

Alex de Rijke: "Timber will be the concrete of the 21st century"

An interview by Imma Sanchís in La Vanguardia captures architect Alex de Rijke's thesis: engineered timber can replace concrete as the reference material, with a favourable carbon balance and faster, lighter construction.

The back page of La Vanguardia published an interview by Imma Sanchís with architect Alex de Rijke that distils, in a handful of answers, an argument PAPIK Group has shared for decades: engineered timber is not artisanal nostalgia but a competitive structural material capable of redefining how cities are built. His headline phrase sums up the thesis precisely: timber will be the concrete of the 21st century.

De Rijke's track record lends weight to the claim. His work includes a timber-panel dwelling designed to be raised in two days after a disaster, timber schools that have become a reference and object of study, residential architecture and a monumental staircase for the London Design Festival. It is a body of work that combines material efficiency and social usefulness without resorting to the spectacle of the skyscraper.

The carbon balance as the central argument

The interview frames the environmental question in concrete figures. According to De Rijke, one tonne of steel equals two tonnes of carbon, while one tonne of timber represents -1.6 tonnes of carbon. The conclusion follows directly: the more timber is used, the more construction's climate impact is reduced, provided more trees are planted than are felled, a condition the architect considers manageable.

This reading shifts the debate from taste to accounting. Concrete, De Rijke reminds us, is after water the most common element on the planet, with roughly one cubic metre per person. Its ubiquity owes less to technical superiority than to design inertia: we build in concrete without questioning other possibilities.

Density before height

De Rijke also questions contemporary architecture's obsession with height. His objection is not aesthetic but a matter of efficiency: an eight-storey apartment building can achieve greater density than a skyscraper, which needs far more open space around it. From this perspective, the pleasant city is not the one that stacks up tall buildings, but the one that manages density well.

The material follows this logic. Cross-laminated timber allows light structures, fast assembly and insulation that uses even the sawdust and offcuts of its own process, a healthier route than conventional chemical-based insulation. Its performance against fire, the architect stresses, is far better than that of steel, a point on which firefighters tend to be the easiest audience to convince.

The real cost of building in timber

One of the most widespread misunderstandings concerns price. In large buildings, De Rijke explains, the cost of timber matches that of concrete because construction is faster, the material is lighter and it does not need to be clad in other layers. Added to this is a benefit that often falls outside the conventional budget: the avoided environmental cost. Timber, in this framework, is both competitive and attractive.

The interview also offers a less predictable argument about wellbeing. De Rijke cites Austrian research showing that, in a timber environment, performance and learning improve, the heart rate relaxes and the acoustics are better. It is a reminder that the material defines not only the structure but the experience of those who inhabit the space, an idea central to the Passivhaus construction we apply in Eskimohaus homes.

Every era has its material

De Rijke orders the history of construction by material: brick in the 18th century, steel in the 19th, concrete in the 20th. In the 21st century, his proposal is to rehabilitate ourselves through timber. The term is deliberate: he speaks of a cultural shift that goes beyond technique and affects the way we design, finance and inhabit. This transition connects with what we explain in energy retrofit and with the underlying logic of the wood revolution in contemporary construction.

The interview closes by handing responsibility to the citizen. According to De Rijke, it is in our hands to ask for more timber in everyday life, to avoid plastic furniture and to demand that more trees be planted in cities. It is a call modest in form and ambitious in substance.

We have grown conceptually lazy: we build in concrete without questioning further possibilities. Recovering timber as a structural material is not a nostalgic gesture but a technical and climatic decision of our century.