

TRIBUTE TO PETER BLUNDELL JONES

As part of the celebration of his life and work
University of Sheffield, 16th November 2016

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One evening after a lecture in the school of architecture here in Sheffield, I went down the pub. Some architecture students were playing a version of the Monty Python sketch about being poor.

You know, the one that goes:

“Cardboard box. Luxury. We lived in a rolled up newspaper in a septic tank...”

The one that goes through a spiral of competitiveness about the excesses of poverty.

The students were doing an architectural take of this, which went something like:

“I remember the time he did a whole lecture about German architecture. It were brilliant.”

“That was too unfocussed for my taste. I remember the time he did a lecture about a single German architect: Hans Scharoun. Now that were good.”

“Luxury. I remember the time he did a lecture about a single German architect that no one had ever heard of.”

“A bit broad that one. I remember the time he did a lecture about a single building, designed by a single German architect no one had ever heard of. A cowshed, nothing more. That was true.”

“That were nothing. I remember the time that he did a whole lecture about a dung beetle, that sat on a cowpat, in a cowshed, designed by a single German architect that no one had ever heard of. Now that were real architecture. That was true greatness.”

I don't know if this was a well-rehearsed ritual that I had stumbled upon, or a spontaneous game, but either way tears rolled down my cheeks, just as tears rolled down my cheeks as I wrote my tribute for Peter shortly after his death.

Tears are always bittersweet.

The depth of loss is a mirror of the depth of affection and love. There was an extraordinary outpouring of affection and love after Peter's death, culminating in the beautiful tribute of lowering the blinds of the Arts Tower on the day of his funeral. (though I can almost hear Peter calling out: “You never should have moved the toilets; I can still see them through the blinds.”)

And so, the game that the students were playing had not one jot of mockery within it, but was part of that affection and respect. In the next few minutes I would like to give my take on how that affection and respect arose, drawing on my experience of Peter as a colleague at Sheffield.

To start with teaching. Sarah (Wigglesworth) and I were taught by Peter at Cambridge, in the first year that he was there. So I guess that we were introduced to Scharoun longer ago than anyone in the room. Twenty years later I went to the lectures he gave here in Sheffield. The strange thing was they were just the same - and completely different. The same because of the importance and passion that he attached to the work, and different because he attached new insights and fresh routes through the work. He must have given these lectures tens of times, but each time it was like the first. As Bryan (Lawson) noted in his tribute, it was like he was thinking in public, sharing with others.

Then there was his amazing ability as a critic, something that he seamlessly transferred from his writing to his teaching. He was brilliant at reading architectural work, particularly in the compressed time and space of the crit. He could, as I wrote in my obituary, read a plan at 30 paces and spot bullshit at 60. He was particularly acute on technical issues, which confused the students who knew him as the cowshed guy.

There was a time when the students of Sheffield School of Architecture were covering the city with urban farms. He would probe away:

“So, what are you growing?”

“Err, like, lettuce?”, the student would say hopefully

“How many lettuces? And how many people would they feed?”

“Err, quite a lot, I guess.”

“Don’t guess. Know. And what about pollution, it looks like they are on a roundabout?”

“Would carrots be any better...?”

And so on.

Then there were his PhD students. To supervise a humanities PhD properly is, I think, the most generous of all all academic activities. Most generous because you give up so much of yourself in order to help someone else develop and project their own voice. The most moving page on the tribute site that the school has set up for Peter is that of the PhD students, each of whom bear witness to the extraordinary contribution that Peter made to their work.

So why did Peter do this?

I would suggest he did it because coursing through him was the attribute of all great intellectuals, that of curiosity. It was curiosity that also drove his next important contribution as a colleague, that of collaboration. He didn’t collaborate because of institutional demands for interdisciplinarity. He collaborated because he was curious – about ideas, sharing ideas, testing ideas. I think that many of us in this room will be eternally grateful for this sharing, because through it we found our own confidence. At a very personal level this was true for me, and I think Doina (Petrescu), with our collective work on participation which took me to a different level as a writer and researcher.

Now in this eulogy I think I need to give a bit of balance. It is difficult for me to say what I am about to say, particularly with the family here.

I'm not sure how best to put this. So I'll cut to the chase:

Peter was not a committee man.

I remember sitting with the Peter and the other professors and deciding that we should each take a leadership role. I then did something that was not the greatest moment in my leadership career. I gave Peter the Quality Committee to chair. In hindsight this was not clever.

Now there are children in the room, so I don't want to go into details, but let's just say that it wasn't pretty, but at least it was quick. Maybe three meetings before I quietly found another chair.

A few years later I tried again. Teaching. Peter's good at Teaching. Let's give him Teaching Committee – or so my naïve logic went. Within minutes of the first meeting, he stormed into my room:

“Idiots! They're asking us to do 'peer observation'. But don't they realise that's what we do the whole time? But not in an Orwellian way.”

So that didn't last long either.

I have wondered what was going on here. It was not Peter being deliberately obstructive, because that was not in his manner. It certainly was not him ducking out of duty. When we did our first quick and dirty workload analysis in the school, the sums showed that Peter was doing by far and away the most teaching hours - and then the research, and then the external stuff. So this was not shirking.

I think that what was going on was that these committees - with their mandates, their instruments, their measures, their prescriptive processes – pierced the core of what Peter believed in as an educator; in terms of the social, political and ethical role of education.

At a time when the moral compasses of the world are not just spinning but exploding in front of our very eyes, we need to hold close to Peter's values, because otherwise the closure, the instrumentalisation, the commodification, and the corruption of education - along with other 'systems' - will become the new normal.

So, although his generosity, his brilliant writing, his astounding teaching, his curiosity, were all important, what I think is most important of all is to remember his central conviction as to the purpose of education; education as a duty of ethical empowerment.

This insistence on the ethic is for me Peter's greatest gift. I hope it is one that we can all share, take away and hold fast to.

Thank you.