

LEGACY AND CELEBRATION

A TRIBUTE TO THE LIFE OF ERROL PIETERS

Friend, colleague, mentor and inspiration.

05 April 1951 - 17 APRIL 2020



Errol's sketch of Errol

"Paul Klee took a line for a walk. It snaked, looped, wandered off, and turned back on itself as it made its fitful journey through the worlds of his invention. A line can run dead straight, be wildly crooked, nervously wobbly, make sensuous curves or aggressive angles. It can meander, wander, track or trace. Be a scribble, doodle, scratch, hatched, dashed, dribbled or trickled. It can be precise or fuzzy, hard or soft, firm or gentle, thin or thick. It can be smudged, smeared, erased – or just fade away. You can push a line, drag it, manipulate and manoeuvre it, make it delineate, accentuate, attenuate, emphasise. A line may be imperious or modest, authoritative or servile, brutal or seductive, passive or active, weak or strong, thick or thin. A line is born, and dies, in a point."

What makes artists and architects, all creative people, unforgettable is their ability to see something ordinary from an angle that is hidden to most of us.

The art of looking sideways.

Like his idol, Picasso, Errol was one of those. Not only when looking at objects as simple (and complex) as a flower, but also in architecture, art, teaching, life, and most importantly, people. All people, from all walks of life.

His own life encapsulated in the line that Klee took for a walk.

Georgia O'Keeffe reflected that "Nobody sees a flower – really – it is so small – we haven't time – and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time."

This is not an obituary.

To write an obituary implies that someone is gone.

For the many whose paths he crossed that will not be the case.

He wittingly and unwittingly became a part of our thinking and living on so many different levels with a (sometimes disarming) honesty and conviction of belief, and passion for life and for those around him.

A true artist, a true teacher and a caring human being above all else (although you sometimes had to look beyond the scowl to appreciate it).

It manifested in a teaching career spanning almost 30 years and two thousand individual students, leaving an indelible mark on all of them.

Friend, colleague, mentor, philanthropist and inspiration that touched the lives of a generation of the architectural fraternity through whom his legacy will live in their own lives and in the work they do to make the world a better and more beautiful place for others.

Like the exceptional talent for cooking which he shared with unselfish enthusiasm- teaching was an act of passion, love and creativity.

Few people outside our small group of friends that taught together and lived through the era are aware of his journey in the attempt to create an opportunity for students that, during their studies, exhibited an ability to make a successful career as an architect (and resultant contribution to society), but were barred from doing so by some or other arbitrary obstacle stemming from administrative autocracy, prospectus requirements or pre-conceived perceptions.

It took a toll on all, but on Errol in particular.

In typical fashion, exhausting all avenues of possible collaboration, he pursued the only remaining route by initiating a process of transforming the Department of Architecture at Technikon Pretoria (now TUT), in the quest to create the opportunity for students to follow a full career path in architecture within the Department.

In the face of substantial opposition from both Academia (externally as well as internally) and the Regulatory Body, he succeeded against all the odds within an Institutional academic structure that did not allow for it.

As in many other instances, it was achieved by crossing boundaries, putting himself at risk for the eventual benefit of the students.

Students are relentless in their critical scrutiny of those who teach them.

When they make a concerted effort to visit a lecturer at his home ten, fifteen or twenty years after graduating, travelling from different parts of the country, or the world, to say hello, or to chat about architecture or life, it is a testament in itself.

So are the tributes paying homage on social media describing their experiences, awareness and emotions as a student and as architect:

There are two things I remember from my early days as a student.

1. The History of Architecture classes. How he taught me that books are meant to be used. Written in. Highlighted. Underlined. How later the year he lifted up my scribbled-in, highlighted, underlined textbook and showed the class 'what a real textbook should look like'. I loved those history classes. He would get this smirk on his face and impersonate a pharaoh or some architect. Highly entertaining. Always slipping in a few fatherly life lessons.

2. There was one watercolour class he presented. I sat next to him beside the drawing board. I was in awe of how effortless he made it look. I was appalled by how he sucked the brushes clean with his mouth and how he didn't miss the opportunity to tease me about it. To this day I also suck the watercolour brushes clean with my mouth.

Thys always says that you never experienced a crit until you walked out of an Errol crit, ears bleeding.

The way he said Poephol. No one could say Poephol with such gravitas.

The way he loved his family. How he spoke of his wife. How he spoke of Arno. With adoration, amusement and pure love. I remember a drawing of Arno and Saskia he shared with us sometime during our studies. How he captured Arno's curly hair perfectly. How he thought the world of them.

I remember how he made time for us. How I came over to his house in my Master's year in the evenings and how he patiently helped me with my speech. How he pushed us to rethink so many aspects of design and life in general.

The last time I saw him was just before we moved to PE. He impersonated Francien, much to her dismay...he showed us his incredible studio, his paintings, his plants. We talked about how leaving architecture for a while is a good thing. We talked about how commercial architecture scarred us for life.

I am sure feeble writings like these will pop up in the near and far future. From all the people who he inspired, moulded, scolded, bitch-slapped, loved. I am not one of his sketch protégés, in fact, I really don't know what he saw in this average small-town girl with very little natural talent or design finesse.

Riette (with her permission)

Such is Errol's legacy.

An indebted friend and colleague.

Sieg Schimdt

