

Remembering Peter Rice

An Article by Renzo Piano

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FONDAZIONE
RENZO PIANO

Chronicle of a day

By nine o'clock each morning Peter was already sitting at the big round table in the seminar room of our office in Genoa, in the very heart of the old city—because earlier he loved jogging for half an hour in the historical center of Genoa.

Sunlight entered through the large windows or one could hear the patterning of the rain—during bad weather—and noises from Piazzetta San Matteo drifted into the office to create a pleasant city ambiance, a reassuring atmosphere that felt like old times.

He sat on a canvas chair, legs outstretched, unusually absorbed reading a document.

We started working on the first of four or five projects on the agenda; at first, all together—architects and engineers—later, he and I alone, alternating between discussions, silence, presence of the one, absence of the other, apparently without purpose, but actually driven at a pace that was set mostly by Peter.

In the morning, Peter was often silent, and could be found looking up at ceiling, or bent over a sheet of paper—or rather, a drawing pad and with a red cover which he always carried around, and kept losing everywhere.

It was his personal way of looking into the dark: a feeling that all people of good sense know that they have to tackle with humility and without haste, in certain stages of creative work. Design work is very strange, and far removed from the mystifying stereotypes which people think of.

During the morning the important moments arrived silently, unforeseen, unheralded either by bugle-calls of war or by the bell-toll of peace. Unexpected and unrecognizable. The most important moments are never recognized initially: they are identified only later, when the project takes the right direction. All the projects to be discussed were touched upon, with a seeming lack of order. Peter came and went three or four times from his plunges into the dark to the reality of the office, surfacing with something, or with nothing, peacefully. Sometimes he agreed with what was being discussed, sometimes not, but didn't say so every time.

We always spoke together in French, a foreign tongue to both of us, since his native tongue was English, and mine Italian. We were on the same level, speaking a simplified language, poor and essential in its vocabulary and thus accessible in the concepts. "*Tu as raison*" "You are right" he said, often—but didn't mean that he agreed with me: he just wanted some time to think it over, and meanwhile he left me to proceed freely. I knew and played the game—but also knew when, later, his "*Tu as raison*" was final and true (I speak now of these things, because he is no longer with us; but back then we never talked about them, nor, in our reserve, did we ever talk about creativity, as if it were something too tender and fragile).

Our discussions ranged all the way from strictly practical matters, such as construction topics, to reach wider questions and cultural issues as we reached always for the meaning of things. Peter had always been a man of science but also a great humanist, in the Renaissance meaning of the word,



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and was an incurably curious person. I never saw him “make do” with a quick solution, or accept banality, and this is among the things that I’ve tried to learn from him: never to be satisfied.

From the concert hall of the Lingotto in Turin, where his interests ranged from acoustics to the make-up of the Berliner orchestra, we could move to the Bari World Cup football stadium, where he got himself involved in safety regulations for crowd control, discussed the granularity of the concrete structure, and enjoyed—as a lover of football and enthusiastic fan of the Queen Park Rangers – discussing tactics. When he worked on the Kansai Airport (in Osaka Bay), the topics ranged from the difficult geologic nature of the terrain to anti-seismic regulations, Japanese culture, and the delicacy of sushi, during dinner in Dotonbori restaurants. The creative process was circular, constantly passing from architecture to science, to art and to society.

Architecture, “contaminated art”, we used to say—but in a positive sense of course, since he was a great lover of architecture, as he was, actually, an architect as well as an engineer. But nevertheless it is art , in the positive meaning of the word: that is, made truer, more authentic, more credible by its ties to the human and physical reality of things.

Towards noon, the merry chiming of the bells of the many churches nearby, heralded, all too soon, the approaching end of the morning. Lunch time arrived, and we used to go to my home, in the same little square but in a different ancient palace, dating from the sixteenth century, that had belonged to the Doria family, where Maria, my cook, served us some good pasta with pesto, a Genovese dish which Peter was fond of, and other things, as well.

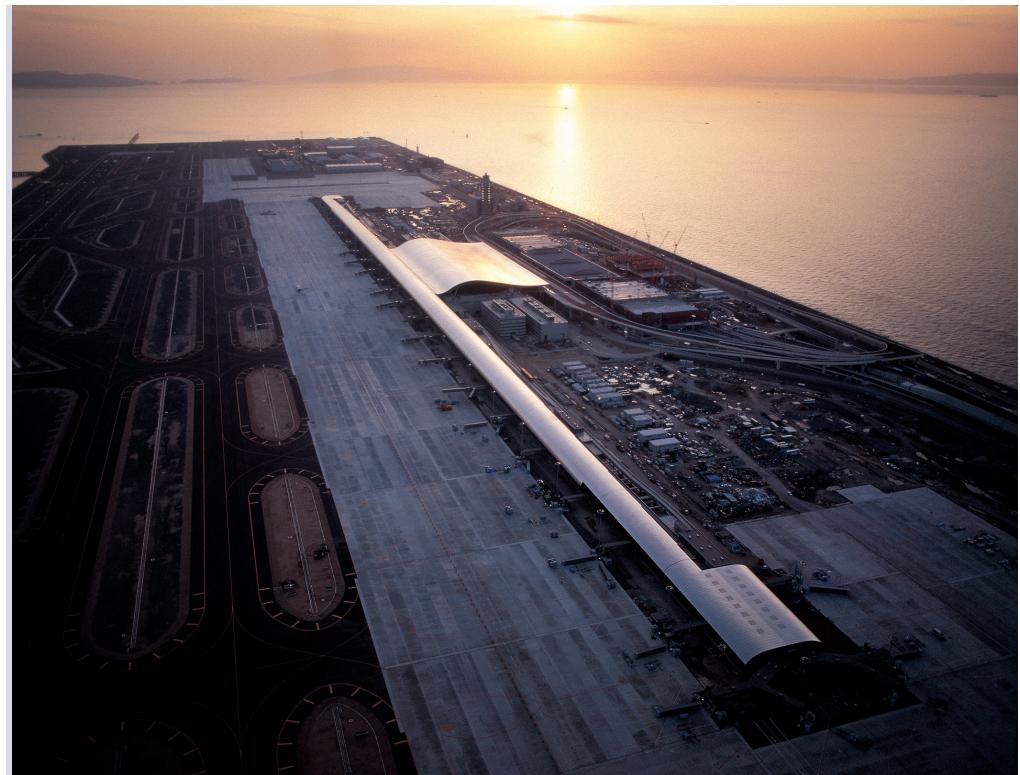
With respect to wine, Peter became impossible: he was demanding and he liked it very much, except during Lent, when he did not drink at all. But the choice was a delicate matter- at least as much as for whisky, which was never good enough if it was not irish. Lunch was the occasion to talk about the big question of life, the future, the ideal organization of work, the eternal search for an impossible harmony.

The afternoon was, with a few telephone interruptions, the continuation of the morning’s work. For example we dealt with the big crane, the “ BIGO ” at Genoa’s old port. Peter would start with his merry incursions of fantasy in the reign of reason, and then vice versa, with the rigor of his arguments in the carefree world of fantasy. I had the feeling, sometimes, that he understood, from his special outlook as scientist and his knowledge of mechanics, some of the truths on which our world is based. And then, when he closed his eyes we left him alone as you would leave alone a pianist, a good one, who closes his eyes to let the hands fly more freely over the keys, so well has he absorbed and made the techniques of sound his own. But sometimes Peter simply fell asleep after lunch. A small human frailty that was willingly forgiven - especially since it lasted just a few moments.

During the afternoon something was usually reaped from what had been sown in the morning. A game we often played was to project the completed work in the near future, with people inside it,



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the city around it, and nature surrounding it, to be better able to look at it, almost concealed. Things, seen with more detachment, seemed to become clearer; the importance of topics assumed its correct hierarchy. Thus, it suddenly became clear that in the design of the concert hall of the Lingotto — a hall accommodating 2,000 people, housed within the old FIAT factory, in Turin — we were now approaching (with the aid of specialists in acoustics, musicians, and many others) the idea of single hall on the geometric plane (a 30 x 30 meter rectangle). But with a very complex composition of the wooden walls and mobile ceiling. It suddenly became clear that our closest attention should be focused on these two elements. Now, Peter was also good at grasping, on both technical /scientific and humanistic / cultural levels, what a project's priorities were in ever changing stages of the project process. " Genius is great patience " someone has said: this perfectly fits Peter Rice, patiently, with a genuine multi-disciplinary perspective, he was able to move, tirelessly, between the " how " and the " why " of each issue. Now, many people talk about an interdisciplinary approach; it is fashionable, recalling a glorious period of European culture, in which the borders between the different artistic and scientific disciplines were permeable. But very few people are actually able to put this into practice, because the interdisciplinary approach requires a genuine ability to listen, sincere humility of the soul, and great prepositional energy. Everybody talks about it, but very few know how to put it into practice: in fact, almost everybody accepts an apportioning of the creative process that works somewhat like a cascade; everybody saying his mind, one after the other.

Peter was champion of common sense, beside being a great engineer and designer; and for this reason he was well suited to achieving within himself, as in an ideal centrifuge, the synthesis of all the very different aspects of a project.

One of Peter's great gifts, that all of us tried to steal from him, was that of having the utmost normality, the utmost aversion to the pomosity of the utterances, the rituality of discussions, the rhetoric of behaviors. A moralizer, without intending to be such. And this is fundamental for a multidisciplinary perspective, because it leaves you constantly open to the significant argument put forward by others.

One afternoon we had a long discussion with the composer Luciano Berio — a very dear friends of us both — about music and the relationship between orchestra and public. We talked about tension, acoustics, lighting and confirmed with certainly some ideas that we had already developed, and removed forever some others.

With Peter one could always feel at least a bit "Homo Faber": man the maker of things, because one felt naturally immersed in a creative multidisciplinary atmosphere, convivial , of great fervor and interchange. One could see first-hand how much of a fantastic human adventure building can be, how much the instinct for exploration and the pleasure of discovery belongs to our nature, how sweet the gift of creativity is, and how painful is the curse of exploring new frontiers.



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Towards late afternoon, after some short meetings with visitors, that usually happened around five p.m. the time to make choices arrived. One day he called me, I think it was around 6 p.m. when he had to say something important he made a special face, with a smile hidden on his lips. He looked straight into my eyes, with his eyes wide open, as if to better focus and describe something in front of him. Then said three times “Renzo, Renzo, Renzo” first in a loud and imperious voice, then lower, and finally calm, first to get my attention, and then almost excusing himself, as if he was not really certain about the reliability of what he was about to say.

We were working on the big church for Father Pio, in Southern Italy, a church for ten thousand faithfuls, in Apulia and he told me that, in the final analysis, the most appropriate material to use for the church, and in particular the large arches of the liturgical hall (church), was local stone; he explained to me his theory on modern stone-cutting technology, the principles of the prestressing that he intended to apply (as this was a seismically active area), along with many other things. That was the moment in which the whole project found a sudden synthesis: because at that moment all the discussions on the shape of the church, on the collective memory of the religious space, on symbolism, on the functions, all started to conceal into a single vision.

That night we did not go to dinner until nine o'clock, because we started to draw, on small pieces of paper, almost hurriedly, and in those moments, so distant from the ostentation of round tables, from the flash bulbs of journalists, from academic theorizing, it became clear, palpable, that between science and art there can not be any barrier; they speak the same language and require the same energy.

Dinner was usually the most convivial occasion, with Shunji, Nori, Mark, Bernard (when he came to Genoa from the Paris studio, to take part in the seminar), and then the Arup engineers, and sometimes Tom Barker. He loved good food, Peter did, and a good glass of grappa after dinner.

In the evening we usually unbridled on the important issues of international politics, or football and horse racing (in this case it was a “solo” performance by Peter; nobody had either the competence or the courage to contradict him). And then Ireland always came to the surface. With Peter, however, we never talked about personal, intimate things; neither at dinner nor when we were alone. About these topics there was a sort of tacit complicity. The reserve of an Irish-man – and that of a Genoese, I suppose.

Afterward we passed again by the studio to collect all the things that he always forgot, and finally Peter started on foot along Salita San Matteo, toward his hotel.

The streets of Genoa are as narrow as the “calli” of Venice, and sounds reverberate; I still hear the echo of the words that we exchanged at a distance, before leaving each other :

“OK, Peter, good night, have a nice rest and see you tomorrow”.



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Peter Rice in the Serres at La Villette, 1990
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Working session on Lady Bird project in San Matteo, 1986/04/28
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Renzo Piano with Peter Rice and one of FIAT engineers working on a structural model, (1979-1980)
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Working session on Kansai Airport project in San Matteo, 1989/04/12
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The Kansai Airport, 1994/06/01
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Padre Pio Project working session in San Matteo with Kenneth Fraser, Renzo Piano, Peter Rice,
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The church under construction in 1998
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The Bigo

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Peter Rice, Renzo Piano and Susumu Shingu working on a “sail” model for the Genoa Old Harbour at Sanda, Japan

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