Discourses, Ephemeral Sources and Architectural History: Personality and the Personal in the Story of J.M. Richards

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J.M. Richards was an architectural critic, author and editor of the British magazine *The Architectural Review* (AR) from 1935 to 1972. In the mid-1980s Richards enquired with the magazine’s then editor Peter Davey about the whereabouts of his archive from his forty-year career at the publication. Davey’s reply, in a letter dated January 1985, was this:

I am afraid that all enquiries lead to one conclusion—that there are simply no records kept of editorial matters older than about 1978 [...] I think this is a tragedy and quite agree with you that your correspondence would have constituted a valuable archive which should have been available to researchers [...] I can only say how sorry I am that this material seems to be irretrievably dispersed.

In 2009, I embarked on a PhD about Richards’ career as editor of the magazine. I was aware that the AR archive was lost. But this letter, which I read 9 months into my research, confirmed that the formal, administrative documents and accounts of Richards’ career at the magazine were irretrievable. The letter was amongst a small collection of Richards’ correspondence belonging to his daughter Victoria Gibson. I read the letter whilst seated on the couch at Victoria’s home. This confirmation that the conventional sources for a history of an editors’ career, were lost, solidified the central methodological question of my own project: how to research a career with no archive?

Richards’ career has not been widely researched or written about. This is, in part, due to the lost archive. It is also a consequence of architectural history’s conventional focus on architects and buildings. Critics and journalists have been perceived as auxiliary professions, supporting and promoting the “real” work of architecture, done by architects. Because Richards, was an editor and journalist, and not a practicing architect, his contribution to architecture has been overlooked in many existing histories. My research into Richards’ career was part of a shift to broaden architectural history as a discipline beyond its existing focus on architects . Due to the lost archive, my research also became an exploration of diverse types of sources and evidence in architectural history. These unconventional sources revealed the intangible and personal dimensions of his work as an editor and critic. They added depth and breadth to my understanding of the type of work (personal, domestic, private) that contributed to architecture culture, beyond the published and public work of the magazine. This essay will set out how an apparent obstacle to research—the lack of a coherent, formal archive—turned out to be the key to understanding Richards’ contribution to architectural history. And, in turn, how a methodology that accommodated a diversity of sources—including conversations and interviews—allowed me to write what Robert Proctor describes as, “a different kind of history” about modern architecture.[[1]](#endnote-1) This “different kind of history,” was one that embraced the complexity of architectural production and incorporated the range of work in Richards’ career into the story of modern architecture in Britain.

The fact that I had read Peter Davey’s letter, while visiting Victoria Gibson, demonstrates that from the first months of the research, I was exploring different types of sources, beyond the conventional administrative archive. I met with the few surviving people that remembered working with Richards or had known him. I met first with Colin Amery—an architect and writer who had worked with Richards at the AR during the last years of his editorship. Amery put me in contact with Lady Susan Lasdun who had known Richards and done her own research on the AR; and Richards’ other surviving colleagues, Sherban Cantacuzino (architect and author) and Nicholas Taylor (author and Labour councillor).

At the beginning, I approached these informal conversations with the sole purpose of locating more documentary evidence of Richards’ work as editor (Formal correspondence, manuscripts, minutes of meetings, etc). As I will explain further on, my project was never intended to be a biography of Richards, it was a critical history of his career as a critic and editor. However, I did not find these “official” records. Instead, I found anecdotes, memories, personal letters, photographs and notes. Initially, I thought that these fragmented, informal and ephemeral sources were a hindrance to my research, a problem to be navigated. They provoked another methodological question – how to write about a person’s life and career without writing a biography based on their individual personality. Many of the people I spoke to conflated Richards’ work and career and his personality (his sensibility, what he was like as a person). His friends and colleagues interpreted his career and his way of working as a result of the type of person he was, caused by his personality. I struggled with this model of causality because it presented Richards’ career as a product of his personality, rather than as something shaped by his cultural context. But these informal meetings, conversations and personal sources they turned up, became the basis of a methodology and my research shifted to address the links between the panoply of sources I collected. This methodology was based on the concept of discourses as the means of producing meaning in culture (explained below) and it allowed me to reconcile Richards’ personal life and how his friends and colleagues perceived his personality, with his professional career. This essay considers how these conversations and other more ephemeral forms of evidence interacted with other more conventional sources to cultivate a new narrative in architectural history.

The first section of this essay will examine the challenges posed by the range of sources involved in researching Richards’ career and the methodological approach that I developed in response these challenges. Oral sources were central to my research but I did not conduct formal oral history interviews. Instead, my ‘oral sources’ consisted of several informal chats and conversations with Richards’ friends, colleagues and family. These conversations were not recorded (often on the request of the participant) and instead were captured or documented in scribbled notes, which I sometimes typed up after the event. These records of my conversations formed part of a broad range of types of sources—visual and ephemeral sources, published or broadcast sources, manuscripts and private correspondence—which I brought together to construct a historical narrative of Richards’ career. The second section of this essay will discuss how this method, of navigating the relationships between very different types of sources (oral and otherwise), led to the issue of personality and its role in historical causation, becoming central to my study of Richards’ role in architecture. This reflection on the relationship between method and content in historical narratives, aims to draw attention to the importance of the processes and practices of research in making history.

*Discourses: Reconciling the Personal and the Professional in Architectural History*

Over the last decade, scholars including Beatriz Colomina, Elizabeth Darling, Andrew Higgott, Steve Parnell, Erdem Erten, Kestor Rattenbury and Sarah Williams Goldhagen, have broadened the horizons of the discipline, with a particular focus on the role of media in architecture.[[2]](#endnote-2) Their research has expanded the field of architectural history to include the apparently “peripheral” figures of journalists, writers, photographers and critics. My project on Richards’ career as a critic and editor in architecture shared this aim of broadening the types of people and work that are considered relevant to architectural history.

Richards had an extensive career in architecture. He was the longest serving editor of the AR, he wrote several books, most well-known of which was *An Introduction to Modern Architecture* published by Pelican in 1940 (with revised editions in 1953 and 1963). He was also a member of CIAM, the Modern Architecture Research Group (MARS), The Design Council and the Architecture Committee for the Festival of Britain. He was also architectural correspondent for *The Times* newspaper from 1948 until his retirement and he regularly featured on BBC radio.[[3]](#endnote-3) Richards was a “node” in a network that joined these various organisations and media outlets. The archives and surviving records of these organisations, as well as Richards’ published and broadcast work, provided one set of sources for researching his career. However, these formal, public and published sources could not account for how Richards’ network was made and maintained. They could not reveal the inter-personal and informal interactions that structured Richards’ career. Accessing the informal, private dimension of Richards’ network, required different types of sources.

Richards was clearly aware of the significance of his career (to which Peter Davey alluded in his 1985 letter) but he was reluctant to reveal aspects of his “personal” life. His published autobiography, *Memoirs of an Unjust Fella*, detailed the international networks of people and organisations that Richards was a part of throughout his career. He acknowledged that there was an inter-dependence between his private and professional lives, writing that in the 1930s he found “common ground between” his “largely social involvement with art and artists” and his “ideas about modern architecture and arts relation to it.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Yet he did not elaborate on the details of this overlap in the book or in any other published writing.

It was my conversations with the people that knew him, which first revealed the personal dimension to these professional networks. Victoria Gibson’s stories about her father gave a clearer sense of the friendships behind his professional network. For instance, she explained that Richards was Godfather to the children of the Crittal family (of Crittal windows fame) and that he was a close friend of Chamberlin, Powell and Bon (architects of the Barbican in London). Richards does hint at this relationship in the Envoi of his published autobiography, where he mentions his “old and valued friend Joe Chamberlin.”[[5]](#endnote-5) In the notes from my journey home from visiting Victoria Gibson at her family home, I wrote:

I was struck by the importance of this circle, or network, that Peggy [Angus, Richards’ first wife and Victoria’s mother] and Jim shared [...] This insight into Richards’ personal life has proved a revelation to me—seeing the human side to the somewhat bureaucratic voice of the Editor, critic and committee member opened my eyes to the importance of the personal dimension to the professional links*.[[6]](#endnote-6)*

It was impossible to separate the “personal dimension” from the “professional links.” Annette Kuhn has said that in oral histories “outer and inner, social and personal, historical and psychical, coalesce; and the web of interconnections that binds them together is made visible.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

Although this research was focused on an individual’s career, my aim was never to write a biography of Richards. Instead, I wanted to focus on Richards’ career as an editor and critic in relation to its cultural context. I was primarily concerned with what Richards’ career could reveal about the role of critics and criticism in architectural culture during the mid-twentieth century.

Pierre Bourdieu’s writing on the “biography illusion” and Michael Freeden’s work on the “individualist fallacy” were helpful for thinking of biography as something more than an isolated story of a unique individual.[[8]](#endnote-8) Both suggest that understanding the actions and ideas of an individual person is dependent upon recognising the wider system of associations and relations that support and contribute to that person. As Bourdieu described it:

Trying to understand a life as a unique and self-sufficient series of successive events with no links other than their association with a “subject”[...] is nearly as absurd as trying to make sense out of a subway route without taking into account the network structure, that is the matrix of objective relations between the different stations.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Bourdieu and later Freeden emphasized the importance of context, particularly socially and culturally constructed ideas, values and practices, in the life story of an individual.[[10]](#endnote-10) Francis Spalding’s biography of the artist John Piper (who was a friend of Richards) is an example of this approach to biography.[[11]](#endnote-11) Spalding locates Piper in a social milieu and among a network of people and places, specifically his and the artist Myfanwy Piper’s farmhouse at Fawley Bottom. Susie Harries’ biography of Nikolas Pevsner does a similar thing.[[12]](#endnote-12) These biographies draw together the personal and the professional. However, unlike Spalding and Harries’ work, my research did not constitute a complete biography of Richards. I looked at his life only during the period that he worked at *The Architectural Review*. The question remained of how to map the relationship between the range of sources that constituted my research. I needed to navigate the links between the informal, loosely documented conversations I was having with Richards’ friends and colleagues (and the personal photographs and letters they were showing me) and the more formal sources such as minutes and published writing. Discourses offered a means of exploring the relationship between an individual source and the broader web of relations and interactions.

Sarah Williams Goldhagen has defined a discourse in architectural history as:

An extended expression of thoughts on a subject or related collection of subjects, conducted by a self-selected group of people within a discrete set of identifiable social institutions, and lasting over a bounded...period of time.[[13]](#endnote-13)

This definition of discourses as “extended expression[s] of thoughts” extends to include sources related to emotions, thought processes, networks and social relations, alongside more conventional sources such as publications, broadcasts, official records, minutes, letters and images. The concept of discourses gives equal weight to personal, informal sources such as anecdotes and gossip as to formal, written and published sources. It presents culture as a collection of various, coexisting, sometimes conflicting, discourses and therefore the work of the historian is to authentically reconstruct the discourses that constituted the period they seek to understand.

This interpretation of history builds on Michel Foucault’s definition of discourses as a group of “statements.” Statements can be images, objects, spaces, thoughts, values, behaviour and identities.[[14]](#endnote-14) Foucault explains the relationship between a statement and a discourse as that between a sentence and a text—“it is not a condition of possibility” for them, but it does give them meaning through their relation to other statements, it is “a law of coexistence.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Discourses ‘produce power’ and ‘distribute’ or position people within society.[[16]](#endnote-16) As such, they are a way of creating meaning. They unite statements, in particular configurations, resulting in a system of meaning for those statements. Thus, statements would exist without the discourse, but they would not mean the same thing, their meaning is dependent on their place within the discourse. In order for a historian to understand a culture, they must seek to understand the discourses that created meaning in that culture. As a methodology, this expands the types of sources that a historian can legitimately explore and emphasizes the links between different types of sources. For instance, Goldhagen has used discourses as a means to move away from style in architecture as the dominant form of ‘evidence’ in architectural history. She calls this challenging the ‘stylistic paradigm’.[[17]](#endnote-17)

 I began to think of the fragments of archival sources (both professional and personal) and the ephemeral conversations I had with Richards’ friends and colleagues, as “statements,” given meaning by their relationship to each other. Exploring the links between the sources was the key to authentically reconstructing the discourses that were the source of meaning in Richards life and career. Discourses, in this sense, were a way of finding the “unities, totalities, series relations” between the different sources in order to understand their meaning.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Developing a methodology based on discourses allowed me to make sense of a diversity of sources ranging from; conversations with people, published writing, photographs, drawings, written descriptions and oral accounts, as well as interior spaces, letters, radio broadcasts, minutes from meetings, television programmes and exhibitions. It allowed me to explore how the personal related to the professional and how the individual was part of fluid cultural networks. I understood my research as the act of piecing together statements in order to understand the discourse that gave them meaning and thus coming to understand the meanings of and around Richards life and career, his role and his significance within architectural culture.

In order to illustrate this, let me sketch some “statements” (sources) from my research and explore how bringing them together illuminated something of the meaning of Richards’ career. In my conversation with Colin Amery, he made a passing reference to the meetings of leftwing architects and local government officials that were held in the Bride of Denmark pub, in the basement of the AR’s offices in Queen Anne’s gate in the late 1940s. He told me that he believed Richards’ may have attended these meetings. In Beavis Hillier’s biography of John Betjeman (who had worked at the AR in the early 1930s), there is a reference to Betjeman’s nickname for Richards having been “Karl Marx.” When I visited Victoria Gibson, she told me that despite her parents’ very different temperaments (and their later, bitter divorce) they had shared an interest in William Morris and socialist politics. Victoria’s bookshelves bore the products of this shared interest, with numerous titles by and about Morris, inherited from her parents. There is no surviving, formal record of Richards’ political affiliation (no record of party membership for instance), however he did make brief references to his politics in *An Unjust Fella*. Richards recounted returning to the Architectural Association (where he trained as an architect in the late 1920s) after working as a station porter to help break the General Strike in 1926, and being greeted with the distain of his fellow students. His friend’s anger opened his eyes to leftwing politics and he described how in the 1930s he “joined and subscribed and protested and marched” in the fight again fascism.[[19]](#endnote-19) He mentions that his commitment to “The Left” was shaken by the events in Hungary and Czechoslovakia after the war.[[20]](#endnote-20) Finally, in the BBC written archive there is a transcript of a radio programme that Richards presented, broadcast in 1947 called *Vision and Design: English Architectural Taste*. In the programme, Richards explained that the material condition of social class was formative in architectural taste. He insisted that any attempt to address “taste” in architecture that ignored the material and class based origins of taste, would fail to grasp the complexity of taste, beyond simple aesthetic choices.

These five “statements”—anecdotes and reflections from two conversations I had and objects in the home of the people I spoke to; references in a biography and in Richards’ autobiography and a transcript of a radio broadcast—when pieced together, reveal political discourses that were part of the meaning of Richards’ work in architecture and his role in culture. The key to this methodology is the equal legitimacy of different types of sources, they are all treated as statements, unified by the left-wing political discourse, which tell us something about the meaning of Richards’ life and career at a particular moment in history.

 While I had intended to approach Richards’ life solely from the perspective of his career and what it represented about a cultural moment, the fact was that the specific details of his personal life were integral to understanding his career and the meaning and cultural significance of his work. Richards was part of a complex network of people and places at a particular time. His role was contingent on this entanglement and could not be separated from it. This realisation enabled me to argue that Richards’ published writing and broadcasting were only one aspect of his contribution to architectural history.

The other aspect was his role as a networker and a facilitator. His job, as an editor, was to know people and to bring them together. The scattered and often ephemeral character of the sources pertaining to Richards’ career was evidence of this wide network of connections. For instance, when I was chatting to Victoria, she told me about several of Richards’ friendships and relationships, many of which I had not known about from reading his autobiography or speaking to his colleagues. Victoria also agreed to show me an unpublished manuscript of an alternative autobiography that Richards has written (but had insisted never be published). The manuscript was a much more detailed account of his personal life and relationships, which reinforced the personal dimension of his professional network. The format of the manuscript was interesting. It was written as an inventory of Richards’ flat in London. He described the objects in each room and the stories behind them. A small teapot for example, which had been a gift from Alvar Aalto and a small mould of a pair of hands given to him by Lee Miller and Roland Penrose. The manuscript, coupled with Victoria’s anecdotes about her father’s friendships, revealed that much of Richards’ work was informal; work that was not recorded in minute books but in the memories people described to me, in scrapbooks and personal letters. His cultivation of a network of friends and colleagues and his work facilitating and promoting their work was as important as his published books, articles and issues of the magazine.

My conversations with Richards’ family and colleagues and the private material that they shared with me, was evidence that the inter-personal and ephemeral aspects of Richards’ career contributed to architectural production and culture, as much as his published written work. Oral sources, combined with other informal and personal sources (such as the manuscript) allowed me to explore a version of architectural culture that was much richer than that contained solely in written or published sources. The concept of discourses allows us to consider these sources and the details they contain, which could be dismissed as trivial gossip or incidental details, as equal to formal or professional interactions in the functioning of architectural culture. This not only enriches the historical narrative; it also moves towards a more authentic form of historical research. Discourses are a way to challenge historical methodologies that focus on individual geniuses and construct canons of male architects; discourses allow historians to explore the complexity of the people and activities involved in architectural production and culture.

This methodology also demanded a self-conscious awareness of my part, as a historian, in the construction of a historical narrative. I could not go to the archive and let the sources speak to me, because I was actively making sources (in the form of conversations) and trying to piece together fragments across a range of different forms and media. Many of my sources defied strict categorization. They incorporated images and texts, or they shifted form. Pieces of evidence can change from personal to professional and back again depending on the perspective of the historian and its place in a historical narrative. As Alessandro Portelli describes, oral history sources are constantly shifting states “from orality to writing and back.”[[21]](#endnote-21) The mutability of the sources was further evidence of the porous division between the personal and professional in Richards life and career. It was often difficult to claim easily where the personal stopped and the professional began.

For instance, Victoria Gibson had a collection of scrapbooks, made by her mother the artist Peggy Angus. Peggy Angus and Richards had married in 1934. Although they separated at the beginning of the war and would later divorce, for the second half of the 1930s Peggy Angus’s rented cottage in the South Downs, called Furlongs, was a key site in the couple’s personal and professional life. The scrapbooks were evidence of the overlap between personal and professional but they also could not be straightforwardly categorized as either a visual or textual source. The scrapbooks consisted of collages of personal photographs, notes, drawings and doodles.[[22]](#endnote-22) They were also a material prompt for Victoria’s memories and she used them to recall stories or anecdotes from her father’s life, which she told me and I noted down. The experience of sitting with Victoria, as she showed me the scrapbooks, I photographed them for my research, and took notes about the memories they were prompting her to remember—confirmed for me that “oral history” or “visual sources” or texts, were not always distinct entities. This is what Portelli described as the shifting states of oral sources, “from orality to writing and back again.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Also, often in my conversations with Richards’ colleagues, anecdotes would be repeated that had originated either in Richards’ own autobiography or in reviews of his autobiography, or from obituaries. Portelli describes how “orality and writing have developed jointly in order to speak to each other about the past.”[[24]](#endnote-24) He explains how when people speak to historians they shape their stories in certain ways because they are aware that what they are saying is “a text in the making.”[[25]](#endnote-25) The oral, visual and textual often merged together in my research to create source material. These scrapbooks were particularly interesting to me as evidence of *process* in making historical narratives. They were records of the practice of bringing “statements” together and creating memories and a personal history. They were a reminder to be self-conscious of the process and practice of making a historical narrative.

I was struck again by the mutability and interdependency of sources when I met with Lady Susan Lasdun. Lady Lasdun was married to the architect Denys Lasdun. She was also a school friend of Pricilla Hastings, daughter of Hubert De Cronin Hastings, who had been executive editor of the AR and Richards’ boss. Owing to her personal relationship to the family and her interest in Hastings’ career, she had researched the history of the magazine and written about it in the 100th anniversary issue of the AR in 1996.[[26]](#endnote-26) As part of her research into the life and career of De Cronin Hastings Lasdun had conducted her own series of interviews with the staff of the AR, including Richards. As she generously allowed me to listen to the recording of her interview with Richards, when I visited her house in Hammersmith. I was sat at the kitchen table scribbling furiously as the cassette recording of Lasdun’s interview played on the old sound system. These notes became a source in their own right. They were a written source, based on another researcher’s oral history. I would try to document specific words or phrasing that people used when describing Richards. For instance, Susan Lasdun described Richards as a ‘journey man’, when comparing him to his boss Hubert de Cronin Hastings, who was the executive editor of the AR during Richards’ career at the magazine. The specific words used to describe Richards’ became an important aspect of my research, which I will discuss further on. The ambiguity of some of my sources, that they were made and remade, was further reminder of the role of the historian in the construction of historical narratives.

For instance, I photographed a series of over 200 index cards compiled by a former Phd student Brian Hanson, which Lady Lasdun had come across during her research into the magazine. Hanson had begun to research the history of the magazine for his PhD and although it was never completed, his research had resulted in this collection of index cards that detailed a chronological history of the magazine and its different publishing houses. Lasdun has a facsimile copy of the index cards (which she allowed me to photograph). The details and anecdotes on the cards were gathered through a combination of archival and oral history research by Hanson. The collection of cards was itself an object hovering between categories. It is defined by the interplay between oral history and other forms of source. In turn, my conversations with Susan Lasdun were guided and steered to some extent by the material in the card index. Often it prompted her memory or led me to ask particular questions. Although they are very different sources, both the collection of index cards and Peggy Angus’s scrapbooks, brought me back to an awareness of the processes of constructing sources and cultivating historical narratives.

The dialogues and interactions between different sources revealed the process of creating histories. Rather than viewing sources as windows onto the events of the past, it’s important to explore the process of the creation and perpetuation of particular narratives. Lynn Abrams’ writing about oral history is useful when thinking about this relationship between methods of research and content of interpretation and historical narratives. Abrams has described how oral history is both the act of recording and the record itself, with both the process and the outcome contributing to the historical narrative.[[27]](#endnote-27) This link between processes of research and the narratives it produces, described by Abrams, was most explicit when conversations turned to the topic of Richards’ personality - in the sense of a person’s individual tendencies, sensibilities and traits.

As stated earlier, I never intended to write a conventional ‘biography’ of Richards, which would to some extent try to understand and convey what he was ‘like’, how he felt and behaved. I wanted to explore Richards’ career as in relation to the cultural context and what it could tell us about architectural culture in the mid-twentieth century. But I kept being confronted with descriptions of what Richards was like, as a person and what is more, these descriptions often conflated his personality traits with his professional role and his approaches in his work. They suggested that Richards career could be explained by his personality, rather than by the discourses that structured culture and his part in it. This next section explores my struggle with this debate around individual ‘personality’ in historical narratives.

*The problem of Personality in Architectural History*

Richards was ambivalent about the role of individual personality in shaping his career. He wrote an autobiography because he felt the story of his life and experiences were important enough to be recorded and published for posterity. Yet, he called the book *Memoirs of an Unjust Fella*, and explained in the forward that the title:

Reflects my awareness that during a full and varied life I have been granted opportunities, and had doors opened for me, as a result of fortunate accidents of circumstance which I did not contrive and for which I can take no credit.

This implies that he saw some separation between his own individual traits, actions and intentions and the shape and path of his professional career. He acknowledged the role of context and circumstance in defining his career. He was ambivalent about the role of individual personalities in shaping culture more broadly. In his contribution to *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, published in 1937, Richards wrote that he hoped for the day that “personality” would become “culturally irrelevant” in architecture.[[28]](#endnote-28) He was criticizing what he saw as the nineteenth century tendency to aggrandize individual architects and attribute ‘great architecture’ to individual ‘great architects’ rather than to broader trends in architecture and culture. However, others sought to re-introduce individuality and personality into accounts of Richards’ life and career, in particular, the author and critic, Reyner Banham.

Banham, who had worked with Richards at the AR in the 1950s, was critical of what he saw as the absence of individuality or personality in Richards’ autobiography. In a review of An Unjust Fella, Banham wrote:

The places and dates are all there...the protagonists are named, blamed or praised...but we learn almost nothing about them, because we learn almost nothing about Richards either.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Banham attributed much greater causality to individual personality, sensibility and tendencies in shaping Richards’ professional career. Using the group photograph from CIAM 6 congress in 1947 as an example, Banham argued that Richards’ position “in the back row but practically in the middle” was symbolic of his desire to maintain a discreet role in the culture of architecture, a product of his tendency to hold “practically everybody at arm’s length.”[[30]](#endnote-30) In the photograph Richards stood on the back row, while the “great” men and women of modern architecture—Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Sigfried Gideon, Jane Drew, even a fellow editor Monica Pidgeon—sat on the front row. Banham went even further and argued that Richards’ aloof personality and his consciously hidden position in architectural culture, was a consequence and an expression of his lack of commitment to the principles of modernism. Banham argued Richards had never believed in the project of modern architecture and as a result, kept himself somewhat removed from it. This conflation of Richards’ individual personality, with his professional behavior and and principles was echoed in many of my conversations with people.

Richards’ former colleague Colin Amery and Sherban Cantacuzino and his friend Susan Lasdun, all described Richards using words such as “reticent” and “evasive,” “headmasterish.” They all attributed Richards’ professional characteristics, such as his tendency to write under a pseudonym (James MacQuedy), his role behind the scenes at the magazine, never appearing on television and apparently preferring to work on committees rather than individually, to these personality traits they described. While no one that I spoke to went as far as Banham, to interpret these characteristics as symbolic of false principles, they followed Banham’s causational link between Richards’ personality and the character of his career. With the exception of Nicholas Taylor (former journalist at the AR who had worked with Richards in the early 1970s). Taylor directly contradicted Banham’s interpretation of the CIAM photo. Taylor argued that Richards’ position at the back of the image was symbolic of Richards’ role in architectural culture - central, but in the background, behind the scenes. As an editor and committee man, Richards was rarely ‘front of stage’ but his role was pivotal to the workings of architectural culture. Taylor’s reading of the image premised Richards’ structural role in a culture, above his individual personality traits.

Oral history to some extent makes the theme of individual personality inescapable, as it deals with the memories, perceptions and reflections of individuals. However, rather than trying to reconstruct Richards’ ‘real’ personality or individuality, as Banham had done in his review, I was interested in how people’s perceptions of Richards’ personality could be used to reassess the priorities of architectural history. In particular, to reassess the criteria of what types of people and what types of activity warranted historical attention.

Conventionally history focuses on “great men.” In the case of art and architectural history, that has meant “great artists” and “creative geniuses”; those who have been deemed extra-ordinary or unique. However, many of the people I spoke to were at pains to emphasis Richards ‘ordinariness’. Susan Lasdun frequently compared Richards to his boss, Hubert de Cronin Hastings, described Richards as the “journeyman” to Hastings’ creativity and flare. Carolyn Trant, in her book about the life and work of Peggy Angus described Richards as “by temperament, a commentator rather than a man of action.”[[31]](#endnote-31) Reyner Banham dedicated a third of his review of Richards’ autobiography to a discussion of De Cronin Hastings, whom Banham described as “a miracle of brilliance, inconsistency, bloody mindedness and untrammeled originality.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Banham contrasted Richards’ “headmasterish” nature with De Cronin Hastings’s image as “a cross between a musical comedy country squire and a mad colonel from an Evelyn Waugh novel.”[[33]](#endnote-33) Even Richards described himself as lacking in “savoir-faire”[[34]](#endnote-34).

In this sense, De Cronin Hastings would have been a more typical figure for historical research. His reputed eccentricity and flair were the characteristics usually necessary for a historical narrative. Richards on the other hand, was quiet, neither extraordinary nor eccentric. He worked consistently, producing the magazine month in and month out for decades. I came to think of Richards as a civil servant of architectural culture. Working, anonymously, to keep the cogs of architectural culture (magazines, institutions, committees) moving. Focusing on the life and career of Richards reveals narratives beyond those of individual creativity and instead considers the networks and collaborations that make up the complex web of architectural culture. While he may not have had an extravagant or extroverted personality, he was central to the workings, both professional and personal, of architecture.

As such, my argument became the Richards’ personal life (rather than his individual personality) was but instrumental to his career. The friendships and relationships he made were as important as his writing in the definition and dissemination of modernism in British architecture – as the concept of discourses accepts.

A paragraph in a personal letter to Peggy Angus in 1936, illustrated the web of friendships, kinships and relationships that was behind the public and professional culture of modern art and architecture at that moment. It captures this interaction between his personal and professional life and paints a picture of the cultural mileu that Richards was a part of:

Ben’s sherry party was a good one arranged to welcome some of the abstract artists from Paris who had come over for the opening of the Lefevre show. Serge was there...called for Barbara at their house and went to the Russian film...the evening I spent with some people called Martin from Hull...whom I met at Bens.

Ben, was Ben Nicolson, an abstract artist who was good friends with Piet Mondrian.[[35]](#endnote-35) Serge was Serge Chermayeff, a modern architect, who worked with Erich Mendelsohn and designed the De La Warr Pavilion (at Bexhill) in 1935. The “people called Martin from Hull” were Leslie Martin and Sadie Martin (nee. Speight). Leslie Martin was an architect, who would later head up the London County Council Architects Departments. Sadie Speight was also an architect who worked with Martin on many projects. Speight also worked on *The Architectural Review* during the war.[[36]](#endnote-36) Through Leslie Martin, Richards became involved in the *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art,* published by Faber and Faber in 1937. Barbara, was Barbara Hepworth, the sculptor who also worked on editing “Circle”; she married Ben Nicholson in 1938. The exhibition at Lefevre Gallery was “Abstract and Concrete,” one of the first exhibitions of modern abstract art in London. The exhibition was organised by Nicolette Gray who was Helen Binyon’s sister (Binyon was close friends with Peggy Angus and lover of Eric Ravillious).

This paragraph was a turning point in my research. I understood that Richards’ friendships could not be separated from his professional encounters and that this personal life was integral to the cultural context. The people and places that constituted Richards’ personal life and their perceptions of his personality were not incidental; they were instrumental to architectural history.

*Conclusions*

The loss and dispersal of the conventional sources for a history of Richards’ career at the AR, forced me to reassess what the evidence of a career as an editor might be. In this reassessment, the anecdotes and memories told to me by former colleagues, the snapshots from family photo albums and personal letters between friends, all took on a new significance. And using the concept of discourses I navigated this diversity of sources including informal oral sources and produced a methodology and a narrative that has broadened the horizons of architectural history.

Of course, few historians find a complete and coherent archive for their research. Even within existing archives, historians navigate the choices and priorities of the owner or archivist. Historical research is therefore always a process of piecing together sources in order to piece together a narrative. Historical narratives are cultivated through the interaction and interdependence of different sources. Oral history has set a precedent in its awareness of and attention to the “construction” of historical sources and narratives. The work of Linda Santino, Robert Proctor, Annette Kuhn, Alessandro Portelli and Lyn Abrams offers transferable and important lessons for paying the necessary attention to how types and forms of sources, cultivate different histories. This essay reflected on the process of that cultivation in my research. It has traced the evolution of my approach to the informal conversations and ephemeral, personal sources in my research; from a necessary tool, to a source of interesting insight, to a methodology. Also, how this in turn led to some of the key themes of my narrative about Richards; namely that his life and career are evidence of the complexity of architectural culture and production. Architectural history is starting to account for this complexity. The loss of what Peter Davey described in 1985 as the “valuable archive” of Richards’ career has in fact led to a more innovative methodology that has produced a more nuanced history.

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1. Proctor, R. (2006) ”The Architect’s Intention: Interpreting post–war modernism through the architect interview,” *The Journal of Design History,*19(4), p. 295 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See in particular: Andrew Higgot, *Mediating Modernism: Architectural Cultures in Britain.* London: Routledge, 2007; Erdem Erten. (2010), “The ‘Hollow Victory’ of Modern Architecture and the Quest for the Vernacular: J.M. Richards and ‘The Functional Tradition’” in. *Built from Below: British Architecture and the vernacular*, edited by Peter Guillery, 145–168. London: Routledge. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The range of Richards activities, from broadcasting to government committees, also contributed to the variety of types of sources involved in the research. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Richards. (1980) *Memoirs of an Unjust Fella*: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, p. 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Richards, *Memoirs of an Unjust Fella,* 271. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Authors own notes [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Anne Kuhn cited in Sandino, Linda. “Oral Histories and Design: objects and subjects” In: *Journal of Design History* 19, no. 4 (2006): 277 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Biographical Illusion*. In: *Actes de la Recherché en Sciences Sociales*, 63(3) pp. 62–79. In: Parenteir, R.J. and Urban, G. (1987) *Working papers and Proceedings of the Centre for Psychological Studies*, pp. 1–7. In: du Gay, P., Evans, J. and Redman, P. (2000*) Identity: a reader*. London: Sage. And Freeden, M. (1990) *The Stranger at the Feast: Ideology and Public Policy in Twentieth century Britain*. In: *Twentieth Century British History*, 1(1) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Biographical Illusion*. In: du Gay, P., Evans, J. and Redman, P. (2000*) Identity: a reader*. London: Sage, p. 304. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Michael Freeden. 1990. “The Stranger at the Feast: Ideology and Public Policy in Twentieth century Britain.” *Twentieth Century British History*, 1(1) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Francis Spalding. *John Piper, Myfanwy Piper: Lives in Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
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13. Williams–Goldhagen, S. “Something to talk about: Modernism, Discourse, Style.” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 64, no. 2 (2005): 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Michel Foucault, (1969, 2009) *The Archeology of Knowledge* trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith. London: Routledge [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid*, p. 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Foucault characterises power ‘not as possessed as a thing or transferred as property’ but something that ‘functions like a piece of machinery’. Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, Trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Williams–Goldhagen, S. p. 161 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Ibid*, p. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Richards, *Memoirs of an Unjust Fella*, 119 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibid*, p. 119 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Alessandro Portelli. “The Peculiarities of Oral History” *History Workshop Journal* 12, no. 1 (1981): 96–107, cited in Abrams, L. (2010) *Oral History Theory*. London: Routledge. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. I have written elsewhere about how the collage aspects of the scrapbooks and of the interior of Furlongs itself, related to J.M. Richards and Peggy Angus’s approach to modernism in art and architecture—see Jessica Kelly (2015), “Vulgar Modernism: J.M. Richards, Modernism and the Vernacular in British Architecture,” *Architectural History Journal*, Cambridge University Press, vol. 58, pp. 229–259. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Portelli, cited in Lyn Abrams. (2010) *Oral History Theory*. London: Routledge. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Alessandro Portelli, “Oral history as genre” in Narrative and [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Alessandro Portelli, “Oral history as genre” in Narrative and [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Susan Lasdun (1996), “H. de. C. reviewed” In: *The Architectural Review*, September, pp. 68–72 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Lynn Abrams. *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. J.M. Richards. ‘The Condition of Architecture and the Principle of Anonymity’, in, *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art.* (1937) London: Faber and Faber, pp. 184-189. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Reyner Banham. “Sir Jim” *The London Review of Books* 2, no.10 (22 May, 1980) 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Banham, “Sir Jim.” [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Carolyn Trant, *Art for Life: the story of Peggy Angus*. (London: Incline Press, 2004), 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Banham, “Sir Jim,” 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Banham, “Sir Jim.” [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Richards, *Memoirs of an Unjust Fella*, 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. For more details see: Christopher Green and Barnaby Wright eds. *Mondrian and Nicholson in Parallel*. London: The Courtauld Gallery, 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. For more details see: Jill Seddon, “The Architect and the ‘Arch Pedant’: Sadie Speight, Nikolaus Pevsner and ‘Design Review’,” *The Journal of Design History*. 20, no. 1 (2007): 29–41. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)