

The future will be just like the past: only more so: A Tribute to the late John Lansdown

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The contribution made by the late John Lansdown (1929 - 1999) to the application of computers to a range of creative disciplines, including architecture is outstanding. This paper attempts to capture the essence of his contribution, to celebrate its impact and to conjecture on the trajectory of his vision.

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Life

So much of what we see and hear in the dying year of the last decade of the first millennium is desperately depressing and degrading: Balkans bloodshed, child abuse, media mediocrity, academic audits, salaciousness and sleaze. How refreshing, then, to recapitulate on the life and legacy of a man whose contribution to his chosen area of activity was signal, but whose conduct and demeanour was exemplary.

John Lansdown, who died in February of this year at the age of 70 as an emeritus professor of Middlesex University's Centre of Electronic Arts, can surely be considered as a polymath.

A Welshman, graduate (with distinction) of the Welsh School of Architecture and award winning pianist at the Eisteddfod he worked in London first for Ian Fraser and Associates and later as partner in Turner, Lansdown, Hold and Patterson. While with Ian Fraser and Associates he took a postgraduate course in Operational Research which may have stimulated his commitment to a systems view of complex phenomena.

In the early 1960s John pioneered the application of computers in building design. Using what was considered at that time state-of-the-art technology (the Elliot 803), but in truth a wholly unwelcoming computing environment, he wrote, amongst other

things, a lift simulation programs, a site shadowing program and a perspective drawing program which put the UK well ahead of the world in the effective use of computers in architectural design.

His interests were, however, much wider. A central concern was the use of computers in a creative context and he pursued this idea in a number of contexts. He organised "Event One" in 1969 at the Royal College of Arts and "Interact" at the Edinburgh Festival in 1973: these two events established the concept of computer-generated art at least in the UK.

While the leading figure in the Computer Arts Society, John founded Systems Simulation - a company he chaired until 1983 - evidence of his truly polymathematical view of the world. In this period he contributed to:

- the special effects of the movies Alien, Saturn III and Heavy Metal.
- the first, superb, UK Channel 4 logo.
- the largest ever (but much criticised) computer-generated mural - "a waste of electricity" (Building Design).

A prolific writer, John's "Teach Yourself Computer Graphics" remains a classic. It deals with the algorithmic generation of images, animations, compositions, conversations, sword fights and

choreography; his dance piece A/C/S/H/O was performed in the Sydney Opera House in 1990.

Wonderfully stimulating were his regular pieces in the Computer Bulletin of the British Computer Society which ran from 1980 - 1992. The titles included such diverse and interesting topics as: Knuth, Polyhedra, Heavy Metal, Bugs, Escher, Uncertainty, Trees, Soft Objects, Turing, Choreography, Music, Chaos Theory, Celtic Art.

Hopefully, someone will re-edit and issue these minor masterpieces.

An Impression

The contribution which John Lansdown made to computer aided architectural design is very deep rooted in the development of the subject in architecture, in the UK and in Europe.

It is easy for the authors - one an envious contemporary; the other a grateful PhD examinee - to acknowledge the "rub-off" quality which John Lansdown brought to his dealings with others in the field.

He was, invariably, encouraging and supportive, a real sign that he was engaged - and wanted others to be engaged - on a mission of importance. We have no inkling of any doubt, whatsoever, that he might have held on the relevance on importance of his endeavours; quite the contrary. Everything that John Lansdown did was marked, one would say, by quiet and abiding confidence and this, it must be said, had an impression on lesser mortals who were wavering in the face of dynamic conservation in the profession.

Despite his mild manner and self-effacing demeanour, John Lansdown had the most gritty determination to see good ideas emerge, and so they did; he was persistent and positive in the pursuit of good causes - at cost, no doubt to his own advancement.

Legacy

The prime legacy left by John Lansdown are the

fundamental issues raised by his writings and work; the CAAD community would do well to return on a regular basis to these issues as they underpin much of what we seek to achieve.

Three of the issues which exercised John can be summarised as:

The opaqueness or transparency of the design decision-making process

What degree can increased insight into the causal relationship linking design decisions to building performance, made feasible by parametric computer simulation, foster creativity in design?

The art/science dichotomy (or not)

As an amplifier of the intellect, to what degree can the computer mediate in the communication between the right and left sides of the human brain?

System versus serendipity

What degrees of freedom do we have and do we need in order to generate designs which satisfy the spirit as well as the mind?

Like all good questions, the answers - if they exist - will be hard to come by but in seeking them, much can be learned. If we are to maximise the benefits from the life of John Lansdown we have to engage in the discourse which he so eloquently initiated.

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Figure 1. The late John Lansdown.

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John Lansdown's home page:

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