



de
zeen

Magazine
Architecture
Interiors
Design
Technology

Series
Interviews
Opinion
Talks
Videos
Newsletters

Awards
Jobs
Events Guide
Showroom
School Shows
Courses
Competitions

Search

Follow:      



"The shadow of Grenfell Tower's burnt-out husk will follow the refurbishment architect forever"



Nat Barker | 4 September 2024 | 43 comments

As the long-awaited final report from the public inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire is published, Nat Barker reflects on the role of the lead architect on the building's notorious refurbishment project.

And so we come to the end. I watched hundreds of hours of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. Among the dozens of witnesses I saw give evidence, the one I still think about most is Bruce Sounes.

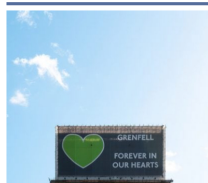
Sounes was the lead architect on the fateful refurbishment project that effectively turned the tower into a death trap. He gave evidence right at the beginning of phase two, four-and-a-half years ago now.

'Decisions he had made, emails he had sent several years prior, were scrutinised in forensic detail'

It was hard going. The cross-examination was highly technical, digging into every minutiae of Sounes's involvement in the refurbishment. Over six days of hearings – significantly more than most witnesses – decisions he had made, emails he had sent several years prior, were scrutinised in forensic detail.

It all seemed too much for Sounes. Sitting in the witness box, his voice faltered frequently, his boyish features twisted and tremored. Proceedings twice had to be halted because he was "taken ill" – and all of us in the room had an idea what that meant.

Sounes's position was that he had no idea about how dangerous the cladding installed on Grenfell Tower was. He claimed that he understood this aspect of the project to fall under the purview of the cladding sub-contractor, Harley Facades, and that compliance with building regulations would be established by building control.



Read:
Architecture education has "shifted away" from fire safety, experts say on Grenfell anniversary

Discover the latest design products from leading brands.



de
zeen room

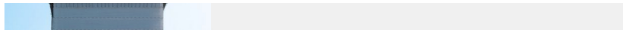
Top architecture stories

Most popular

Most recent



- 1 Dezeen's top five houses of August 2025
- 2 The state of high-speed rail infrastructure in the United States
- 3 Peter Besley shelters Brisbane home with walls of perforated brickwork
- 4 Seven UK homes that reimagine traditional bay windows
- 5 Studio McW turns London home into a "space primed for hosting"



Whether or not we believe that – whether or not Sounes himself believes it – it was abundantly clear: he was traumatised by the disaster.

I do not for a second mean to equate Sounes’s suffering with that of the people unfortunate enough to have been inside Grenfell Tower on that dreadful night, or their loved ones.

I think also of Marcio Gomes, who plunged through thick black smoke for 35 minutes as he tried to escape the tower, unsure if the bodies he stumbled over were those of his pregnant wife and children having been separated from them in the terrifying darkness. His baby son, Logan, was the youngest victim of the fire before he even took his first breath. He was stillborn in hospital shortly afterwards.

‘It is not often you see an ordinary person struggling to live with themselves’

I think of Nabil Choucair, who lost six members of his family. I think of the little girl who lived in flat 175, who lost literally everything in the fire: her mum, her dad, and her two sisters. She was six years old, and will now be about 13.

I think too of the aspiring young architects Gloria Trevisan and Marco Gottardi, trapped in their flat together on the 23rd floor having moved to London from Italy only a few months before. Trevisan ended a call home shortly before she died so that her mother would not have to listen.

Their stories are just a snapshot of the unbelievable, unhealable pain caused by that fire.

But, still, for some reason, time and time again my mind returns to Sounes and the haunted figure he cut as he answered the inquiry’s questions. It is not often you see an ordinary person struggling to live with themselves.



Read:
"Putting architects in control will not solve the building safety crisis"

There are few surprises in the mammoth report published today. The strength of the language it uses to describe the architect’s role in the disaster is perhaps its most remarkable aspect.

Studio E, the firm that employed Sounes, “bears a very significant degree of responsibility for the disaster”, the report said. This is more damning terminology than I have seen applied to any other participant. In the hierarchy of blame, the inquiry apparently considers the architects to be very near the top.

My own personal opinion is that Sounes displayed a startling lack of knowledge and curiosity about building regulations and fire safety, but may have had more of an inkling than he let on; his first instinct when looking for an insulation product was to reach for non-combustible mineral wool. *Asked why*, he replied: “It’s the safest.”

‘Criminal charges, with prison sentences for the convicted, are generally believed to be likely’

Sounes wanted the refurbishment to be a success, but seems to have only really thought about the criteria that he personally was interested in: how it looked, and whether it improved thermal efficiency. Everything else, he was content to leave to someone else.

In the context of what happened and his lack of any public apology to the victims, some may consider that to be unforgivable. Others may recognise it as behaviour they themselves tend towards. Regardless, among all the people who worked on the refurbishment called to give evidence to the inquiry across 80 weeks of hearings, Sounes was the most visibly affected.

It is not clear what the future holds for him now. A police investigation into the fire is ongoing, and criminal charges, with prison sentences for the convicted, are generally believed to be likely.



Read:
Over 900 Grenfell fire victims reach civil settlement

Will Sounes be among those individuals? I don’t know. Either way, the eerie shadow of Grenfell Tower’s burnt-out husk will follow him forever.

Architects must, of course, pay close attention to the inquiry’s findings and recommendations beyond the news headlines that will emerge over the next 24 hours. In particular, its conclusion that Studio E was responsible for ensuring that the cladding complied with building regulations and not the contractor, or the specialist sub-contractor, or building control, may be an alarming wake-up call.

But they should also think about Sounes. Think about him working on that project, and him as the witness stand several years later, barely able to come to terms with his

Kéré Architecture unveils brick mausoleum for Burkina Faso's former president



Ivy Studio references golf materials and textures in Montreal club



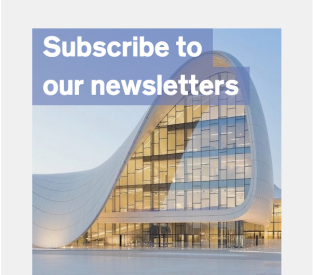
Rarify collaborates with Gantri on "infinitely expandable" 3D-printed light



Dominique Coulon & Associés creates colour-blocked creche in France



Subscribe



and him on the witness stand several years later, barely able to come to terms with his role in one of the worst peacetime disasters in modern British history.

“Try to feel what Sounes must feel today”

Let’s be honest, lengthy reports – even ones as important as this – can be difficult to engage with emotionally. You may know what it says, but do you feel it?

Well, try to feel what Sounes must feel today. Try to imagine what it would be like to work on a project, and later have to live with the fact that it turned out to cause even a fraction of the anguish caused by the Grenfell Tower fire. If that does not motivate you to learn whatever lessons are relevant to you from this disaster, I doubt anything will.

As we sift through the 1,700 pages of the phase two report in the coming days, the stories of Gomes, and Choucair, and Trevisan and Gottardi, and the little girl from flat 175, and everyone else affected who is still waiting for justice, and will have to wait for some time longer, should never leave our minds. I wonder if they ever leave Sounes’s.

Nat Barker is features editor at Dezeen.

The photo is courtesy of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry.

Dezeen In Depth

If you enjoy reading Dezeen’s interviews, opinions and features, subscribe to Dezeen In Depth. Sent on the last Friday of each month, this newsletter provides a single place to read about the design and architecture stories behind the headlines.

Read more: London | UK | England | Grenfell Tower fire | Architecture | Opinion

Subscribe to our newsletters

Email*

Next

Share and comment



43 comments

More

Series
Interviews
Opinion
Talks
Videos
Newsletters

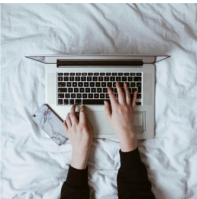
More opinion



“We need plastic to keep our economic order going”



“I’m teaching students not to follow Mies van der Rohe’s ...



“With another academic year over, there are thousands more ...



“We must confront design’s colonial inheritance”



“Design and architecture needs a new vocabulary”



“A little bit of dereliction in an otherwise-polished city ...



“Civilization has gone about as far as it can go, chair-wise”



“Pessimism plays a crucial part in design”

Comments

Visit our comments page | Read our comments policy

Comments on this entire site are premoderated (only moderators can see this message). Change site settings.

43 Comments

Dezeen



Join the discussion...

• Share

Best Newest Oldest



Whateverandeveramen

a year ago

Seven years on and 75 people still do not have justice. Sounes is not a victim here. Sounes should go to prison

Email

Next

“We use too much energy creating beautiful shapes” says Byoung Soo Cho



“We are collectively suffering through a crisis of imagination”



Popular jobs

Featured jobs



- 1 Architect/interior designer at COD Consultants
- 2 Technical mid-weight interior designer at Peter Mikic Interiors
- 3 Senior industrial designer at Monokoto
- 4 Material surveyor (auditor) at Material Index
- 5 Architect at Apt

Eight statement-making staircases that elevate living spaces



seven years on and 75 people still do not have justice. Soames is not a victim here, Soames should go to prison.

👍 1 🗨 0 Reply Share >



Dik Coates → Whateverandeveramen
a year ago

Something is badly broken in the UK.

👍 1 🗨 0 Reply Share >



Dik Coates
a year ago

"The architect should be held accountable for his choices according to UK law."

👍 0 🗨 0 Reply Share >



David foster
a year ago edited

The architect should be held accountable for his choices according to UK law. I remember in the RIBA Part 3 course the lecturer made it very clear, bringing up similar cases from the past. Ignorance is not an excuse. And to be clear architects also feast at developers table.

👍 1 🗨 0 Reply Share >



The Damp Course → David foster
a year ago edited

Thousands of architects, if not the entire profession, is accountable then – because there are 4,000 other buildings at 11m or above with similar cladding, insulation and detailing.

👍 1 🗨 0 Reply Share >



Dik Coates → The Damp Course
a year ago

4000 other potential Grenfell Towers!

👍 0 🗨 0 Reply Share >



Dik Coates → David foster
a year ago

This depends on what he spec'd and what he knew.

👍 0 🗨 0 Reply Share >



David foster → Dik Coates
a year ago

From what I understand the report found that his firm specified the ACM panels, either ignoring the danger or not fully understanding or investigating it.

👍 0 🗨 0 Reply Share >



Dik Coates → Dik Coates
a year ago

This was in response to Orangikaupapa's comment, but I couldn't move it.

👍 0 🗨 0 Reply Share >



Dixie Normous → David foster
a year ago

What about alleged illegal sub-letting of units?

👍 0 🗨 1 Reply Share >



Whateverandeveramen → Dixie Normous
a year ago edited

What about it?

👍 1 🗨 0 Reply Share >



Dik Coates → Dixie Normous
a year ago

That's a totally different issue. This is far more serious.

👍 1 🗨 0 Reply Share >



This comment was deleted.



Dik Coates → Guest
a year ago edited

It's called a 'red herring', in Canada.

👍 1 🗨 0 Reply Share >



Godfree Roberts
a year ago edited

One night in 2010, a Shanghai high-rise fire killed fifty-eight people. Before dawn, local Party members had coordinated twenty-five fire stations, a hundred fire trucks, and a thousand firefighters along with police, hospitals, finance, insurance, housing, donations, counselling, criminal investigators, and schools.

Forty-eight hours later, state-owned insurers compensated families for lost property and wrote \$250,000 checks for each death. Ten days later, Shanghai Mayor Han Zheng confessed, "Our poor supervision of the construction industry caused the fire". He implemented new building codes, fired or demoted thirty officials, and indicted twenty-two, most of whom went to prison, two for sixteen years. The contrast with London's Grenfell Tower fire is stark.

👍 2 🗨 0 Reply Share >



Dik Coates
a year ago edited



Ten skyscrapers that buck the all-glass trend



London Design Festival guide 2025



Dezeen Jobs





a year ago edited

The architect firm, who was hired to design Grenfell Tower's refurbishment and saw flammable cladding wrapped around the building, has been blocked from shuttering.

Studio E – the firm that led the design of Grenfell Tower's refurbishment – has been in the process of closing down for more than four years.

But despite the business being in liquidation it cannot shut as long as investigations into the fire, which devastatingly tore through the block and killed 72 people, are active, The Times reports.

During this week's public inquiry into the disaster, it emerged Studio E holds a 'very significant degree of responsibility' when it comes to the tragedy of Grenfell.

https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13819355/architect-firm-grenfell-flammable-cladding-blocked-closing.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490

It appears the malfeasance was by the supplier.

👍 0 🗨 0 Reply Share ›



dwg → Dik Coates

a year ago

If you are interested in this issue and want to conduct some research, I would suggest going a little further than the gutter press which is the Daily Mail UK.

👍 1 🗨 1 Reply Share ›



Dik Coates → dwg

a year ago edited

Thanks for the info... I didn't know that about the Daily Mail. The statements that I posted appear to be factual. I was aware of the UK's practice of shuttering. From an engineering website, I frequent:

"Once it is dissolved. In the UK all companies remain active until removed from Companies House, a registration of all companies operating in the UK. I requested my company to be removed when I retired, but they ignored my request for a year, so they are right when they say it can take a year to get removed."

👍 0 🗨 0 Reply Share ›



James

a year ago edited

I think that – the sad facts of the matter and the tragedy it caused notwithstanding – this should be a wake-up call to other professionals across the world, and in the UK specifically. A crucial first lesson here is that the architect still bears the great weight of responsibility for design, even in procurement practices which have been built up to diminish this impression and separate the architect from oversight and control of the works.

Even recent moves to enforce the role of Building Regulations Principal Designer on the design team leader – though theoretically a way of moving some power and oversight back to the architect (or other suitable, qualified designer) – don't mean much in the face of a lack of protection of function/final sign-off.

Without the legally supported ability to recommend sanction/rectification, as well as collaborate, the architect has little power at the end of projects and very little non-social means of manoeuvring direction and attitudes at an early enough stage to ensure design safety – and, coincidentally, save everyone time and money in the long run.

This needs to be something which changes soon, or the practice of architecture in the UK will become a very strange occupation indeed, with increasingly harsh effects on those that participate in it.

👍 3 🗨 0 Reply Share ›



Peter W

a year ago edited

Interesting to read the various perspectives in the comments but there are two inescapable facts in all of this:

1. Studio E pitched on a very low fee in order to win this job, despite apparently having no prior experience of re-cladding tall residential buildings. I remain intrigued to see what the Architects Registration Board (ARB) has to say about this, but also interested to learn who decided the lowest fee and least experience should get the commission.
2. From the very first viewing of the fire, it was as clear as day follows night that there were no fire stops behind the cladding or around the windows. With so many firms contributing to the re-cladding process, it's remarkable (aka unbelievable) that not a single person from any of these companies happened to notice this omission. Whether a cost-saving, ignorance or sheer negligence, it is highly arguable that the fire could not have spread in the way it did, or as quickly, had even the most minimal levels of fire protection been in place.

👍 3 🗨 0 Reply Share ›



Dik Coates → Peter W

a year ago

"Studio E pitched on a very low fee in order to win this job, despite apparently having no prior experience of re-cladding tall residential buildings. I remain intrigued to see what the Architects Registration Board (ARB) has to say about this, but also interested to learn who decided the lowest fee and least experience should get the commission."

I'm not so sure that that is an issue.

👍 0 🗨 0 Reply Share ›



The Damp Course → Peter W

a year ago

According to the report, there were no other fees submitted. The Studio E fee fell under the LA requirement to competitive tender. It is unclear whether this was a low fee or not for the design work involved, unless I have missed that part. It wasn't compared like for like to other architect's fees.

Studio E was liquidated, I'm not sure the individual architects are registered architects anymore. You can read ARB's statement here: <https://arb.org.uk/arb-statement-on-grenfell-tower-inquiry-phase-2-report/>

👍 1 🗨 0 Reply Share ›



dwg → The Damp Course

a year ago

That's interesting and something which does happen in Local Authority procurement. Contractors can

that's interesting and something which does happen in local authority procurement. Contracts can be chopped up and budgets manipulated in order to avoid the OJEU threshold, which triggers a competitive tender process.

👍 0 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›

Dar

a year ago edited

Typical blame the architect not the corporation mentality that is rapidly seeing our profession degraded to little more than liability scapegoats.

Sad to see a young architect publicly crucified for this – I'd safely bet that the vast majority of architects have higher moral principles than most other professionals (some who actively go out of their way to screw others over).

Also the focus on the individual vs the "company" is shocking. Have the individuals who designed the Boeing 737 Max been named and shamed? The corporation should take responsibility not the individual.

Another nail in the coffin for our profession in the UK. Depressing time.

👍 6 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



Dik Coates ➡ Dar

a year ago

"Typical blame the architect not the corporation mentality that is rapidly seeing our profession degraded to little more than liability scapegoats."

Like the saying about politicians, "Once you can fake integrity, you have it made." If the architect spec'd the material and/or construction, he's responsible for the 74 deaths. There is no putting lipstick on this pig.

👍 0 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›

Marius

a year ago edited

There is a tendency to crucify the architect. The product/system is widely used (4000 applications) with hundreds of architects.

The path usually blocked by "let the others be sued first" seemed to be clear. The product is approved, sold, used, and most likely budget-friendly. Manufacturer was not cheating by non complying with specification. They developed a dangerous product and pushed it, using all sales propaganda tricks. Who is the first to know that there is a problem with the product? The inventor and manufacturer whose only aim is to get an approval and sell the crap. Did they try to cut corners along the way, to get certificates and their way in? Guess what I think.

It is a sad reality, but behind almost every provision of building codes are hurt, or dead people, we don't have crush dummy building testing.

👍 4 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



Prado Sellinder ➡ Marius

a year ago

It is entirely not on the architect to test and approve material flammability. We work with countless materials on any project and we have to trust the testing data that is given to us. This is primarily a failure on the regulator's behalf.

👍 0 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



DaveW

a year ago edited

People think architects design buildings. The truth is they are part of a design team, and while they may in some cases be responsible for bringing that team together, often the project is initiated by a developer/owner/management company, and for very understandable reasons, that entity wants to maintain control of the project. Many people today are focused on cost savings to the detriment of all else because it is one of the few things in the building process that can be easily understood.

The executive summary reveals there was deliberate distribution of misinformation by the manufacturers and failure of regulating bodies to stop it. Imagine trying to design anything when the data one is given cannot be trusted and industry precedent is wrong. I maintain it is impossible to know every performance aspect of every element in a building. That is what Bruce Soune's faced, and what many others faced without the fire to reveal their error. Criminal charges against the perpetrators of lies is warranted. Reprimand of Mr. Soune's may well be warranted, but only if all who made his mistake are reprimanded.

Executive Summary https://www.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/sites/default/files/CCS0923434692-004_GTI%20Phase%202_Report%20Overview_E-Laying_o.pdf

👍 3 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



Dik Coates ➡ DaveW

a year ago edited

"People think architects design buildings."

They are part of the design team that designs buildings.

"The executive summary reveals there was deliberate distribution of misinformation by the manufacturers and failure of regulating bodies to stop it."

They may not have been able to stop it, if given the wrong information. I generally trust suppliers to provide what was specified.

👍 1 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›

IDRACULA

a year ago

OW ...

👍 0 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›

AlfredHitchcock

a year ago

No doubt there will eventually be a few scape goats sacrificed, but the real culprits probably won't be charged.

👍 4 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



bernie

a year ago

A drawn out inquiry full of detail but is that hiding the real responsibilities? Corporate criminal liability seems to have become blurred by a long train of command and passing the buck. I feel that there will be another long drawn out judicial process involving liabilities, convictions and appeals.

👍 1 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



The Damp Course

a year ago edited

The huge number of other high rise buildings with similar cladding and detailing show Sounes was not alone in thinking this type of refurbishment was okay. If it is 4000 other buildings as has been quoted, that is 4000 building control full plans applications, 4000 sets of drawings and specifications, contractors and subcontractors carrying out the works, and 4000 building control inspections across the country that didn't pick up this was an unsafe practice. If this was a rogue refurbishment and unique in the materials it used and how it was installed, then the question of negligence is very different to one where so many others were done in the same way.

👍 12 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



Dik Coates

→ The Damp Course

a year ago edited

If the architect spec'd the wrong material then they are liable and responsible. If the supplier provided material that was not to spec, then they are. I knew that at the time of the fire. It's as simple as that.

Unfortunately that is not likely the way it will work. It's taken seven years to get to this point; what could go wrong?

The existing buildings with similar problems are a real-life safety threat, and doesn't seem to be resolved.

👍 1 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



Mark Emery

a year ago edited

Just how young must Sounes have been back in 2011-14 when this scheme was on the drawing boards??

👍 0 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



Dik Coates

→ Mark Emery

a year ago edited

Did he seal the drawings? Did he have a supervisor? When I'd been registered for only a couple of years, I was designing 20 storey buildings, without supervision, but it was a different time period.

👍 0 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



Chris

a year ago edited

Is it the case that Sounes initially specified a different cladding/insulation, and the change was pushed by the builder? Architects are supposed to know and worry about everything, but some things matter more than others. This is an insane and tragic story, and should serve as a reminder that architecture is a brutal and risky career. End of story.

👍 6 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



Dik Coates

→ Chris

a year ago

...and a reminder to others!

👍 0 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



vbha

a year ago

Sorry but as just another architect in the rat race, what the hell is this guy, who does not seem to be the owner of the firm, doing up there taking hits from the press and 'potentially' looking at criminal charges? Does the UK work differently than the USA with regards to professional responsibility and stamping? If its not his stamp, he should be doing little more than serving as a witness in the service of prosecuting who is actually the professionally responsible party.

I've seen plenty of stuff go down on projects I probably wouldn't stamp myself. The idea that even as a lead architect or anybody who isn't the firm owner has any true power in what goes down on a project is totally absurd. You are a cog in the wheel at best. The truth is this guy probably did understand there were some risks in the project, though I imagine nothing this tragic. Everyone probably told him to politely shut it if he loves receiving a paycheck, or to not worry about it.

Given the rapid increase in design build facades, and entire design build projects in the USA, where the architect has ceded huge amounts of control in the process, I wonder how long it is until we see some hapless sucker on the stands over here because they didn't realize that somehow in this profession losing the ability to direct the process doesn't actually absolve you of any of the responsibility when things screw up.

👍 7 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



Whateverandeveramen → vbha

a year ago

Yes. The UK works differently to the USA.

👍 0 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



Frank Lloyd Wrong

a year ago edited

I feel extreme empathy for Sounes as this can happen to any architect even though we give it 110%. It's an unforgiving profession and it is every architect's duty to extinguish any aspirations of young people to pursue such an anxious line of work with no reward but consequential liability. It's never too late to throw in the towel and make a career change, especially if you can still get out unscathed. It will be the best decision in your life and your health can be repaired so you can enjoy the rest of your life. I hope the court shows mercy for Sounes even with a guilty verdict, hopefully the sentence takes into account that it was a mistake and he did not intend any evil.

4 0 Reply Share >

Ash → Frank Lloyd Wrong
a year ago edited

Very well said. Get out of this shitty underpaid profession.

2 0 Reply Share >

The Damp Course → Frank Lloyd Wrong
a year ago

As said above, if Studio E and Sounes made mistakes, then so did thousands of other architects and building professionals on thousands of other buildings, as did approved inspectors plans checking and inspecting them, and certifying bodies giving materials the all clear. This type of refurbishment had become an accepted industry norm, it isn't the story of isolated individual mistakes, it is a story of systematic regulatory failures.

9 0 Reply Share >

Colin_MacGillivray → The Damp Course
a year ago edited

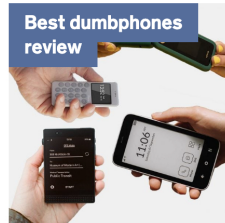
"...it is a story of systematic regulatory failures." The person responsible for the Grenfell deaths is the civil servant in the government department which commissioned the testing of the material. The person ignored the correct course of action when the report stated the material burned out of control in the test. The course of action was to establish a ban on the material in high-rise buildings. Governments have the power to ban things, ordinary citizens do not.

3 0 Reply Share >

Subscribe Privacy Do Not Sell My Data

DISQUS

Highlights



Magazine
Awards
Jobs
Events Guide
Showroom
School Shows
Courses

Architecture
Interiors
Design
Technology

Series
Interviews
Opinion
Talks
Videos

Newsletters
Comments
Submit a story
Advertise
Privacy notice
Contact