

Peter Blundell-Jones (b. 4 January 1949; d. 19 August 2016)

I was privileged to know Professor Peter Blundell-Jones as a friend and academic colleague for nearly 25 years. Many - including myself - would argue that Peter was *the* pre-eminent European architectural critic of his generation, and certainly the most scholarly. Yet despite the erudition underpinning his writing, all his work was eminently readable, and completely accessible to a range of audiences. It was Peter's humanity that made him the man - and consummate professional - he was. And whilst Peter was never a member of the RIBA in a formal sense, he was a very good friend of this Institute, and a staunch believer in the redemptive value of architecture; for these reasons alone, this brief *memoire* is appropriate to the point in Council where we remember those who have passed on.

Others have written about Peter's frankly astonishing list of publications, whether books, chapters in books, reviews, or journal articles. What many may not know is that Peter routinely also provided the photography for his many building reviews and case studies. Long after digital cameras were built into the back of our phones, Peter used a 2¼"x 2¼" viewfinder camera to produce negatives as sharp as his prose. He had an excellent eye.

Without reducing his written work to a single theme, Peter was especially concerned with identifying the paths that Modernism might - and probably should - have moved down. Arriving as a student at the AA in the late 1960s, he heard the first sceptical critiques of the Corbusian canon offered by Charles Jencks; Jencks' commentary amounted to borderline heresy at the time, but for Peter it provided the impetus for understanding in depth the work of Hans Scharoun, Hugo Haring, and Gunnar Asplund - and a generation of younger architects whose values reflected these masters. These included Giancarlo de Carlo, Peter Hubner, and Enric Miralles.

Peter demonstrated persuasively through his many books and articles that the Cartesian geometry of Mies and Corbusier could be complemented - possibly supplanted - by a more complex approach to space, form, and programme, reliant on an intimate understanding of context in the widest possible sense. Haring's cowshed (bought to the world's attention in Peter's [Hugo Haring: The Organic versus The Geometric](#)) received an intensive analysis by generations of readers which would have baffled its bovine inhabitants.

In his own architecture - the Round House in Devon for his parents, the house he adapted and extended outside Cambridge for his family (described by Lucien Kroll as 'an entire village in itself'), and the converted mill at Grindleford which Peter lived in throughout his time as professor at the University of Sheffield, he expressed the values he supported in his writing.

Shortly after he'd bought the mill, a colleague and I were driven - very quickly - across the dales (unsurprisingly, in a Citroen CX, a car which aligned with Peter's embrace of the alternative) to inspect the newly acquired premises. There was about 2' of snow on the ground, and icicles were forming on ears and nose at will. A huge cloud of evaporating air escaped Peter's mouth, as his finger stabbed energetically at a set of survey drawings; he was certainly very excited about something. 'There! Look! That beam!'. OK, we cautiously offered...we see. In the centre of one drawing, a massive timber binder beam appeared offset from the X-Y grid by about 5-7°; Peter explained with a wonderful breathless enthusiasm that this skew - always the skew - now opened up a world of displaced room division for the mill. And that's exactly what he built.

When searching for a new chair of the RIBA Dissertation judging panel, I unhesitatingly nominated Peter. He chaired the panel for 5 productive years, reading around 40 major texts each summer, and forensically scouring the work for the most robust and medal-worthy arguments. At the summing up after each annual session, Peter's glasses would descend his nose southwards as he offered a terse but telling encapsulation of the strengths and weaknesses of the work, which was frequently also very funny.

Far from funny however is the thought that this brilliant critic, great scholar, and acknowledged authority on the only architecture that really matters (the properly interesting work telling a story of more than budgetary caution or scrupulous use of resources) will no longer grace our profession with his insight. But for all he did give us, and for the eternal wisdom of his work, we thank you PB-J.

David Gloster

RIBA Director of Education

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