Intelligence
Contacts book

30 January 2020
Words: Eric Parry

Daylight From Above
Award

Contacts Book: Eric Parry's most valued collaborators

A sculptor and a Portuguese supplier of structural stone are among the favourite collaborators named by the founding director of Eric Parry Architects

Wolseley Quarry, one of Eric's sources of Portuguese limestone

Lili Stone

Lili is a Portuguese-based stone contractor. We've worked with them on three projects and they've kind of grown up with us over the years.

Lili was established 25 years ago and is led by a formidable lady called Regina Vieira. She's incredible, always excited by the next challenge. I came up with, I've watched them develop over at least 15 years. They run a very sustainable operation in terms of recycling – the way they use water, and their use of energy.

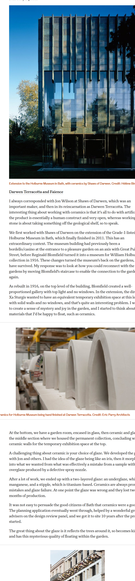
We'd started working with self-supporting stone earlier at Pembroke College Cambridge, for which I visited 25 quarries and saw stone. But I found a good Portuguese stone until we worked with Lili on T & S St James Square, London, which was completed in 2011. Lili's stone is from the Portuguese Wolseley Quarry, near the city of Pinhanos Tejuco and was procured at the Southwark Stoville at London Bridge.

Eric Parry collaborated with Portuguese stone contractor Lili at T & S St James Square, London. 1 of 5

T & S St James Square replaced a 1939 building and follows the original footprint of domestic buildings on the square. It has a granite base and large limestone elements above. For this, I wanted very big reveal depths and limits. Portland stone would have been a nightmare, so we worked with Portuguese stone, using Calacatta Vanilla limestone from Lili.

Lili didn't have the machinery to work with granite at that time but soon afterwards, they invested in machinery to do so. By the time we worked with them at Chelsea Barracks, where they supplied both the granite columns bases and beautiful Calacatta Vanilla limestone facade, they were able to work with us on the idea of referencing in architecture, using CNC cutting of lettering at an extensive scale as a theme on one of the three buildings.

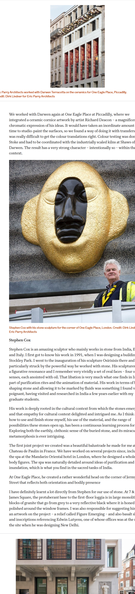
Although the project coincided with Covid, they were able to keep going and the quality and cutting of the stone are wonderful.



Eric Parry Architects's underwriting with Lili on the freestone campaign of the City of London Law Courts which is currently at stock up stage. Credit: Eric Parry Architects 1 of 2

Now we're collaborating with them on the new City of London Law Court building, a part of the Salisbury Square Justice Quarter development on Fleet Street. Here, the exterior of the building is essentially a self-supporting limestone carapace. It has to be very robust, a protection shell for those who will be inside at a crisis-ridden.

We started on the project in 2017 and we're now at the stock-up stage. Lili is also supplying the base – an Angolan Calebo stone that has been scrutinised very carefully for its sustainable credentials and ethical sourcing. Lili's work is integrating an ambitious artwork by Shiraneh Shamlooy of 13 panels using the same base material.



Eric Parry Architects collaborated with Sunderland's Ian Hamilton over frames at 4 Pancras Square of King's Cross, Credit: Dirk Lindner for Eric Parry Architects 1 of 3

Ironfield

We worked with Ironfield on the metalwork for 4 Pancras Square at King's Cross, which completed in 2018. We worked with Ian Hamilton, who is based in Sunderland. Again, With the carve of a project in the metaphor, we were given three models to come up with an idea pre-form.

The trapezoidal site had a sense of the industrial, with the rare accelerations of the gasholders and solidity of the warehouses in the background. I started to dream about something that would be expressive of the future but resonate with the past.

I wanted to liberate the ground and let the public routes to flow underneath. I talked to Albert Williamson, Taylor of engineer ARUP, it is close friend who I've known throughout 35 years of practice and then, during the charette, we came up with the idea of a lattice structure supporting the whole block on the weight of the building above. That was pretty much where the design began. This opening attention 27m. Argent wanted a single column at the centre, but I eventually convinced them not to have it.

Eric Parry Architects' design was inspired by the nearby gasholders and warehouses. Credit: Dirk Lindner for Eric Parry Architects 1 of 3

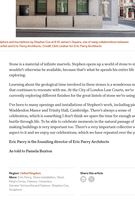
It was wonderful to think about the metal with Ironfield. The idea was to build an external frame that would structurally support the building without and would have something of that geometric scaling. The frame was created in plates of Cor-ten weathering steel, with the vertical elements filled with concrete to give the necessary fire resistance. The structure has a strong haptic quality, particularly in the wonderful sliding plates with the steel bolt heads.

The weathering steel was put together at Ironfield's Bolton works and was rather like the scale of bridge building. It was a great joy to visit to see the remarkable coating, as it was molded before being transported to site.

Weathering steel is really abundant of light, and changes over time as it forms its protective crust. It gets better with age, with a unifying absorbent quality of deep richness.

It fills me with pleasure to see that it was built like any original structure of the Victorian era, with the bolt heads showing and the welds tidied up, so that the best office building to be built since The Economist, which as a structure analyst of this, I appreciate very much.

We've now working with Ironfield on the City of London Police headquarters at Salisbury Square.



Entrance to the Ashmolean Museum's Rafe, with ceramics by Sharon of Darwen. Credit: Stefan Dold

Darwen Terracotta and Faience

I always corresponded with Jon Wilson of Darwen Terracotta, which was important maker, and then its reincarnation as Darwen Terracotta. The interesting thing about working with ceramics is that it's all to do with profiles, as the product is extruded in a beam contract and very open, whereas working with stone is about taking something of the geological shell, so to speak.

We first worked with Shaun of Darwen on the extension of the Grade 2 listed Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, for which I visited 25 quarries. The museum's collection is unique. The museum building had previously been a bordello (casino at the entrance to a pleasure garden on an area with Great Pulteney Street, before Reginald Blomfield turned it into a museum for William Ashmole's collection in 1910. These changes turned the museum's back on the gardens, which were lost to the public and turned into a private garden for museum staff. The gardens by moving Blomfield's staircase to enable the connection to the gardens again.

As a result in 1916, on the top level of the building, Blomfield created a well-proportioned gallery with top light and no windows. In the extension, the director Ka Dempsey wanted to have an equivalent temporary exhibition space at the level with solid walls and no windows, and that's quite an interesting problem. I wanted to use Darwen Terracotta for the exterior, and I started to think about materials that I'd be happy to live with, so to speak.

Ceramics for Ashlama Museum being hand finished at Darwen Terracotta. Credit: Eric Parry Architects 1 of 3

At the bottom, we have a garden room, encased in glass, then ceramic and glass for the middle section where we housed the permanent collection, covered with ceramic walls for the temporary exhibition space at the top.

A challenging thing about ceramic is your choice of glaze. Stoke developed the glazes with Jon and others. I had the idea of the glaze being like an ice, then it morphed into what we started from which was effectively a mistake. We ended up with a complex with an irregular produced by a kiln-firm spray mesh.

After a lot of work, we ended up with a two-layered glaze: an underglaze, which is manganese, and a single, which is titanium based. Ceramics are always prone to unexpected results. At one point the glaze was wrong and they lost two months of production.

It was not easy to persuade the good citizens of Bath that ceramics were a good idea. The planning application eventually went through, helped by a wonderful group of advisors on the design review panel, and we got it to site 10 years after the project started.

The great thing about the glaze is it reflects the trees around it, so becomes kinetic and has this mysterious quality of bearing within the garden.

Eric Parry Architects worked with Charles Tonnelier of the ceramics firm Carrigan Place, Piccadilly. Credit: Dirk Lindner for Eric Parry Architects 1 of 2

We worked with Darwen again at One Eagle Place at Piccadilly, where we integrated a ceramic centre artwork by artist Richard Deacon – a magnificent chromatic expression of his ideas. It would have taken an inordinate amount of time to studio paint the surfaces, so we found a way of doing it with transfers. It was really difficult to get the colour translations right. Colour testing was done in Germany, and we worked with the maker Charles Tonnelier – a director of Darwen. The result has a very strong character – intentionally so – within the context.

Stephen Cox with his stone sculpture for the corner of One Eagle Place, London. Credit: Dirk Lindner for Eric Parry Architects

Stephen Cox

Stephen Cox is an amazing sculptor who mainly works in stone from India, Egypt and Italy. I first got to know his work in 1995, when I was designing a building at Sterling Park. I went to the inauguration of his sculpture Omitron there and was immediately struck by the quality of his work. Stephen's work is a combination of figurative ornament and Cosmorder very similar to that of mid-later – four of the senses, each anointed with oil. That Shaston is very much what one finds in Indian art part of purification and the animation of material. His work is a form of both shaping stone and allowing it to be marked by Nature was something I found very interesting. We became friends and researched in India a few years earlier with my graduate students.

His work is deeply rooted in the cultural context from which the stones emerged, and that engenders a cultural context delighted and intrigued me. As I think about how to use and finish stone myself, his use of the material, and the range of possibilities these stones open up, has been a contribution to my practice for me. Exploring both the earthy, chthonic sense of the buried stone, and its miraculous metamorphosis is ever intriguing.

The first joint project we created was a beautiful balustrade he made for us at the Sainsbury Wellcome Centre. We had a very interesting conversation, including the tax on the Mandarin Oriental hotel in London, where he designed a series of body figures. The spa was naturally divided around sides of purification and immolation, which is what you find in the mortuary temples of India.

At Cox Eagle Place, he created a rather wonderful head on the corner of Jermyn Street that reflects both orientation and bodily presence.

I have definitely learnt a lot directly from Stephen for our use of stone. At T & S St James Square, he produced four to the first floor niches in large monolithic blocks of granite that go from grey to a very reflective black where it is honed and polished around the window frames. I was also responsible for suggesting him for an artwork on the project – a tilted tabled Figure Emerging – and also heard skills and knowledge from him in the detailing of the sides of stone offices over at the rear of the site where he was designing New Cullen.

Sculpture and wood fabrics by Stephen Cox at 4 St James's Square, one of many collaborations between Eric Parry and Cox. Credit: Dirk Lindner for Eric Parry Architects 1 of 2

Stone is a material of infinite marvels. Stephen opens up a world of stone to me that wouldn't otherwise be available, because that's what he spends his entire life exploring.

Learning about the geological time involved in these stones is a wonderful reminder of the preciousness of our planet. We are at a time when we are very, very carefully exploring different finishes for the great blocks of stone we're using there.

I've been to many openings and installations of Stephen's work, including pieces at Wordsworth Manor and Trinity Hall, Cambridge. There's always a sense of celebration, which is something I don't think we spare the time for enough as we hurtle through life. To be able to celebrate moments in the natural passage of making buildings is very important too. There's a very important collective social aspect to it and we enjoy our collections, which we have imported over the years.

Eric Parry is the founding director of Eric Parry Architects

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AJ100 Mentor of the Year 2024 named

21 JUNE 2024 • BY WILL HURST

Eric Parry Architects associate Emily Posey is the winner of the inaugural AJ100 Mentor of the Year award

Chosen from a wonderfully strong and diverse group of nominees, Posey particularly impressed with the judges with her promotion of external mentoring through a partnership with charity Blueprint for All, in particular her success in embedding a culture of mentoring at Eric Parry Architects itself.

Building on an existing, informal system of mentoring that focused on architectural assistants and Part 3 students, she developed a far more wide-reaching and generous system open to all EPA staff, which now involves around half of the roughly 100 employees.

She also supported Part 3 students in the office with exam preparation and provided one-on-one support to her project mentee, who recently qualified as an architect. The AJ100 judges said her determination and hard graft stood out, pointing out what an achievement it is to play an instrumental role in changing the office culture of a large practice such as EPA.

'I was so impressed by her tenacity. What she's achieved is really impressive,' one judge said. 'She clearly knows what she is doing and, the longer she keeps doing it, the more of an impact she will have.'

Another remarked: 'She created a real programme for EPA and I found that very inspiring.'

Judges voiced admiration for the high calibre of the shortlist, with particular praise for young candidates Alice Farmer of dMFK Architects and Jeevan Chahal of JTP.

Shortlisted

Jeevan Chahal, architectural assistant at JTP

Gabi Code, London Studio Lead - Technical Director and Regional Manager (Architecture + Masterplanning) at AtkinsRéalis

Alice Farmer, architect and social value champion at dMFK

Etain Fitzpatrick, director at JRA

Peter Garstecki, associate partner at Foster + Partners

Katia Polidoro, principal director at tp bennett

Judges

Shaun Ihejetoh, co-founder/director, West Port Architects

Teri Okoro, director, Toca

Shankari Raj, architect, Nudge Group

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Materials Library: Eric Parry Architects

Hannah Tourell, Derek Gibbons and Eric Parry discuss how the practice has utilised long-standing relationships to maximise shared learning on materials and ensure a smooth specification process.

Senior architectural technician Derek Gibbons (left), principal Eric Parry and associate Hannah Tourell.

Words
Jason Sayer
Photos
Agnese Sanvito

In 1983, Eric Parry set up his eponymous studio above a garage in Cambridge while he was teaching at the university. There, ideas on materials and their wider relationship with the process of architecture began to crystalise. More than 20 years later, the practice moved to Banner Street in London (just north of the Barbican) where it remains to this day, and where those ideas are now writ large in numerous projects across the capital. An intense focus on the inter-relationship of objects, components, the site and materials – in particular stone, ceramic and metal – is integral to the studio's thinking, as associate Hannah Tourell, senior architectural technician Derek Gibbons, and principal Eric Parry explain.

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How do you store materials used from previous projects?

Eric Parry We have various bits of storage but a lot of the models and drawings – our portfolios – are in art store, so they're professionally stored and archived. We also have a pretty good handle on material storage, which is easily accessed from our studio, so we can call up things, like, for example, lettering designed by Tom Perkins for the poem by Andrew Motion around the lightwell at St Martin in the Fields (2008).

It's got more organised over time. We always produce a hard copy of the as-built drawings. I don't think you can isolate materials. Drawings, models, materials and thinking: for us it's a big soup. Besides those as-built drawings, we have a material samples board for every project.

For planning and for clients, the business of the representation of a project – the materials board – is always terribly important, as is the representation of things. Visiting the planners I would often take an object. For example, I once took a David Mellor-designed spoon, and on another occasion, a Bavarian beer jug that related to a particular ceramic we were looking to use for a building in the city. It's about objects that manifest the qualities of a material we're looking to specify.

Metalwork finishes from Tuchschmid, serving as studies for 'Opera Terrace', a project on the roof terrace of Covent Garden in London. "The project employs a series of trusses that have to fold back and fold upwards. There were questions of whether it should be mild steel or not, and if it should be treated in a particular way. There are numerous grades of stainless steel, and we considered various finishes from chrome to sandblasting. This is just part of that journey."

What level of depth do you go down to with those material boards?

Hannah Tourell Really just the key material palettes: one for façades and one for a couple of key interior spaces. Everyone has to do a material board by the end of the project. They are then catalogued by Derek Gibbons – one of the most experienced members in our office. Sometimes people take things off material boards so it's also about keeping an eye on all of it! We also have larger pieces of buildings in the office, such as 1:1 scale components and mock-ups, to represent interesting or important architectural aspects of a project, which we're keen to retain for reference.

Eric Parry That's one of the advantages of the terrace – we can keep larger objects out there. We took a lease on a little building on the roof and built a few full-scale protypes there to test relationships, shadows, etc.

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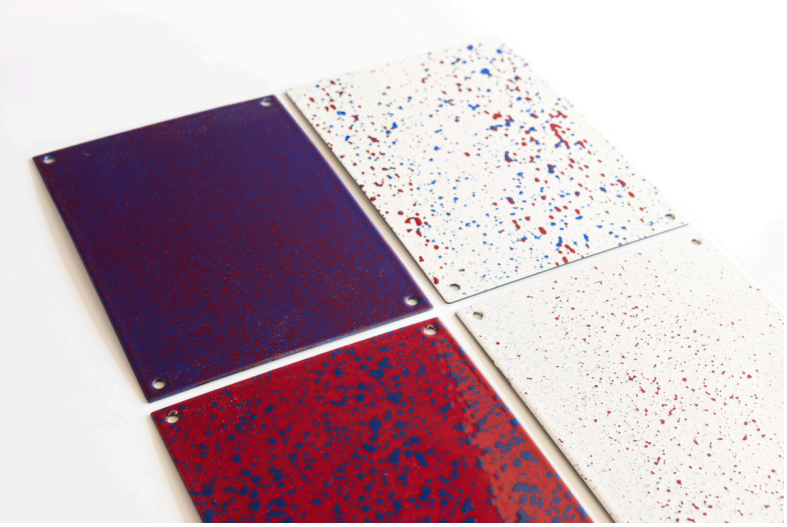


Vitreous enamelled steel supplied by Omera, used for studies of various current projects.

Derek Gibbons There are sample boards we did after every project, listing manufacturers and materials… but we've accumulated so much we need additional storage and additional referencing for the materials we've used. After every job, we have a whole range of materials, as well as variations of the same material, which are catalogued and which we have whittled down to fit onto one sample board that represents the project in question. But that means we end up with leftover samples and materials that don't make it onto a project's samples board – and we don't want to lose the thinking behind those materials as that knowledge might be useful for a future project – you never know!

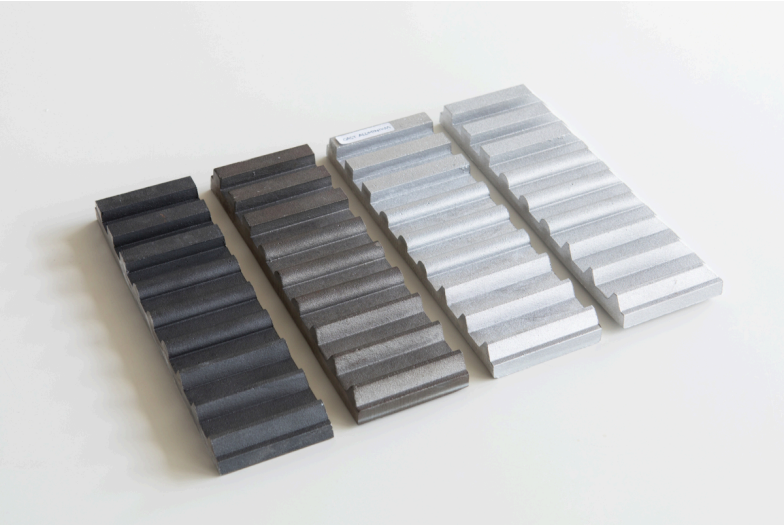
We have employed a librarian to reassess how we store and access these physical materials. And trade literature now is accessed online, so we don't necessarily have a physical requirement for that anymore. I have spoken to a company who will set up a link to a website for all your materials. Each material has a code that links to a system explaining how it was used on a job, including a detail. Everything that was used would be recorded and anybody going to a new job would know exactly how to access all that information from the office. But right now, it's just a matter of storage.

Study for Salisbury Square development, London. Hot forged steel from CB Arts, power hammered, galvanised, patinated and lacquered. "There's often a conversation about tonality and depth, which was particularly evident with the Salisbury Square project for the City of London Police. We were thinking of using a vivid shade of red associated with that police force set against spandrels, which are in turn set against the absorbance of weathering steel. All of which means that right now we are working with a palette of possibilities. I think that is a very interesting stage – stage five to be precise – because everything is in the process of being made, where stuff is becoming real."

What was the trigger for this new way of thinking about the materials library?

Derek Gibbons Moving upstairs… we had to bring so many materials upstairs.

Eric Parry It also traces back to an academic interest. I remember when I first got my job as an assistant lecturer at Cambridge. I was running Third Year, but I had to create a lecture series on something I called 'The iconography of materials', because I was interested in the bridge between history, theory and practice. Each lecture was on a material and each material had a historic lineage of importance. Each project has a narrative to it about the use of materials and retaining that information is absolutely critical to the way we practice.



Cast iron and aluminium samples from AATI used for One Liverpool Street, London. From left to right: cast iron –natural cast finish; cast iron – shot-blasted finish; cast aluminium – natural cast finish; cast aluminium -– shot-blasted finish.

What about projects that didn't make it off the boards, do you retain the material thinking for them? And if so how?

Eric Parry It's only when a project gets to a certain point of formality that we have a sample board that we'd keep for it. We tend not to use CGIs much at the early stages of a project as we prefer sketches and drawings. There's a nice amount of looseness and freedom that comes with that way of working. We might include an object or a material to indicate certain things, but not a full materials sample board.

Studies for a cast metal balustrade supplied by FSC Foundry for Chelsea Barracks, London. From left to right: cast aluminium – painted finish; cast iron.

What about material experimentation? How is that process recorded?

C

Eric Parry I find I get a bit frustrated when I look back sometimes. We're ISO 9001 compliant, so quality control is important. And as a result, we have a quality audit. But when you look back through our project history from an archival/reporting perspective, to me it's always a bit too banal; it doesn't really tell the story of the project and its genesis, it just tends to be a summary at the end of it.

How closely do you work with suppliers?

Eric Parry Very closely, and that dialogue is what makes projects 'live'. There are examples where we've done a job and then the manufacturer has gone bust – it happens. The world of contracting and fabrication is a tough one and sort of a generational cycle. So, because of that, recording all the information about how, for example, a façade system worked is incredibly important for another generation of makers to be able to use.

The relationship with manufacturers is incredibly intimate, in the sense of being aware of all the potential issues, and being a way for people to improve their methods. For example, going to the quarry when specifying stone and seeing the quality of the material, because with natural materials you never know what's coming next.

Hannah Tourell We're lucky to have a good relationship with façade consultant FMDC. They produce material booklets for us, which is a really useful resource for referencing purposes. We also record the challenges we come across with various manufacturers. We always feed back to them, and then they take that into consideration for future projects.

It's a nice process of collaboration and learning together; working out how we can better specify. FMDC has worked with suppliers and then they've helped us learn how to better specify. And now, we're going to use all that information and have a much smoother journey because we have this resource and we can have better conversations at earlier stages with contractors and subcontractors.

Shot-peened stainless steel lettering from Tuchschmid used for St Martin-in-the-Fields, London.

Eric Parry Our relationship with FMDC is very important and goes back a very long time to when the founding director worked at Arup, and I was really determined to have a self-supporting stone elevation on a building that's now 25 years old at Pembroke College, Cambridge. And we've worked with them on almost every project since. It's a continuous run that essentially means we have about 20 years of common, parallel experience, which is incredibly valuable.

I use the analogy of turning over a Persian rug: when you turn it over, you see the stitch and you can appreciate the dye. To see the work that's gone on, you need to turn it over. I believe that with architecture, you need to be able to understand the story through the materials and their use in order to have a critical attitude to the problem. We're not involved in stage design. These buildings, for instance, the City of London Police building at Salisbury Square, have a 125-year life. All our detailing has to work to that. It's interesting to have these questions of longevity and buildings in mind.

Hot-forged steel from CB Arts, which has been galvanised, painted and lacquered, and used as a study for Charterhouse, London.

What material are you excited to use next?

Eric Parry What's really exciting is the combination of components at Salisbury Square. We've got the exoskeleton building for the City of London Police, plus an adjacent law courts building (an 18-court complex in stone) facing Fleet Street, and then the third building, which is employing ram-pressed, unglazed terracotta. That's taken us to a really interesting point with research, building on what we have already done with faience.

We're working with an American supplier, Boston Valley Terracotta for this, and undertaking a research project with them exploring the glazed and unglazed terracotta faience elements that they're producing. Together, we're also examining the relationship of faience and 'growth' – integrating terracotta with a green wall; letting the ceramic morph into something else to reflect the quality of the growth of lichen that has been involved with the unglazed faience.

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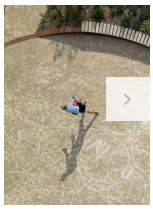
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