

Eva Jiricna

Interview by Holly Porter

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Eva Jiricna is a female architect whose work in the fashion world has received international acclaim. Over the years she has designed stores, houses and exhibitions for some of the most prestigious fashion houses: Joseph, Hugo Boss and Joan & David. With over thirty years experience and with offices in London and the Czech Republic, she designs architecture which has truth and beauty embedded within its form and function. The name of Eva Jiricna is synonymous with inspirational staircase design. Her talent is to open up a space through creating highly engineered architectural forms, such as her hallmark staircases in structural glass and filigree stainless steel, which appear light, delicate and transparent. Awarded a CBE for services to interior design, Jiricna is one of the leading design innovators of our time and a role model for many young architects. Mainly based in London, her latest project is the installation of the first major international exhibition devoted to the complex relationship between fashion and architecture, 'Skin and Bones'. This opens in the new Embankment Galleries at Somerset House and runs from 24 April until 10 August 2008.

Behind Eva Jiricna's enormous design reputation one might expect to encounter a rather formidable woman. However, meeting her for the first time in her office surrounded by her incredible library, full-scale models, sketches and renderings, this preconception is immediately dispelled. Indeed, she is courteous, gentle and much more generous than I could ever had imagined - especially for someone who had already achieved success at a time when women running their own practices was unheard of (the legacy left by the construction industry in the 70's, 80's and 90's has meant that numbers of successful 'senior' women in the industry are small).

She began by saying: "If I achieved anything it was totally unplanned. I never expected to set up a practice on my own. On the contrary, I never wanted to take care of the finances; I never wanted to be in charge. But somehow it happened. When you argue about every little detail as I do, you can't have it both ways! One finishes up on one's own for that simple reason." However, Jiricna's early career was far from simple. Brought up in communist Czechoslovakia she received her degree in Architecture and Engineering from the Prague Technical University. She then found herself working in a predominantly man's world. Indeed, she was rejected from her first job - a 'posting' to a concrete

prefabrication factory. It seems the factory chief refused to have a woman working with 400 men in the (design) office.

Subsequent postings to a variety of teaching positions culminated in her move to the Institute of Fashion and Interior Design where she was placed in the interiors section. She hated it: "because I wanted to do big buildings because everybody told me that because I was a girl I couldn't do it...". However, interestingly this 'disadvantage' turned out to be quite advantageous as it introduced Jiricna to the world of fashion. During her time there she met fashion and textile designers at the school; she found their creations intensely appealing as they involved expression and design. This was in stark contrast to the interior architecture school which, at the time, was taught in a very conservative and restricting manner: "It was this experience that had me thinking about fashion, architecture and design as part of the same world."

After the Czech uprising of 1968, Jiricná sought refuge in Britain. Here she progressed quickly from the architects department in the Greater London Council to the Louis de Soissons Partnership to work on Brighton Marina - a project about which she still remains passionate: "The Brighton Marina was one of my favourite projects - checking the breakwaters in the middle of sea storms and climbing cranes in the middle of the sea . . . this was real architecture." After a time she then moved to the Richard Rogers Partnership, designing many of the interiors for the Lloyds of London building.

However, it was a chance encounter with Joseph Ettedgu - founder of the Joseph stores - that established Eva's name in the world of fashion and architecture. She was commissioned to design his apartment, and then a succession of shops for his chain. "The first project I took on with Joseph was perfect for me as I could do it on my drawing board in the middle of my flat in Hampstead", Eva states, "then Joseph asked me to find him a flat - we look at a lot of converted flats before we found a horrible, little space in one of the apartments in Floral street. But it had a nice little balcony over looking a courtyard and I thought it had nice windows. Joseph liked it because it was cheap - but then of course it became very expensive!"

The flat conversion that Eva then designed has been widely published - its main feature involves a beautiful glass spiral stair which runs through the building. She laughs when she reminisces on the style of

it: "You can imagine - I was used to designing on a large scale and then I was suddenly designing a mini bathroom, a mini flat, mini kitchen - I had no idea how to do it so it was really very hi-tech because the scale in my head was huge. Hi-tech at this time was very much in fashion!" She points out one particular feature she remembers : "I designed a bed that you could pull out and put away - because I knew he was never going to make it everyday..." Indeed, looking back the design is very hi-tech in style - but the staircase design in particular embodies an elegance, honesty and beauty that transcends the period in which it was designed and represents a signpost for her future design work.

Then ensued a succession of shop designs for the Joseph chain - many of which featured her hallmark glass staircases. Commissions quickly followed from other fashion designers, such as Kenzo and Boodle & Dunthorne jewellers amongst others. Jiricna believes that as an architect designing in the fashion world she functions as simply a backstage presence - providing a setting in which others can perform or exhibit their creative work. However, she adds that not all fashion architecture can be classified in the same way. For example, in jewellery as the products are so small one has to work a lot harder with the architecture - colours, shapes, volumes, clasps and lighting to set the jewellery off.

Jiricna's latest project is 'Skin + Bones' - the first major international exhibition devoted to the complex relationship between fashion and architecture. Designed by Jiricna, the installation will open in the new Embankment Galleries at Somerset House. Focusing on the period from the 1980s to the present day, the exhibition examines the visual and conceptual ideas that unite fashion and architecture. It will feature more than 200 works by over 40 internationally renowned architects and fashion designers.

Eva talks of her relationship with the curator of the exhibition, Claire Catterall (who had previously worked with Eva during her time curating at the V&A). She describes their relationship as "a mutual ability to communicate - a rapport that is very rare between client and architect." One difference between them is Eva's belief that the relationship between fashion and architecture began before the 80's. "My interpretation is that if one looks at the dialogue between the two (architecture and fashion) through history - for example baroque

churches - they look like the skirts of baroque ladies dresses...a period throughout history was always this vision which anyone in the creative arts was part of.. but I suppose you have to pick a period for an exhibition of this nature."

This commission has been particularly challenging due to the proportions of the existing room - a long narrow space. Moreover, the exhibition can neither touch the ceiling or the walls. Consequently, her concept is to " . . . forget the surround and simply create a journey along the centre of the space." The design consists of a long journey through two floors of the exhibition rooms - the space being divided down the centre by a long undulating wall. Due to the narrowness of the space and the amount of content in the show, they have had to have to create a one-way system - fashion exhibits on the right, architecture on the left. The flow of the exhibition is punctuated by two dramatic figures in the middle created specifically for the show : one piece by Vivienne Westwood and the other by Hussein Chalayan. Here the colour changes - behind the Vivienne Westwood piece - a gold dress - is a gold wall. Lighting is fixed to the top of the central curved walls which adds volume to the space. Other lights are set into the black platform - illuminating the fashion pieces from below.

The undulating curved central walls gradate in colour from blues and to soft pinks. The colour, Eva says - is inspired from "the best fashion book I've ever had" : 'Thierry Mugler' (Published by Rizzoli, December 15th 1988). Context is the key in this book's collection of fashion photographs by French fashion designer Mugler. Setting his models against dramatic architectural backgrounds, he plays off texture against texture, color against color and the human in scale against the simply colossal. As we look at the book Eva points out that most of the fashion pieces are shown to best advantage on a canvas of sky in varying intensities of blue combined with the muted pink skin tones of the models. As an architect she is drawn to noting the canvas on which the fashion is placed rather than the pieces themselves. "To start with" Eva says, "there were a lot more colours - from white to blue to pink with little bits of yellow but in the end it was toned down. The UK design scene is very conservative." Eva informs me, " . . . if this was in the Czech Republic they'd push the colours much more. Its odd, in architecture there is a real fear of colour - white, grey, black are the palettes architects such as Fosters tend to use. In the UK everything is grey, blue, black or white - except the bus-stops which are beige. I could never live with grey."

There is an honesty and genuine humility in Jiricna's approach to her work which I admire for a woman who has been so conspicuously successful. She doesn't believe her own hype - something very rare for the 'superstar' generation of architects. Like all great artists Jiricna transcends the rules and, in doing so, she takes us beyond the material to a higher zone of sublime architectural experience. I conclude with her advice to young architects at the beginning of their career: "If you can see what you want to do, then you have to fall in love with it. You have to take everything that being in love entails: pleasure, happiness, frustration, occasionally hatred. You have to take the burden on and you will get some immense satisfaction if you work seriously."