

TRIBUTE TO PETER BLUNDELL JONES

As part of the celebration of his life and work

University of Sheffield, 16th November 2016

Dr Catherine Burke

I first met Peter some 20 years ago on the unmade track outside of the property he was about to transform, just along from where I live in Upper Padley, near Grindleford. He, Chrissie and his teenage children, Tim and Claire, were to become our new neighbours. A short time after that, my partner and I were delighted to be invited to a celebration of Peter's 50th birthday at the Sheffield Showroom where we all enjoyed *Mon Oncle (Tatti)*, a fitting film indeed.

Thereafter, I got to know Peter and his interests at social and communal gatherings along our lane - bonfires, summer parties, new year day musical gatherings. When Anna came along, my daughter, also an Anna, babysat and after a while gave Violin Lessons. Gradually I became aware of Peter's interest in the essential social functions of the design of school buildings as well as his extensive knowledge of architects who have designed schools past and present.

When in 2001 with *The Guardian* newspaper's co-operation, I gathered together thousands of school children's ideas on the theme of 'the school I'd Like', I talked with Peter about their responses that were so architectural and inspiring. As generous as ever and with no hesitation, he helped me to get in touch with architects designing schools today as well as other architect educators and I began many years of collaboration with architects and educators from that point.

Peter introduced me to Peter Tregenza and Judy Torrington and with Judy and Jon Prosser, a colleague from Leeds University, I co-directed a 2 year network funded by the EPSRC as part of their Design 21 programme. This was - *The view of the child. The Visual Culture of School*. Peter was part of the network and took a very active part. I remember one trip we all made to a school in Norfolk where Judy's daughter was teaching and while we worked with the children inside the classrooms, Peter disappeared to make a detailed photographic record of the whole building. He encouraged us all at that time towards the systematic recording of the histories of schools, their buildings, grounds and relationships. He saw this as vital work in reconnecting school communities with their pasts in order to help them plan for the future.

So, I was encouraged and once again invited Peter to be part of an international network this time funded by the AHRC, to explore 'the decorated school' as a phenomenon. Peter graciously attended all meetings and gave excellent contributions in what was a rich cross disciplinary project. But more than that, he acted as a most insightful referee. I found the other day a draft of a letter of support he had offered the AHRC which most likely contributed to our success in gaining funding. This is part of what he wrote – June 2010

'The architecture of the welfare state is now passing through what I call the trough of despair, when it is in bad physical condition, out of fashion and often subject to alterations which destroy the original concept. In this vulnerable state, buildings and their ancillary features are too easily brushed aside. Also in the recent rush to rebuild schools there has been a tendency among architects to start again from scratch, as if the problems of educational building had not been faced before, and as if no good solutions had been discovered. I have seen good repairable schools, progressive for their

time, demolished in favour of ill-conceived and hasty rebuilds. Such violence destroys not only building fabric but also continuities of practice and memories among the school community.'

Peter always read through my efforts to write about these things: his review of a first draft of my book 'School' co authored with Ian Grosvenor (2008) enriched the content. He pointed me to Scharoun, got hold of images for me, introduced me to Peter Hubner's work and presented me with his beautiful book on Hubner for my 50th birthday.

I spent countless hours on trains with Peter over the years and enjoyed many entertaining conversations over wine at neighbourly gatherings. In fact it was on one such occasion in early July that I last saw Peter. The work that I have tried to do in bringing the fields of education and architecture into conversation, if not yet forging a common vocabulary, would not have had nearly as much traction had I not encountered the friendship, social commitment and historical depth of understanding of Peter Blundell Jones.