

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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I first met Peter in a lecture in October 2012 when I had just started my Masters in Sheffield School of Architecture. Peter became my thesis supervisor later in that year and I still remember so clearly our first meeting on a sunny morning in his office, his smiles, his books, his words, his carefully reading of my proposal, and his strong recommendations to narrow down my topic. Peter was so happy to see that my final thesis was shortlisted for that year's RIBA Presidents Awards. I remember on that awards night we coincidentally met at RIBA, the first time we met outside the Arts tower. He seemed really happy and took me to an exhibition in upstairs gallery, this moment left a deep impression that the man in front of me was not only an influential professor, but also such a nice elder who wanted to listen to a young international student express architectural ideas using not fluent English.

After graduation I was so lucky to become a PhD student of Peter during his semi-retirement, one of his final last ones. I felt at home in his vernacular-focused East-West seminars, although at that time I was interested in contemporary urbanism. I still am. But I struggled during my first year, until the following email which saved me.

'Dear Xiang,

I see you have been very busy following up all this western theorising, but the report seems to me rather abstract and lacking in material concerned with China. We know that there was a sophisticated carpentry system and much interaction between villagers in the building process, including all the building rituals, mutual assembly, ancestor worship, the feng-shui and so on. Surely some of this still exists or is at least within memory, so it is worth documenting in particular examples, and moving on from there to current practice. There may also be some Chinese metaphors and characters to describe and frame it, which you do not have to reinvent in terms of western concepts. So the challenge will be precisely what and where to research: I would start with a specific village. Peter '

That was the longest email Peter had written to me. It was also the turning point of my PhD research shifting from contemporary western urban to the Chinese traditional village, to down to the earth, to get hands dirty, to find my own root. When I got the news one morning this September that my work on village was shortlisted for this year's RIBA Presidents Awards, to be honest, I was of little happiness but deeply into the silence looking at my email inbox. How much I was looking forward to receiving an email again from Peter, which was normally one sentence with no more than two lines but meaning so much for me. He wouldn't say too much congrats but probably – 'How are you doing with your next research?' I found myself missing Peter extremely at that shortlisted moment; he would always be the first person I would email to about good news. I couldn't send him an email anymore; I have sent my last one on his funeral day.

Last year Peter had weekly lecture every Monday afternoon, it was the Humanity module vernacular architecture for undergraduate Y1 students. So we scheduled our meeting every Monday at 11am, usually took about one hour and a half, sometimes towards 2 hours because of too many naïve questions from me, but Peter was never impatient. Then it was 1pm for lunch, Peter occasionally joined me at the Students Union for a quick take-away, but mostly he would stay in front of his computer. One day I couldn't help to ask him 'Hi Peter, why not having a break before the afternoon's lectures starting at 2?' He answered me he still wanted to refine his PPT. Then I

understood he was preparing to the fullest till the last minute before the lectures, even the content of which he had been giving for decades and writing in so many academic papers. It was from here that I fully understood that, behind his commitment is his love to students, his love to teaching, and his love to architecture. I still remember the long queue after his afternoon lectures which sometimes used up his transportation time for going back home - so he had to rush to the bus station from lower ground lecture theatre in order not to miss the train back. The rush sometimes made him lost a piece of his everyday objects in the lecture theatre, for example computer mouse, which I would with much pleasure to pick it up after I got his email later that evening. I developed a habit to accompany with him walking to and standing at the bus station, waiting for the bus coming before saying goodbye to him – that almost became a Monday ritual for me during those dark and cold winter evenings. For me it was of course warmest from inside, because lots of informal discussions would be happened during that walking/waiting ritual.

As you could see in this exemplary way, many students and I learnt a lot from Peter not only from formal academic meetings/lectures, but also from those informal daily interactions/activities. I doubt Peter would object that is the essence of architectural education as well. Learning and teaching would happen everywhere and at any time, consciously or unconsciously. It is about the irregular, the spontaneous, the organic, which all corresponds to Peter's distance from that universal solution as pure as Miesian aesthetic in architecture, but his perseverance through a thicker interpretation on those messy-engaged but grounded materials taken from the locality and from the everyday.

For me as a student, also as an international outsider, the time I spent with Peter is much less than most of the attendees here today. But he was really that person who influenced me so much – I would say, whole life – there is an old saying in traditional China - 'one day teacher, whole life father'. Peter was such a person to me. He was also 'the father of the house' for the arts tower/SSoA, and I believe the flame will go on, for so many generations of younger students, scholars and practitioners not only coming from Sheffield, but also from all over the world. Thank you.