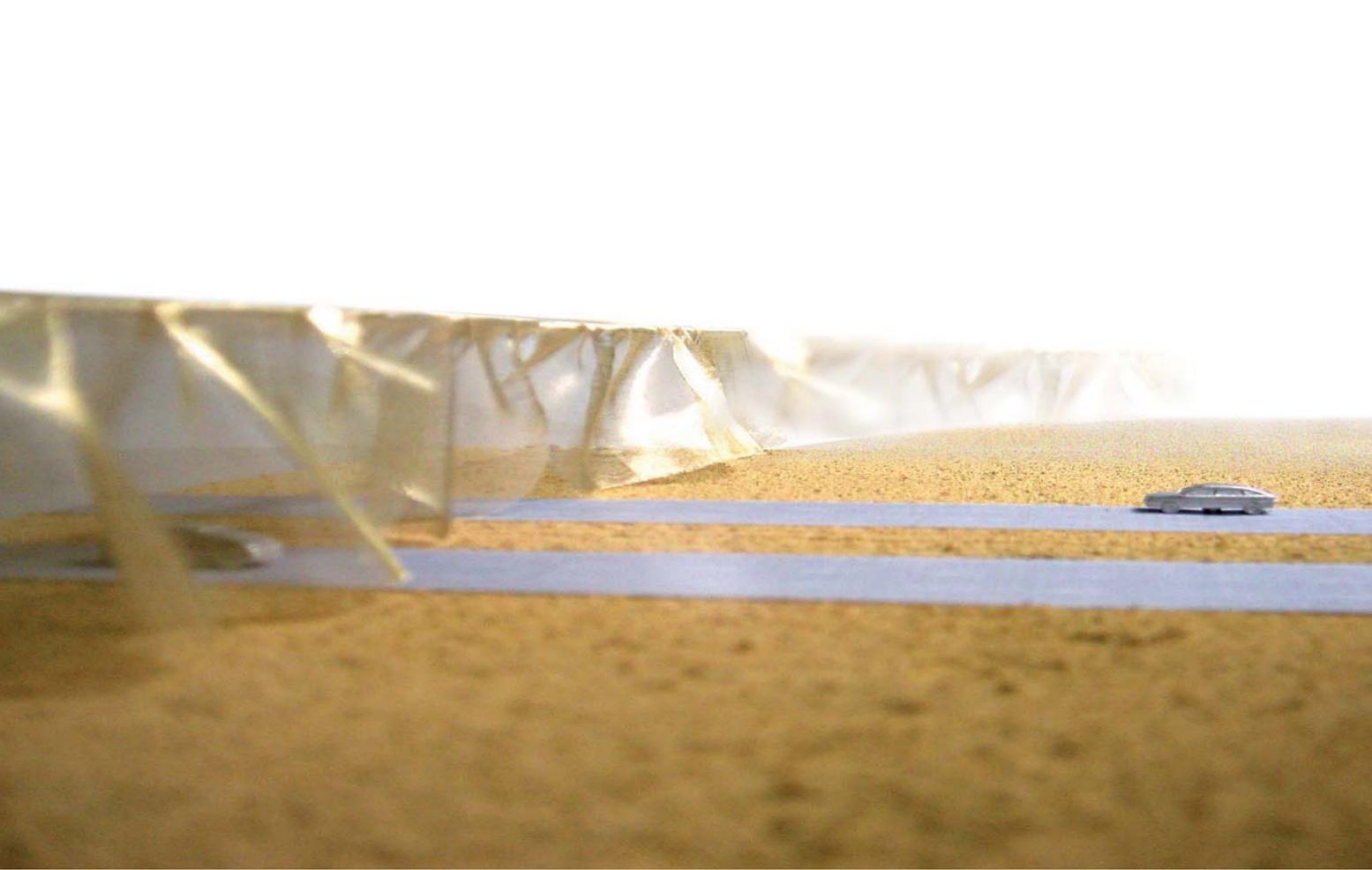
Our profession is adapting to the current global circumstances

Igor Marko established Art2Architecture with artist Peter Fink in 1996. At the time architects didn't pay so much attention to what goes on between the buildings. "I wanted to push the boundaries of architecture. From my artistic background, I felt that

there might be something interesting in combining things. Peter had a lot of experience with public art and an interest in cities in terms of urbanism, so we met on the crossroads – the public space. We were just testing things, so it was trial and error. It was a very liberating process; we didn't have a 'masterplan'. We won two prestigious competitions in one year, Car Free London and Westminster Millennium Post, and we set up Art2Architecture backed up by the reputation and financial impulse gained by this initial success.

"Peter, about 20 years my senior, is an extrovert. As personalities we are like chalk and cheese. He expresses his ideas gesticulating, excited, and full of charisma with his trademark fluorescent orange spectacles. I am more withdrawn, in my own creative world, and often came across as quiet, shy or even arrogant in those early days. To be honest, our collaboration never ceases to surprise me. It's more common for architectural partnerships to be people of similar age, taste, background or experience. Peter and I would be attracted to completely different things. However, that's also what has united us and what brought a new approach to projects."





Please tell the readers of BOND more about the competitions. “We won the Car Free London competition with an idea to restore the River Thames to the connective London ‘route map’,” he says. “River taxis and Thames Clippers – which are integrated with public transport now – hadn’t been introduced. We proposed a dedicated car-free cycle and pedestrian environment along and over the river. A cycle journey from Battersea to Greenwich that had taken more than an hour would take only half an hour, integrated with a cycle hire system [a city bike system was launched in London in 2011]. The Westminster Millennium Post competition was to create street furniture for the borough of Westminster. Our proposal had in-built interactivity. Almost as living objects, the elements would react and adapt to the environment, a very new concept at the time. Nowadays, ‘interactivity’ features in most aspects of our lives. Ten years ago, the technology wasn’t ready for all of our ideas; we were ahead of our time. Still, we had earned credibility and this kick-started the success of our studio. Car Free London has become the symbolic vision for London, and it is taken out of the drawer by every new mayor.”

Interactivity became integral for Art2Architecture projects. “For us, interactivity has two levels – the first is an inevitable part of every project, and that’s bringing future users into the design process, so that they have a sense of ‘ownership’ of the place. The second is the designed interactivity, which refers to technology. Bull Ring Wind Wands is a good example of this. The wands became a marker in the newly developed area in the heart of

Birmingham, giving orientation and definition on the crossroads of two main shopping streets. Gently swaying in the wind, the ‘wands’ constantly change, the metal leaves rotating at the top to reflect the surroundings. They instantly became a popular meeting spot.

We need more irony and fun to connect with others

“On projects involving soft landscape, it takes time for the place to grow and settle in, but the process is just as rewarding, especially when you see them becoming more and more popular with people. Unfortunately, the architectural press gives too much emphasis to shiny images snapped on completion day, ideally with no people in them! For me, the celebratory moment of completion is just the beginning of another journey in the life of a project. Success can be assessed only some time after ‘handover’ day, when the place takes a life of its own as people use and occupy it. With some projects, the transformation is instantaneous, like the Bull Ring, or in the lighting of One Canada Square, Canary Wharf’s tallest building, which has been nicknamed the ‘halo’. Our concept became a brand across the whole new financial district, with other towers taking similar approaches.”

Northala Fields Park in London’s Ealing district is a landmark project for the team. A visual delight, there is more to the monumental landscaped park

than its form. “The area was a wasteland between three communities. The local council called an open competition for a new park to provide a vital asset for the area and at the same time deal with flood risk, and provide a barrier to the north end of the A40 highway. They chose our proposal not only for the artistic land and ecological strategy, but also because we offered a way for the park to self-finance. Recycled spoil from the old Wembley Stadium and Heathrow Terminal 5 are buried under the grassy mounds, and the deposition of this waste generated income of £6 million, delivering the park at no cost to the taxpayer. Public consultations for this project involved probably the most thorough engagement of people. For me as an architect, it was a very rewarding process. I learned that if you engage people very early on, and if you are honest with them about your intentions, then they are part of the process and not on the other side. Northala started as an art commission, but by the end the project went far beyond the two disciplines.”

FoRM is the practice set up by Igor Marko and Peter Fink, with landscape architect Rick Rowbotham. “FoRM is a laboratory for green urbanism and a multidisciplinary practice. Our main concern is the liveability of cities. The expertise of our team, as well as good collaborative relationships with specialist consultants, is a valuable asset not only here in the UK but increasingly in Eastern Europe, India and China, where fundamental issues of sustainability in growing cities need to be addressed holistically. Integrating our landscape expertise has widened our portfolio and enabled us to diversify.”



Igor talked about FoRM’s plan to turn the riverbank between the cities of Manchester and Salford into five miles of walking and cycling paths and waterside park. “No matter at what scale, each project starts from the human scale and we keep this principle across all our work. Very small but focused interventions can create a resonance across larger parts of a city. In our Irwell River Park masterplan, for instance: from new bridges to revitalized waterfronts and squares, the project components can be delivered on a one-at-a-time basis, when funds are available. At the beginning, we devised the overall vision and it is important for each section of the project to reflect that. The project also connects three boroughs, all with historic rivalries. In the past, everyone turned their backs on the river, so the masterplan is not only about creating the physical park but also uniting those three parts of the city to celebrate the waterfront. This year, we have completed the first section of the park, the Trafford Wharf promenade, in one of the most difficult regeneration zones along the River Irwell. The new quayside completes a loop linking into a new bridge across the river, where the new MediaCityUK, containing the northern headquarters of the BBC, has been just completed.”

Green living should become mainstream

The expansion of western architects to the Middle East and China is well underway, and Igor is a part of it. “We are increasingly working outside our own context, bridging vast cultural and social differences. Paradoxically, the last decade of economic boom has brought an international architectural style that is sterile in many ways. A few architects have pushed the boundaries, but not many have challenged the client’s brief. Many iconic buildings haven’t created the expected effect and have become just another tourist attraction – seen, ticked and archived. In large cities, the economy of those new icons has been diluted, but many smaller cities are still recovering from investments that

were never returned, facing the high cost of maintenance and the operation of buildings that have little use for their citizens.”

Perhaps the economic climate helps to challenge this approach. “It pushes the industry back to a human scale, to be innovative and resourceful. I think the educational aspect of regeneration and development will be increasingly important, even in countries where people haven’t the right to vote. We are seeing little revolutions brought about through people connecting across the world, with technology and social media. I look forward to the day when we stop using expressions like ‘alternative energy resources’ or ‘alternative means of transportation’. Green living should become mainstream.”

Igor told BOND about his plans for 2012. “I would like to work more outside of the office, building relationships, looking for new collaborators and fine-tuning our methods. Our focus remains on regeneration and the liveability of cities, so we need to get better at telling the story to different audiences. I would also like to travel back in time a little and explore some forgotten analogue methods of design. We rely more and more on technology, so technology is very important for us to work globally in different teams. At the same time, I think it’s important that we are still able to use the basics and rely on our human side. I think architects tend to take themselves quite seriously. After all, architecture is quite a serious profession. For my wardrobe, I am a minimalist, but in design, I find inspiration in things that are thought-provoking. I like irony and humour. I look for things that connect people, regardless of their profession or where they come from. We call it the ‘rainbow effect’. If you see a rainbow, you smile, whether you’re a child or a hedge-fund trader. Not every project requires colour, but where it is appropriate, colour is a powerful means of expression. Using colour is not easy and many architects avoid it. It can bring delight, but it can also be a disaster, so it is risk-taking – also something that inspires and motivates me. We need more irony and fun to connect with others.”