

Fiona MacCarthy

I'm here to talk of Peter both as a fellow writer and as a near neighbour in the next village in Derbyshire. While Peter was converting Padley Mill in Grindleford my late husband David Mellor – a few miles away in Hathersage – had been building a cutlery factory, reviving the old Hathersage village gas works site. So there was an immediate rapport between our families. Architecture, design and Peter's, mine and Chrissie's books in progress were the focus of our many enjoyable and memorably stimulating conversations.

I want to dwell for a moment on that legacy of writings, remarkable writings, that Peter leaves behind him. He was never not writing: an outpouring of words, ideas, rethinkings were the way he connected with the world. If we look back to his first book on Hans Scharoun, developed from his Architectural Association student thesis and published in book form in 1978, we're conscious already of his confidence in claiming Scharoun, at the time generally considered too maverick an architect to rate among the major modernist practitioners, as a modernist indeed – but of a rather different species. Peter's talent as a commentator was to take the opposite, the unexpected view. With Scharoun he precociously and confidently challenged what he spurned as the inadequate view of modernism propounded by Pevsner and Gidion and others (Peter let's remember was a terribly good spurner), bringing out modernist architecture's depth, its emotional intensity and complexity.

I think it's true to say that Peter's revisionist energy and fervour overturned our view of Hans Scharoun as it did of Gunnar Asplund – the subject of another of Peter's major reconsiderations. Peter reclaimed Asplund too as part of an alternative modernist tradition, a humanist, poetic way of architecture developed so convincingly by Alvar Aalto later. I know from my own personal experience just how profoundly Peter's writing can affect one's responses to individual buildings. After Peter's book on Asplund I started viewing Asplund's Stockholm City Library and Woodland Crematorium with totally new eyes.

Where did Peter's zest for the contrary view come from? His sophisticated rarefied alternative sense of art and architecture? His background after all was not especially visual, his father being a West Country orthopaedic surgeon and his mother a GP. He was sent to a conventional prep school in Exeter and then to Blundell's in Tiverton, a public school which – after an enlightened decade in the 30s (when an altar carving had even been commissioned from Eric Gill) – had reverted by the 60s when Peter was a pupil to 'its original path of making hard men for the empire' as described by Peter who greatly disliked Blundell's hearty conventionalism. But there was one exception, the art master William Lyons-Wilson who was a considerable influence on him.

Peter talked often about Lyons-Wilson. The small abstract painting which Lyons-Wilson gave him hung so very touchingly on Peter's bedroom wall and he contributed an appreciative essay to a slim memorial volume, a copy of which he gave me, which brings out the importance of Lyons-Wilson in shaping Peter's view of art and ambiguity and indeed of the richnesses of life itself. Lyons-Wilson, as an orderly in World War One, had witnessed the extremes of carnage. Art, as a result, became

almost a religion. Lyons-Wilson indoctrinated Peter with his own profound knowledge of early modernism. He was a admirer of Miro and Klee, Dubuffet and Arp. Peter acknowledged how, like all the best teachers, 'he caused careers to be redirected, including mine.'

We need to think of Peter next at the AA in London, enrolling as an architecture student at the age of 17. We are now in the mid-60s. I didn't know Peter then but I can see the scene as I was then in London too, working for the Guardian as a kind of Swinging Sixties correspondent, covering art, design, that whole eruption of 1960s visual culture. Peter at the AA was in the very thick of it. The Archigram Group was upending old architectural certainties. Post-modernism too would soon be on the horizon. Charles Jencks was in fact one of Peter's tutors. Think of Peter young, impressionable, not long out of Blundell's. I feel the Swinging Sixties gave him the intellectual confidence edging on that very 1960s bloody mindedness (Peter could be wonderfully, caustically witty) that he went on to develop for all his working life.

Peter, as we know, wrote long and learned books. But he was also an accomplished, sometimes controversial journalist, writing regularly for the Architectural Review and the Architects' Journal. The first piece I ever read by Peter was on William Morris's Red House. – one of many links between us. I remember him writing an appreciative article on David's most radical cutlery, the cutlery called Minimal, which some people still consider a little too extreme. And (while we're on the personal) I cannot help remembering this evening the marvellous address Peter gave at David's memorial in Sheffield Cathedral. There was a great rapport between them. For me speaking here tonight there's a kind of symmetry.

Peter's new book Architecture and Ritual: How Buildings Shape Society perhaps has to be seen as a sort of culmination, a summit of his life's work on the often unconscious influence of architecture on the way we live our lives. It's a wonderful reminder of the breadth of Peter's interests. A masterly analysis of The Nuremberg Rally of 1934 precedes a haunting chapter on 'Hunter-Gatherer Architecture', the cults and rituals of primitive Australian Aborigines. From the Modernist Hospital to Opera and Concert Halls. How one longs to discuss and maybe argue with his statement that 'Of all the institutions housed in the pure and abstract architecture of the Modern Movement the hospital is perhaps the one that suits it best.'

That was the thing with Peter. With him you always wanted to continue conversations. Peter himself of course was quite a creature of the ritual. There were little ceremonies of drink and food and welcome when you went to spend an evening with him and Chrissie and (if you were lucky) Anna down at Padley Mill. If it was in summer there would be the beautiful ritual walk around the Mill Pond. Conversation about Timothy and Clare, Peter's older children whom he loved and was so proud of, and then more talk about the project of the moment – Peter's book on ritual, the book he planned on Lethaby, my own new biography of Walter Gropius.

I hold in my mind the memory of Peter when you asked him a question tearing off to his bookshelves to find the book you needed. It was always just the right one! We all mourn an irreplaceable colleague and dear friend.