

Lectio doctoralis

ERNEST WILHELM WENDERS

Regista



Siracusa lectio

Wim Wenders

Desidero ringraziare il Magnifico Rettore,
Professore Antonino Recca,
Rettore dell'Università di Catania,
il Professore Giuseppe Dato,
Preside della Facoltà di Architettura
et Carlo Truppi,
Dozente di Progettazione Ambientale,
per il suo straordinario contributo alla mia nomina.
Ringrazio inoltre la Facoltà di Architettura,
il Senato Accademico e l'Università di Catania.
È con grande piacere che oggi ricevo
la Laurea ad Honoris causa in Architettura
da questa storica, prestigiosa e magnifica Università.

Da ora parlerò in inglese, se me lo consentite.

When I was a boy, in the Fifties,
living with my parents and my brother
in a small apartment in a suburb of Düsseldorf,
I once saw photographs of the first buildings
that Oscar Niemeyer was constructing for the city of Brasilia.
I could not believe my eyes!
They were creating a new town
in the middle of nowhere,
practically right out of the jungle!

These pictures somehow excited me more
than anything else I had ever seen...
Brasilia became an obsession of mine,
I collected all the pictures I could find
of this fantastic new capital of Brazil
and pasted them on the walls of the room
I was sharing with my brother.
He was a bit too young to really appreciate them,
but I explained these pictures to him as good as I could,
so he could grasp the audacity of this vision
and this historic event.
In the end, all our walls were covered with this Utopian city.

I had even found a map of South America,
 but it did not indicate Brasilia yet.
 So I had to draw it in myself.
 I dreamed of Brasilia!

My second encounter with architecture followed soon afterwards:
 In some magazine I saw photographs and floor plans of a house
 built somewhere in a faraway place called California,
 (I loved the sound of that imaginary "country" or whatever it was.)
 Anyway, the house was by a certain Richard Neutra.
 It was flat and straight and long,
 nothing but huge glass fronts, wood and concrete.
 From that day on I started to draw floor plans for countless villas.
 And I was going to become an architect, no question about it!
 (A dream that only came true more than 50 years later...)

We were still living under the roof of this crummy little town house,
 that couldn't be more remote
 from the elegance and the generous proportions
 of the American architect's universe,
 but my highflying dreams would not be brought down
 by something as profane as our everyday reality.
 In my mind I had already entered modernity.

Plus: my own city of Düsseldorf had produced the best example
 how quickly modern times could overthrow the old ages.
 They had built an actual skyscraper,
 the first of its kind in Germany,
 three flat slices of a concrete structure,
 rising an incredible 18 stories high.
 This wasn't all that different from my Richard Neutra dreams.
 Instead of spreading out flat and horizontally,
 the "three slices" grew vertically into the sky,
 nothing but glass and straight lines.
 Modernity had arrived at our doorsteps.
 America couldn't be all that different!

Architecture, I (vaguely) understood,
 changed the way people were living.
 New cities and new buildings
 were necessarily going to generate new people!
 Better people! I was sure of that.

Then my father started earning a bit more money.
 We were still living in that rented 2-bedroom apartment
 on the outskirts of Düsseldorf,
 and owned a small used German car, a "DKW",
 but now my Dad made an extravagant choice:
 He bought the first Citroen "Déesse" in the city.
 The famous "goddess", the "shark"!

That car almost caused riots.
 Everybody came to our street to see it.
 Other cars slowed down in traffic just to watch us!
 I had the feeling we were causing accidents wherever we went.
 Modernity was no longer a distant phenomenon.
 We had reached it!
 We even owned it and sat in it!
 My self esteem made a quantum leap.

**Design, I (vaguely) understood,
 changed the way people thought of themselves.**

At this point I had never been to America, let alone Brazil.
 The first foreign city I got to know was Amsterdam.
 I was mesmerized by the multitude of canals,
 by the foreign language, of course,
 but especially by these Dutch houses that were so different
 from the houses I knew in Germany.
 Windows had no curtains, for instance!
 You could look right into everybody's living room!
 The division between private and public life
 was drawn differently!

I realized that you would live a totally different life
 if you grew up in a city like this,
 in houses where everybody could look in,
 and near canals that you could always fall into:
 no railings protected people, cars or bicycles from taking a dive.
 There was a general "transparency" and fluidity in Amsterdam
 that contrasted strongly
 with the "enclosure" and the rigidity of the German cities I knew.

What could be more adventurous
 than exploring how other people lived!

Come to think of it,
most of the obsessions of my future life were already firmly planted
when I was 12 years old.
(At this age, I must add,
I was already taking photographs for a number of years...)

One more thing was missing, one big revelation!
I came upon it in Amsterdam as well, inside the Rijksmuseum!
For hours I stood in front of these paintings
by Vermeer, Rembrandt, Bosch,
and all those (sometimes even anonymous) landscape painters.

Apart from the worlds they opened up for me
I was struck by two discoveries:
The first one was the frame.
No, not the impressive golden frames around the paintings,
but the hidden ones
that separated what was INSIDE and visible
from what was forever going to be OUTSIDE and invisible.
You might think that this predisposition of the frame
to include and to exclude at the same time
is only too obvious,
why only realize it in a museum?!
Well, at some time you always have to discover the simplest things
for the first time, and all for yourself.

It was those Dutch painters
that revealed the mystery of "framing" for me.
And they made me discover a second even simpler thing
that I had not really discovered yet for myself:
the horizon!

A lot of these Dutch paintings had the flattest, straightest,
most infinite horizon line!
I was magically drawn to it.
It was like I had never noticed the horizon before,
or had always taken it for granted.
And maybe my post-war German landscape
had actually never exposed any real straight horizon line to me.

I returned to these museums over and over again.
I went to Amsterdam by bicycle to stand in front of Vermeer again.

I didn't know it yet, but in these paintings
were all the instructions and all the teaching
my eyes would ever need.

**Art, I (vaguely) understood,
was changing the way people see.**

That was all long ago.
Now I'm a good 50 years older,
enriched (and burdened) by 50 years of experience.
Why am I telling you about my childhood?

Well, because I asked myself a few questions
on the occasion of this honor and in order to prepare myself.
As I grew older I learned to accept
that the only radical questions are the ones that children ask.
So I looked at my early conceptions of architecture, design and art
and asked myself:

How do cities effect me now?
Can I ... live better in them now than then?
And how has architecture changed me to who I am today?
Does design still enrich my life
and improve the way I think of myself?

The horizon? Does it still attract me?
Does art continue to educate me
and improve my way of seeing the world?

Have we really become new, possibly better people,
because we *have* lived, *are* in fact living in modern cities,
surrounded by digital technology,
communicating through all sorts of networks,
in the late age of post-capitalism
and the early age of a truly global culture,
facing catastrophes that are so essentially different
from the one that had just passed when I was born,
the Second World War,
or from the one that overshadowed the world
when I grew up, the "Cold War" with its nuclear threat?
In short: have we become "new", even better people
through all the progress that we saw?

You might feel the vast disappointment
 that crept into my heart, into all our hearts,
 with each and every question.
 Better people? A better world? I must be kidding!
 Architecture, design and art did not change the world.

We learned so much, but...
 maybe we still didn't learn enough?
 Is that the truth that we fucked it all up?!
 We probably did... We certainly did, if I compare the world today
 to what I was expecting from it when I was a kid
 growing up in a destroyed country.
 But: Is it fair to judge the world
 by our childhood hopes and expectations?

I don't have an answer.
 But I would say: without a Utopian idea of the future,
 without examples for "beauty" and "truth" and "identity"
 I would never have had any expectations to begin with.
 That would have been much worse.

Let me concentrate on architecture.
 I grew up in a city that was almost entirely flattened.
 The world I knew was rubble, mountains of rubble,
 and nothing but ruins.
 So I started pretty low on the scale of expectations.
 Any new house was an improvement.
 But then I saw the first old remaining areas torn down,
 and the first inner cities deteriorate.
 I saw and lived through all the sins
 of the Fifties and Sixties and Seventies,
 which ravaged cities (not only in Germany)
 often worse than the war itself.
 Only slowly I came to realize that progress also works in reverse.

When I finally visited Brasilia, 30 years after my childhood fantasy,
 it was still impressive, sure,
 but it also felt stale and strangely out of place, out of time,
 out of touch with what people really needed.
 Utopias can also turn into their opposites.
 I had already noticed that phenomenon in East-Berlin,
 and later, when I saw Cuba.

Still, even now,
 even realizing that very few of the hopes of my youth were met,
 I would ardently defend my childhood theories:

Architecture still needs to change the way we are living.

**New cities and new buildings
 still must help people to improve their lives
 and, yes, become a better humanity!**

And yes,

**Design still has the function
 to change the way we think of ourselves.**

And yes:

Art better change the way we see!

Or it's all useless.

So, am I still the same eternal optimist?
 Has nothing really changed since I was a kid,
 and are we still naively continuing
 to project our hopes into the future?

One thing HAS drastically changed since then!

What it is?

I travel a lot, more than most other people I know,
 so I think I have developed a very acute sense for it.

I've been to cities lately in my own country, in Japan, the United States, Brazil, Switzerland, Sweden, Italy, France, Armenia, Bulgaria, Russia, Australia, Korea, Taiwan ... you name it, some of them new, some of them old "acquaintances", and I can not conceal my disappointment about the fact that they all start to look and feel alike.

You go to a coffee shop in Paris or Taipeh,
 and you might think you are in New York.

You look out of the window of your hotel room
 and you ask yourself:

Could I still tell where I am, just by looking out and around,
 or from the noises, or the smells?"

In the old days, that you all might still remember,
 cities had their own soundscape,

their very own and unmistakable smell,

their own "touch", their own ambiance and flair,

so that you would immediately know where you are.

Today, most of the time,
 you see the same advertising, the same billboards,
 the same neon signs,
 but also the very same buildings and cars.
 Even people seem to be dressed the same wherever you go.

You get out of a taxi at night on Pushkin Square in Moscow
 and you think you are in Las Vegas.
 Neon heaven, a hundred meters high!
 That, by the way, is the very opposite of a city,
 its contradiction in terms,
 my definition of "Hell on Earth": Las Vegas.
 If you have ever been there, you know what I mean.
 But don't laugh!
 That non-city is the fastest growing metropolis in America,
 and every other American city tries to catch up.
 And other cities everywhere else in the world, it seems,
 have caught the same disease.
 The virus of the worst commercialization, and of self-annihilation.

Now, don't get me wrong:
 I am not going to blow that horn
 about the much-complained "loss of identity"
 and that all the world becomes the same.
 That is an interesting subject, sure, but a commonplace,
 and maybe more a political and economic issue
 than an architectural one.

I am much more worried about something else.
 A loss that is even more tragic,
 a damage done to one of our human senses,
 to a basic feature, like smell, feel, touch, hear...
 One of our senses is "The sense of place".

I guess it was a primary sense for our early ancestors.
 They needed it for the most existential reasons.
 Their acute sense of place helped them to find shelter,
 it helped them to protect themselves,
 it helped them to find food,
 it helped them to survive in a hostile world.
 Slowly, with the ongoing civilization,
 the human race has lost that sense.

In the Vietnam War,
 Indians were very important for the American Army.
 Sioux, Apaches, Comanches, Cree...
 They were sent as spies, advance guards, scouts,
 because of their amazing and intact sense of place.

We all still have a bit of that sense,
 but we do not use it much any more.
 And therefore, as I said, it is declining and deteriorating.
 Architects are an exception from that regression,
 they need this sense for professional reasons.
 If you want to design a new building,
 you have to immerse yourself in that territory first,
 know all its conditions,
 how the light falls in, which weather prevails,
 make yourself familiar with the geology and so on...

A building needs to belong to a place,
 at least that is the architect's ambition.
 I remember once staying in a house
 built by the great Australian architect Glenn Murcutt.
 It was a very light structure, built out of wood and glass,
 and standing on sticks, so it would not even touch the ground.
 I woke up in the morning from a strange noise
 that came from under the floor in my bedroom.
 I tiptoed to the window and opened the curtain a bit.
 There were hundreds of kangaroos and wallabies,
 all walking around the house, some grazing,
 some involved in the funniest boxing matches,
 some coming out into the open from under the house.
 The house was actually inexistent for them.
 When we sat and had breakfast, a bit later,
 Murcutt told about the philosophy of the house
 that could completely adjust to sun and to rain,
 to cold and to warm weather,
 and that could be taken away at any moment
 without leaving a trace on the ground.
 I asked him why he had never built anything
 outside of his native Australia,
 although he was traveling the world
 and teaching in many places.

He said: "I would need to live somewhere for 20 years to understand the seasons and the light alone, not to speak of the flora and fauna, before I could possibly conceive of a house there."

I told him that I was about to give a lecture in Sydney entitled: "A sense of place".

He laughed and pulled a book from a shelf.

He had written it himself. It carried the same title...

That sense of place

has an important implication for my work, indeed.

All my films start with it,

much more than with a story, or with characters.

I first need to know WHERE a film "takes place",

I need to have a feeling for that place,

I need that urgency to want to know more and more about it,

so that the story I finally come up with

could not possibly happen anywhere else than at that very location.

Then I feel that my film is not arbitrary.

It's not just a plot that could happen anywhere.

When I go to the movies and see one of those films

where you don't exactly know the city or the country,

and where the filmmakers actually try to make you believe

this is happening in an anonymous place,

anywhere and everywhere,

I lose all interest.

There are no anonymous places, only specific ones.

Just like people.

There are no anonymous "shadow people"...

Because I work so much from a sense of place,

I am quite sensitive for a lack of it, not only in other movies,

but also in neighborhoods where every specificity has gone,

or in shopping areas that make me woozy, or nauseous,

with their aggressive effort to kill every last remnant

of a local culture, of local color, local taste.

But most of all,

and this is what I really wanted to talk about today.

I recognize and feel a loss of that human sense

in people.

Yes, that is the scariest thing:
 People, mankind, are in the process
 of losing one of their basic instincts.
 A lot of them are no longer aware,
 or can not even distinguish any more,
 what is special to their region, or their village,
 or their valley, or their surrounding.
 They have lost the taste for it.
 They feel it is worthless.
 Other places are better.
 Places on television are better.
 Places in magazines are better.
 Virtual places are better.
 The internet or digital realities are better.

A lot of kids are feeding so strongly on second hand reality
 that they have lost the feeling, or taste, or pleasure,
 in a first-hand experience.

Places can only be experienced first-hand,
 they need to be cherished.
 A place is something utterly real.
 The ever-growing loss of reality
 leads to a "loss of place"...

What the effect of such a growing rootlessness might be...
 we can only guess.
 One instinct dies, other instincts grow instead.
 It doesn't seem that social behavior would increase.
 The sense of place also creates solidarity,
 a feeling for the common good, a mutual responsibility...
 A loss of that sense leads to more greed
 and a lack of peace.

The people with the most developed sense of place
 I ever met on this planet were the Australian Aboriginals.
 Their religion IS the land.
 They know no gods,
 only mythical creatures that are hidden in the landscape
 and represent it, since the beginning of time.
 A mountain is such a mythical entity. a river, a valley
 or any land formation.

Every one of these people is personally responsible
 to maintain his, or her, stretch of land,
 by keeping its myths alive,
 by "singing the country".
 If they let that song die, or that knowledge of their stretch of land,
 it will die, along with them.
 These people would never ever conceive of the idea,
 that they could own the land.
 The land owns them.
 They could not possibly harm the land.
 It is holy!

WE, our civilization,
 have gotten used to owning everything,
 and of course every stretch of land, and every place.
 And as we own it,
 we have the right to destroy it.
 Ownership is a very bad concept.
 It reminds me of that Japanese businessman
 who owned a painting by Van Gogh
 and wrote into his testament
 that he wanted it to be buried with him.

Our vanishing sense of place
 may in the end destroy our planet and ourselves.
 The movie "Avatar" nicely showed
 the consequence of such a development.
 Only that this destruction is no longer science fiction.
 Here on our home planet we proceed just as brutally
 as mankind in the future on the green planet of Calypso.

This brings me back to architects.
 Here is a group of people, a profession, an art,
 with a pronounced sense of place,
 with all the tools, mentally and emotionally,
 to preserve their instinct
 for the local taste,
 the local light,
 the local beauty,
 the local geology,
 briefly: the very specifics of local and regional living,
 habits, culture, language, tradition, values.

If they have to plan and draft and build a house,
 a bridge, a street, a park, a city block or even larger structures,
 the architects can support and maintain at the same time
 whatever is REAL there,
 whatever EXISTS and deserves to survive.

Unfortunately, our human race seems determined
 to extinguish everything that is small,
 and thereby specific.

Whatever is BIG, corporate and powerful
 wants to rule.

There is a huge opposition to such politics
 of power and ownership worldwide,
 by people concerned with the future of our planet,
 and how we leave it to our children.
 Architects are the perfect partners for these new forces.

(I know, I know,
 a lot of architects also build shopping malls
 and could not care less for the holiness of places.
 But you are of course not part of these destroyers.)
 In my book, these are the new ethics of architecture.

In a film of mine that was deeply inspired by the Aboriginal culture,
 there is a character, a young man who is a geologist,
 and there is a note pinned on the wall of his studio in the outback.
 It says: "A geologist is a man in love with the Earth."

I hope that this can also be said for many architects in the future:
 "An architect is a man in love with the land,
 the place, the local reality."

Another hope of mine is
 that this can also be sad about many filmmakers of the future.
 Our two professions are allies
 in defense of this human instinct, the sense of place,
 that should never become an endangered species.

The future of a civilized life on Earth
 is built, among others,
 upon keeping a sense of place intact.

I thank you for your attention.