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ARCHITECT PROFILE

CHRISTIAN GARNETT

JADE TILLEY SPEAKS TO CHRISTIAN GARNETT, FOUNDER, GARNETT + PARTNERS ABOUT HIS TRANSITIONING BETWEEN CALIFORNIA AND LONDON AND HIS LOVE OF VOLUME AND SHAPE



CHRISTIAN GARNETT'S EARLY YEARS LIVING IN CHELSEA AND BELGRAVIA DEVELOPED HIS PASSION FOR ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN FROM A VERY YOUNG AGE. AN APPRECIATION OF THE SPLENDID ARCHITECTURE SURROUNDING HIM AND WITH DESIGN IN THE FAMILY, THERE WAS A CLEAR PATH PRESENTED EARLY ON.

Christian graduated with distinction from the University of Cambridge, trained at Sheppard Robson Architects and later worked with Sir Terry Farrell & Company. Following spells as a designer in Sydney and New York, Christian joined the late great Franklin Israel's office in Los Angeles to act as a project architect on a highly acclaimed residential scheme in association with Frank O Gehry. Christian returned to his beloved London in the early 1990s to launch his own practice, Garnett + Partners. He has gone on to become an

award winning architect, with a portfolio which includes a number of long standing corporate and private clients including many of London's most prestigious great estates, leading developers and major retailers. Christian brings to his business the unique ability to combine an inherent design capability, with an in depth understanding of planning and sustainability. This ensures clients maximise value and minimise risk in urban development. A team of over 20 highly qualified, young and creative architects supports Christian. Garnett + Partners have been shortlisted for the International Design and Architecture Awards 2015 with their Lower George Street, Richmond project, which, amongst others is where the Whole Foods Store is. It is nominated in the Retail category. Here, Christian elaborates on his architectural beginnings and discusses what it meant to be able to learn from some of architecture's greats.

WHAT IS YOUR EARLIEST MEMORY OF ARCHITECTURE HAVING AN IMPACT ON YOU?

I grew up with an architect father, Patrick Garnett, so it has always been at the forefront of my attention. My father's use of geometric forms and pop art styling embodied the spirit of the 1960s. I remember when he designed an upside-down house in North Wales. It had a Californian style open plan living area with bedrooms downstairs. It had beautiful views of Snowdonia, which was unusual for its location and it's still there to this day; a glass and timber box on a brick base in a suburban setting. I think this memory comes from before the age of five, so you get an idea of how imprinted it is in my mind. Architecture has always been there. During my school years I attended Wellington College. The school itself had this amazing Queen Anne quadrangle design with towers, a great brick and stone pile with incredible



geometry and shape. I spent my teen years there and it really informed my design ideas.

WHERE DID YOU STUDY ARCHITECTURE?

I went to Cambridge University and completed my Part 1 and 2 there in the 80s. It was great, a fantastic experience. Eric Parry was teaching at the time alongside Dalibor Vesely. Vesely was an incredibly influential lecturer and a very intense man - both continue to influence me.

WHAT KIND OF ARCHITECT DID YOU ASPIRE TO BE? HAS IT WORKED OUT THAT WAY?

While studying I was confronted with the remnants of architecture and design from the 60s and 70s, many of the problems and the

damage of the brutalist architecture that had left quite a mark on the industry. I think these after-effects, which we were witnessing, caused me to look at it and make a reassessment of modernism. During this time, Bob Allies was also lecturing and really addressed the excess of modernism in a positive way. It forced you to ask yourself how we could improve towns, working in conjunction with historic environments. Polite Modernism was the topic of discussion. I think it is our responsibility to create authentic architecture with continuity. After University I had the opportunity to spend sometime in California working in Franklin Israel's office, who has worked with Frank

Gehry. This example of American design thought and process has stayed with me, I really believe in the way they design. It was then that I had the chance to work on a large estate in Malibu.

WHO ARE YOUR DESIGN INSPIRATIONS?

I love Rudolph Schindler and his work in Southern California. Then there is of course the late, great Frank Lloyd Wright. There is also the Californian architecture practice Morphosis, lead by Thom Mayne, who has noted achievements, including helping to found the South California Institute of Architecture. Frank Gehry is another example. Difficult to translate over here in the UK, Gehry's work is





special for its shape and 'weirdness'. Volume was integral to his work and I admire that.

WHAT DOES GARNETT + PARTNERS REPRESENT AS A FIRM?

When I came back from LA in the early 90s, I fell into a couple of jobs on great estates, which was a total contrast from what I was used to in California. It was all about the history of the buildings, London and its stewardship. For the firm this is something we've built on over time. Now, for us, it is about working on these types of buildings and bringing new work in, integrating and blending old and new, contemporary and classic, with a sense of location, into one sound piece of architecture. We're building on our own legacy.

We now have a good track record with local authorities, Westminster, Camden, Richmond and Kingston are just some of them. I think this is because we always aim to address the right issues with creating new, workable spaces – how are we going to develop? What makes a place? How can we make something new without becoming a pastiche? These are just some of the questions we ask ourselves when designing.

WHERE IS THE MAJORITY OF YOUR WORK BASED?

We're mainly based in central London but also

work in the South of France, Nice, for a London client. We have clients in New York and associates out there in Harlem. Then there is California, which I have great connections with.

HAVE YOU EVER WORKED OR LIVED ANYWHERE ELSE? IF SO, HOW HAS THIS HELPED TO SHAPE AND INFLUENCE YOUR IDEAS ON DESIGN?

Aside from California, I have spent some time in New York as well. During the period that I studied at Cambridge, we witnessed a succession of architecture students head out to NY and set up in the midtown area, the Garment District. Some great loft conversions occurred during that period. I also spent a year in Sydney working with a practice.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR BIGGEST DESIGN COMMISSION TO DATE?

We did a 60-70,000 sq ft property in Richmond for a Dutch property fund. It was a new build office development and was eventually sold to standard life.

Our work with Whole Food markets, the American retailer has definitely been a big, ongoing, project for us. We enjoyed working together after the first store and now have completed four or five stores for them. The European CEO is a really creative guy and this makes it a really good fit for us.

WHAT DOES THE FACE OF ARCHITECTURE LOOK LIKE TO YOU IN 10 YEARS TIME?

I think it's moving in a different direction now. We have many technological advances and this changes things. Economy of scale is to be considered as well, we're seeing things shift in places like Kings Cross and Croydon areas. Now there is a much greater value in place and what really makes it. How do you attract people to spaces? Working environments are completely shifting, there are now places where people want to be and where things happen. Good architecture is bringing life into schemes and making interesting places. Creativity will be treasured more.

There is also the consideration and respect for stewardship, maintaining and transforming historical environments for the better. The standard of architecture in the last 20 years has improved massively and I think it will continue to do so.

IF YOU HADN'T BECOME ARCHITECTS WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING?

I would be in building, my whole family is. Maybe contracting. I have worked in construction before and I love it. There is nothing better than seeing a building come together and working as a team to achieve it.

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