



Paulo Marto



Paul Acland

# Let's Partner

Commenced in 2002, Paul+O Architects Ltd. are a young architectural practice set up by Paulo Marto and Paul Acland. While Paulo is an alumni of the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg; Paul has studied architecture at the University of Auckland, New Zealand.

The firm has the experience of working on a broad range of projects, which includes office fit-outs, restaurants, shops and landscaping. They received nationwide attention through their controversial Wilderness Project — a country house on a green field site in Suffolk, one of the few houses to achieve planning permission under Gummer's Law and also, one of the last. In an exclusive interview with Sarita Vijayan, Editor & Brand Director, India Architect & Builder, the architects discuss their projects, design philosophy and plans for the future.

*Photograph: courtesy the architects*



**SV. Your firm aims to create work appropriate to its time, place and function, using traditional materials in a contemporary manner. Please elaborate.**

**Paul+O.** Each project is site-specific, rooted in its immediate surroundings and greater context. Our approach to each project brief is always the same, but the resultant form of each project is inevitably always different. The Wilderness, for instance, is a rendered flat-roofed building, which sits on a flint plinth and uses only local building materials. The grid of the site, formed by rides and hedgerows, became the generator of our design: a cruciform plan with a spine wall that aligns with and carries the memory of an older hedgerow. A recently-completed indoor swimming pool is built of soft red brick and has an asymmetrical pitched roof clad with handmade tiles. Its playful and asymmetrical form echoes, in a contemporary way, the adjacent red brick country house. Two very different projects, but with the same design approach. In England, there is an ongoing debate between those who consider that contemporary buildings built within historical areas (i.e. most of the UK) should be built in the style of the existing surrounding buildings and those who think we should be designing buildings that are clearly of our time. HRH The Prince of Wales has added considerable weight to those who support the former. We consider that our projects are 'recognisably of our age,' as well as, being sympathetic to their surrounding – whether that be a woodland or a country house or an urban setting.

**SV. You received attention nationally through one of your first projects, the controversial Wilderness Project – one of the few contemporary houses to attain planning permission under Gummer's Law, and one of the last. Please elaborate on the concept behind the project and your experience from it?**

**Paul+O.** The house was commissioned by a seventy-year-old woman who lived in a large country house but wanted to build a contemporary house in a woodland nearby. The Planning Regulations meant that the only way a house could be built was if it was in the tradition of a country house and was outstanding in its architecture. Approximately 25 new country houses have been granted planning permission in the last 10 years. From these, the Wilderness was the only house of a contemporary design to be built – the others being predominantly neo-Georgian. As stated previously, the geometry of the site became the generator for the cruciform plan of the house, which embraces the landscape judiciously exploiting aspect, shelter and existing watercourses. The ground floor of the house is largely transparent, making one feel surrounded by the landscape and blurring the edges between indoors and outdoors. We wanted the house to be quite picturesque, a sculptural form in the woodland with its asymmetrical and broken-up massing. The landscaping was also an integral part of our proposal – so again, our proposal was all about accentuating what was special and unique about this Suffolk 'Wilderness'. The Wilderness was a tough project, not only because of the difficulty in obtaining planning permission, but also the difficulty in dealing with a 'traditional' contractor who did not understand the contemporary detailing of the project – one could say there was a bit of a culture shock!

**SV. Which of your past projects best represents your design ambitions?**  
**Paul+O.** All of our past projects represent our design ambitions; each project presents different challenges.

**SV. What's your secret, in addition to your obvious talent? Is now a good time for young architects?**

**Paul+O.** We believe the secret is dedication, tenacity and not letting one's vision be weakened throughout the duration of the project. Often schemes are compromised because of differing agendas between the client and the consultants. I would say that the role of the architect is difficult in many ways. First, our role has been diminished along the years and therefore our status has been reduced. It is not uncommon for clients, now, to be looking for project managers or QS to run their job, rather than architects. We also have less control of planning affairs and, as a result, the quality of buildings is suffering. I believe that architects need to be forever finding new ways to carve out a relevant role in current practice.

**SV. Some firms seem to handle growth extremely well, while others are absolutely incapable of growing—the scale of their work can't be easily transformed. How do you see your work changing as your scale expands and you create multiples?**

**Paul+O.** I think that there is always pressure for offices to expand. We are resisting the idea of growing too large as we want to retain a strong contact with our clients and our projects. We provide a very intimate personal service to our clients, which makes our role very satisfying and we wouldn't want to endanger that.

**SV. What do you think of designing overseas? Would working in India, Shanghai, Dubai or any of the other overseas boom economies change your work?**

**Paul+O.** We are both from the antipodes – Paulo from Southern Africa and Paul from New Zealand. Paul has worked in Hong Kong, Australia and New York, Paulo in South Africa and Portugal. We would very much like to be involved with projects outside the UK, either in Europe or further afield. In fact, we are currently carrying out some feasibility studies for a house in Bali. In any of these countries we would undertake only projects where we could continue our philosophy of designing buildings that are appropriate to their time and place. This would not include building glass towers in the desert!

**SV. What would you say that Indian design has to teach the West?**

**Paul+O.** When I was in India some years ago, I was fascinated not by the Taj Mahal (undoubtedly a beautiful building), but by the Jantar Mantar in Delhi and Jaipur, scientific instruments pared back to their essence and at the same time made poetic – they are very sculptural in their massing and are timeless. I do not like the idea of one culture lecturing another culture, whether it be the west teaching India or vice versa, but what I think England has forgotten is that buildings can be both functional, as well as, beautiful and can lift the spirit and mind at the same time as sheltering the body. ■