

Yufei Li



*In
Conversation
with
François
Penz*

INTRODUCTION In the autumn of 2020, a year after he stepped back from the Head of the Department of Architecture at Cambridge, Professor François Penz retired from his teaching role. With the Scroope Building closed and isolation put upon every one of us at the time, it was a quiet farewell to mark the closing chapter of his ties with the School over the past four decades. In this interview (conducted online), Penz shared with Yufei Li his life path in architectural learning, education, and research. The conversation was a nostalgic reflection on times past, the relationship between practice and academia, the many turns one's career and interests take in life, and sentiments of best wishes to the Faculty's staff and students for all that the future may bring.

Yufei Li (YL)

How long have you been living in Cambridge?

François Penz (FP)

I arrived in Cambridge in October 1978, 43 years all together. The first 25 years of my life were in France (and Switzerland where I studied) and then the rest here. So, I have stayed far longer in England than in my original country. Cambridge is my main home now.

YL

I know you have just retired from the Department of Architecture last autumn.
Congratulations on entering the next chapter of life.

FP

Yes, I've been retired since the 1st of October 2020, at the start of the Michaelmas Term.

YL

What did you do in the first few months of your retirement?

FP

Well, the first six months of my retirement was a very intense period. *The CineMuseSpace Project* finished at the end of July 2020. Often with a large project like that, the outcomes arrive after the end of the project. So, my retirement has been ideal for starting to work on all the publications, and I am co-editing, with Janina Schupp, a book for Routledge, *The Everyday in Visual Culture: Slices of Lives* – now likely to be published in 2022. The editing process is quite nice because we are still interacting with all the colleagues who came to the conference in September 2019.

I also have a new book contract with Routledge – it is entitled, *The 100 Films That All Architects Should See*. It will be both an academic book and hopefully a book that practitioners would also like to have. I think for every architectural brief there is a film or two that people could use as a starting point for a conversation with a client or among the team. But this book will take a while to complete.

YL

Your retirement fell in a very special period of the global pandemic.

Could you describe a typical day in your lockdown life?

FP

A typical day would start with catching up with the news over coffee. Like everybody else, I read too much news. I also read the French news and listen to French radio, whenever I'm alone in the kitchen and preparing a meal. I probably won't start at my desk before 10:00 o'clock, work for 3 hours, and after that I would go jogging or walking on Grantchester meadows as it's so close by, followed by a late lunch. The afternoon is for correspondence, emails or supervisions. Towards the end of the afternoon, I would start picking up with writing and being more creative again until around 9 o'clock in the evening, when we stop and have a glass of wine and cook. After dinner, we would watch a film, if we still have the energy!

YL

That's a pretty unusual life routine.

Things are shifting a bit later than average in your schedule.

FP

This is a southern European lifestyle. But it suits us. Of course, it means that we never get to sleep until quite late.

YL

But it is great to keep up a very regular daily routine and keep life on track, especially during the lockdown period.

FP

Yes. I mean there are landmarks in the landscape; there are no more landmarks in time. Everything is the same [in isolation] that you have nothing to measure your life against. I don't know if you feel the same – but in lockdown I've noticed the perception of time goes faster. Well, thank God in a way. It is definitely lucky if we still feel the time is running and we are still not too bored of that life.

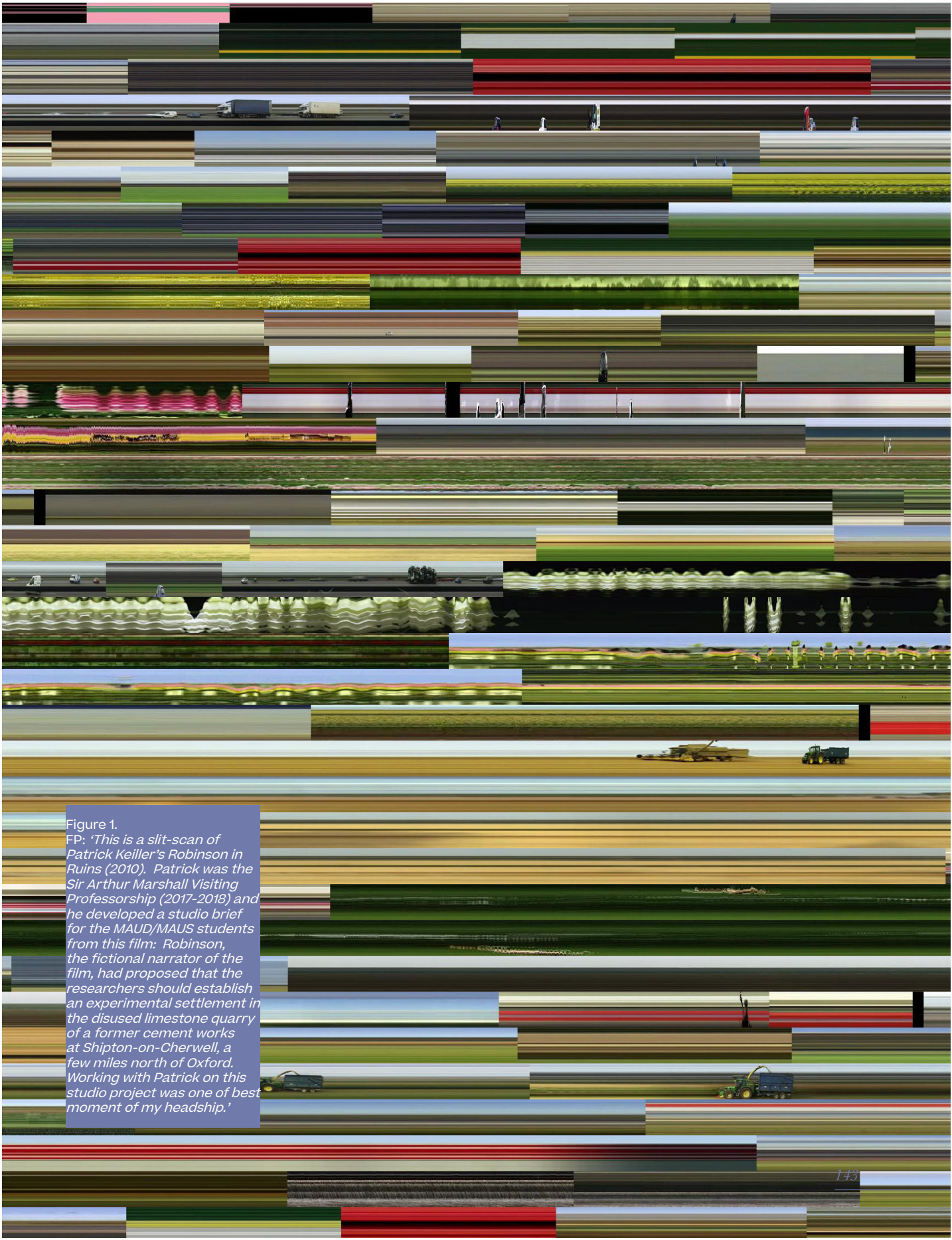


Figure 1.
FP: 'This is a slit-scan of
Patrick Keiller's *Robinson in
Ruins* (2010). Patrick was the
Sir Arthur Marshall Visiting
Professorship (2017-2018) and
he developed a studio brief
for the MAUD/MAUS students
from this film: *Robinson*,
the fictional narrator of the
film, had proposed that the
researchers should establish
an experimental settlement in
the disused limestone quarry
of a former cement works
at Shipton-on-Cherwell, a
few miles north of Oxford.
Working with Patrick on this
studio project was one of best
moment of my headship.'



EARLY ENCOUNTER WITH ARCHITECTURE

YL

Looking back to the very beginning,
could you talk us through your first encounter with architecture?
Where and when did it all start?

FP

There was no architect in my family, but I was quite good at drawing and was steered early on towards architecture by my parents. They arranged for me to do an internship at a local architects' office while I was still at school.

When it came to choosing a university, I originally wanted to go to Paris. But it was around the time of May '68, when Paris was extraordinarily chaotic – the Beaux-Arts system had collapsed, and everything was out of order. We were living on the border area next to Switzerland, which had been less troubled by May '68. There was a very good school of architecture in Lausanne, the EPFL, so I opted to go there.

I started in September 1970, it was still a very challenging, very exciting environment. There were a lot of political discussions. In the first year for example, every time the tutors proposed a brief, we would immediately challenge it (*laugh). Especially there was a core group of people who would immediately say that 'it was a very bourgeois brief' and that they wanted something more radical. Looking back, it must have been hard on the staff.

YL

Did these movements at the time – and the socio-political context back then –
influence the way you think of architecture? Were there any influential figures during your
early years of architectural studies?

FP

In the Spring of 1971, I followed the seminars of Henri Lefebvre who came to Lausanne for a term. As a Marxist philosopher, his lectures were very political. I still have his notes and it was my first encounter with the notion of the everyday. Although I don't really remember much about his seminars, I think somewhere it might have left a mark. Because I've spent so much time later on, decades later, rediscovering Lefebvre.

YL

Yes, even now in your book.

FP

Indeed. Lefebvre was a very important figure. But also I had strong influence from a young lecturer at the time, Jacques Gubler. He was our history and theory teacher in Lausanne. He got us to write essays and present them. I always remember my first presentation, in my second year, on brutalism and Reyner Banham in a history and theory seminar. I very much enjoyed that. And then in my third

year, I did a dissertation on Le Corbusier and colonialism – mainly his Algerian projects – and for which I won the dissertation prize, which surprised me as well as everybody else.

The course structure at Lausanne at the time was actually very similar to what I encountered here afterwards: three years undergraduate, the year-out, two years for the diploma. The pattern 40 years ago was exactly as it is now really. There were lectures, studios and crits ...things haven't changed at all. You probably had similar education yourself.

YL

Throughout your time in the school, did you find yourself
already leaning more towards research?

FP

Yes, absolutely. I came to enjoy the academic side of the course much more. In hindsight, this paved the way to my academic career – but I didn't realise it at the time. There was absolutely no plan whatsoever. It was all a series of encounters and chances.

MOVING TO CAMBRIDGE

YL

What brought you to England?

FP

It was a complete accident. After Lausanne, I moved to the South of France, to Aix-en-Provence near Marseille. I worked for half a year in an awful architectural office. And then, as often happens, there was an economic crisis and I was unemployed. At the time, the government was proposing, instead of being unemployed, to fund further education. So, I took a one-year master's course in Marseille in an engineering school (ISBA). This engineering qualification gave me access to grants that were not opened to architects. This is how I got a one-year British Council scholarship. After the first energy crisis in 1973, I wanted to work in the field of solar energy in buildings and the British Council recommended for me to join the Autarkic House Project at the Martin Centre, directed by Alex Pike.

When I arrived at the Martin Centre in October 1978, Alex suggested I do a PhD. However, the British Council had clearly specified that they would not fund a doctorate, to which Alex replied, 'Well, don't worry, something will turn up'. And he was right, as I later applied and received, not one, but two grant offers: one from the CNRS & Royal Society, which I took up, the other one, ironically, from The British Council, which I had to turn down. In both cases I was on a waiting list, which has taught me that often in life things may indeed turn up! Sadly, in the Spring of 1979, Alex Pike passed away rather suddenly. But I was very fortunate as Dean Hawkes very kindly took me under his wing and took over as my supervisor.

By today's standards, I would never have managed to get into the PhD programme as my English was quite poor. In fact, I wrote my first-year paper in French and gradually translated it. I had to follow some English courses at Anglia Polytechnic (now Anglia Ruskin) and this is how I passed my Cambridge First Certificate. From that point of view, I was wholly unprepared for the PhD. Like a lot of French kids, when I was 12 and 13, two summers in a row, I stayed for a month in the home of an English family in Brighton. But culturally I had absolutely no predisposition towards England. We were joking in my family before I left, that the rowing contest between Cambridge and Oxford was pretty much the only knowledge I had of Cambridge. So, everything was totally new. But what was quite fascinating is how, very quickly, I really enjoyed and adapted to my life here. At that time England had just joined the common market, the EU (in 1973). There was a lot of enthusiasm for being in Europe. People here were very kind and welcoming. I warmed to the lack of bureaucracy, and never had to register for anything. By contrast, while I was studying in Switzerland, as a foreigner, I had to go to the local police to register every time I moved accommodation. Being here was a breath of fresh air!

I also enjoyed the tolerance, the live and let live attitude. It was love at first sight when I came to England; it took me completely by surprise. I wasn't expecting that at all. I thought I would come here for one year and I would be gone; I would have learned English and it would be helpful for me later on. But now of course, after Brexit, things have changed a lot. It is a great sadness for me compared to the beginning when there was this wonderful hope and atmosphere, as I have seen the transformation from the opening to Europe to its rejection.

YL

You were treated as a guest when you arrived, weren't you?

FP

Of course. Darwin College played an important part in this very positive experience. For somebody coming from abroad, college is like a second family. And indeed, it was very lucky that Dean Hawkes and I were both at Darwin, and we both carry on being here in the same place – this association and friendship has lasted to this day. Now I have joined him in this mythical category of Emeritus Fellow, but the college keeps treating us very well. They keep us informed, for example of the new architectural developments. And if we can, we keep actively helping the college and the college keeps welcoming us. It's a wonderful arrangement.

YL

Yes. Cambridge's collegiate system is quite a unique way to engage with the educational environment.

FP

I mean it is on one hand very privileged, and we can all recognise that, but on the other hand you could say, arguably, that this is how all education should be. What's extraordinary is its interdisciplinarity. For example, when I was the Head of Department, I always made the effort, as often as I could, to go to college for lunch. By walking there, sitting down and talking to students or fellows from completely

different backgrounds, in half an hour, I would feel refreshed and rebooted... much better than just staying at my desk, eating a sandwich and looking at emails. And often new research ideas can come through these discussions.

YL

Do you feel life in the department is on another parallel track to that in college?

FP

One of the mysteries of Cambridge is that there is a strong, completely symbiotic relationship between the college and the university. But those are unwritten rules. You will discover how things happen as you go along. I probably know an awful lot about the relationship between colleges and the department, but none of that is written anywhere: it is a series of customs, a series of unwritten rules which govern this extraordinary relationship.

YL

Yes, it is very ambiguous for any newcomers to Cambridge.

But this is also quite a process of discovery throughout all these years when you are here.

FP

It is actually a very complicated system to understand and to explain. But that's in a way a part of the charm, isn't it? There is still a lot to be discovered. Nobody would design a system like this from scratch now. It wouldn't make sense.

EARLY DAYS OF RESEARCH

YL

During your PhD, were you working on more of the engineering aspects of architecture, or more humanity-based (subject)?

FP

I think I was probably more on the scientific ideas. For my PhD I was developing an environmental computer model, but it was the very beginning of computers. At the end of the 70s and early 80s, there was only one computer mainframe situated on the New Museum site. And, because the computer centre was very busy during the day, the best time was to work at night, entering the data in the terminal situated in Chaucer Road linked to the mainframe computer. Then, in order to see the results of the mainframe calculations, I would cycle from the Martin Centre to the New Museum site to collect the print-out. But quite often, there would have been a mistake in the programming, so I would go back to the Martin Centre (and repeat the process again)... It was physically demanding (*laugh), but kept me fit. Those were very interesting times as I really saw the whole evolution of computing over a long period of time.

YL

It is very interesting to see this paradigm shift in architectural computation.
In Cambridge there was perhaps the first bunch of people actually
getting into this computational system in architecture?

FP

Indeed, and if you had attended the Lionel March Memorial Conference in 2019, you would have come across a lot of people who talked about the early days of computational work in architecture at the Martin Centre since 1967. It is probably one of the earliest research centres of architecture in the world.

YL

What was your choice of career at the stage after you completed your PhD?
Did you choose to be an architectural academic straight afterwards?

FP

As I was nearing my PhD, it became quite obvious to me that I was more interested in research than being a professional architect. When I finished my PhD in 1983, I was trying to write to the main research bodies in France, but nobody ever responded to me. Fortunately, Dean Hawkes kept having grants, so I did a first postdoc and then a second one. Quite quickly it became apparent that I was going to stay here. My first lectureship was in London at the South Bank Polytechnic as it was called at the time. I was there for two years, but I was still living in Cambridge. I was commuting to the Southbank, by train and by cycling, taking me around 2.5 hours each way. Nevertheless, it was a nice experience because I met a lot of interesting people there.

YL

Was there a direct influence from your research of architecture
and computation to your career in architectural education?

FP

Yes. Because of my skill with computers, I started to introduce CAD at the South Bank. Then there was an opening here (in Cambridge), I think it was in 1988, the department wanted somebody to start teaching CAD. That was how I came back to Cambridge, with the brief of lecturing and working in studios. I introduced the first Apple computers in the Department of Architecture in 1989, and started experimenting with drawing life classes on the computer. This was an unusual use of computers and it got Apple interested in this experiment. They subsequently sponsored a large-scale studio experiment – in Year 2 – whereby each student was allocated a computer for a week, doing a studio project. And so, by the end of April 1990, arrived a big lorry in front of Scroope Terrace, full of Apple computers, which were set up in the classroom – it was quite a sight. (Figure 2)

YL

That was fascinating, seeing the start of introducing computers
and relevant new media into the studios.

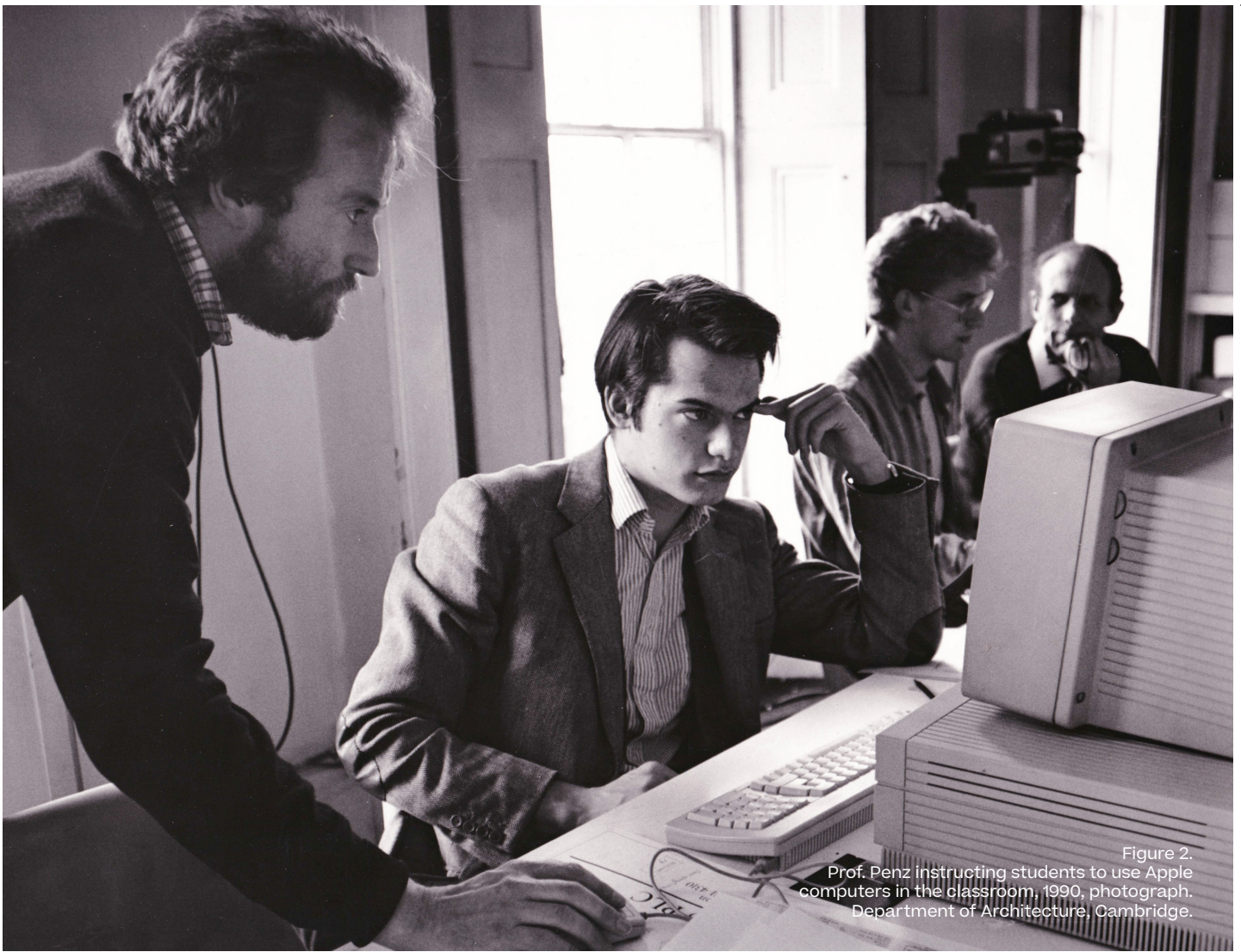
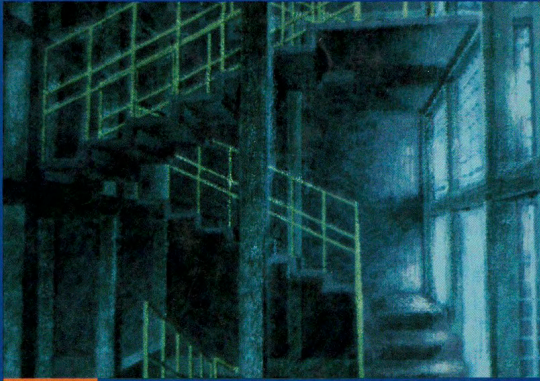


Figure 2.
Prof. Penz instructing students to use Apple
computers in the classroom, 1990, photograph.
Department of Architecture, Cambridge.

FP

This was first my real ‘solo’ research experiment. I had met Patricia Wright, working at the Medical Research Council (MRC) unit in Chaucer Road, and she was specialised in creativity and computing. Together we set up this studio as a controlled experiment and for the whole week the students, relieved of all lectures, had to do work by hand for some exercises and with the computer for some others. We were attempting to measure the impact of the computers on the creative design process. These were very early days, and during the crit at the end of the week I will always remember one invited guest proclaiming, ‘Well, in any case you will never ever find a good building designed on a computer’. In the early 1990s there was a huge amount of resistance in the architectural profession and in education. But on the back of this experiment – and sponsored by Apple again, I held my first international conference in September 1990 in Jesus College. I invited William Mitchell from MIT – who had been at the Martin Centre in the mid-1970s – and many other experts in the burgeoning field of architectural computing. I subsequently edited a book, *Computers in Architecture*. (Figure 3)

COMPUTERS IN ARCHITECTURE



Tools for Design

EDITED BY FRANÇOIS PENZ

Figure 3.
Front cover of
*Computers in
Architecture:
Tools for
Design* (Harlow:
Longman, 1992).
Scanned copy.

YL

It is an extremely beautiful book, published in full colour.

FP

Unfortunately, I think it is out of print now. This book, and the conference, were defining moments in my career. The next major step was in 1991, when I staged my first Cinema in Architecture workshop. It was opened to second year students over the Easter vacation in 1991, and I had twelve volunteers, if I remember correctly. There used to be an Audio-Visual Aids Unit (AVA) in Cambridge with a large TV studio. I had teamed up with the AVA staff who did a course on how to use the cameras and how to do film editing – all very cumbersome at the time as the edit suites used large u-matic tapes, long forgotten! And yet I recall the students being very inventive at using the technology in relation to their studio work. Then, in the following year, I met Maureen Thomas and turned my interest to film. It was in 1992, nearly 30 years ago.

BUILDING A RESEARCH CIRCLE

YL

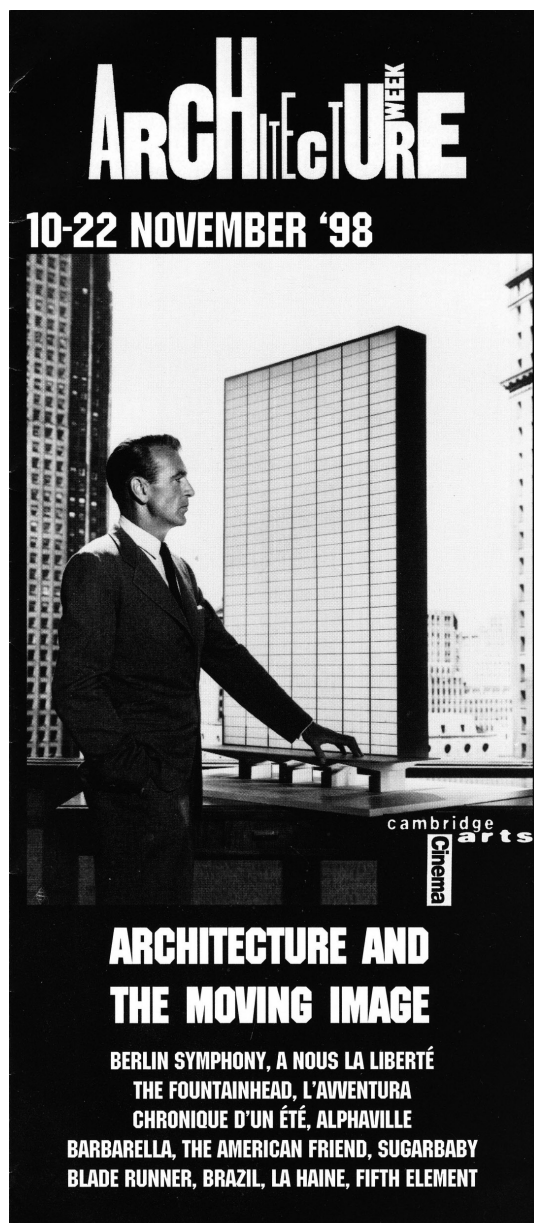
Would you tell us more about your
journey of encountering
film in architecture?

FP

Maureen was Head of Screen Studies at the National Film and Television School (NFTS). She once came to Cambridge to visit Paul Richens, at the time Director of the Martin Centre, and that's how I met her. At the time, Maureen was trying to introduce computers at the NFTS, and she became interested in my experiments in mixing video footage, architectural drawings and animated walk throughs. But I didn't have much of a clue about screen language, her expertise, and that's how we decided to help each other. She started to come to Cambridge to participate in my workshops and in turn I would go to the NFTS to talk about our experiments – a very informal arrangement and this is how we started.

In 1995, sponsored by the Arts Council, we staged the Cinema and Architecture Conference out of which Maureen and I co-edited a book published by the British Film Institute (BFI) in 1997. It took off from there. Another very important date is 1998, the creation of the Cambridge University Moving Image Studio (CUMIS), which was based in Benet Place, just around the corner from the department. CUMIS took over from the Audio-Visual Aids Unit, the AVA, which was closed down by the University. Two technicians and some of the equipment were transferred to CUMIS. The deal was to create a film unit, which we could use for our own purpose, as well as by other departments. I became CUMIS's director and Maureen its creative director. (Figure 4)

Figure 4.
FP: 'I curated a film
season at the Arts
Cinema (at the time
when it was still in Market
Passage, now B bar)
to correspond to the
launch of CUMIS. We ran
several film seasons at
the Arts throughout the
1990's, all sponsored
by the French Cultural
Delegation in Cambridge,
now long defunct.
This was a key part of
creating a film culture
in the Department.'



Between 1998 and 2005, we were making films for the whole of the University. Amongst other examples, we would record various award ceremonies at the Senate House; we tracked the evolution of West Cambridge from the very first buildings onwards and so on. Many aspects of the life of the University were recorded at the turn of the century. Hundreds of digital video tapes lie dormant awaiting to be rediscovered! We were also doing workshops for other departments, mainly Anthropology, Modern and Medieval Languages (MML), and other departments. Crucially, in 1999, we started our first MPhil in Architecture and Moving Image, and we had six students. It ran until 2005 when CUMIS was closed down by the University as the result of the restructuring of the Department. Many MPhil students did a PhD, and that was how we built a research group.

YL

Do you still keep a record of how many students you have supervised in your career?

FP

I have supervised about 25 PhD students in my career – that's pretty average. But the important point is that PhD students turn into lecturers, researchers and professors taking positions in different parts of the world. They later become your collaborators for the future. There can be a lifelong and fruitful collaboration between supervisors and their PhD students. It is a formidable research network at a global level. When the Department organised the Martin Centre conference in 2017, every research group had asked their alumni to come back and contribute to a discussion on how our research field had evolved over the years. And I always remember that Janina, one of my former PhD students, was in charge of contacting them and about half managed to make it. Meeting all those people, she said, was like meeting all her half-brothers and sisters, cousins and family. It was a very nice moment.

YL

It is like you started to grow a tree.

FP

Yes, exactly.

RESEARCH, PRACTICE, TEACHING – JOYS AND DILEMMA

YL

Being in the architectural academia, do you feel a closer bond between you and the research units than to the design studio?

FP

In some sense yes. But it could be problematic. In fact, I think there's a divide that every Head of Department is trying to break. Design and research are like two separate cultures within a department. Academics can be disconnected from the practical work that the design fellows are doing in the studio. We all try hard to bridge the divide but it's not easy.



Figure 4.
Photograph taken in April 1995, the first Cinema & Architecture conference in Kings College hosted by Penz (second row, third from left), Nick Bullock to his left and Maureen Thomas at the front.

YL

Personally, I experienced that kind of divide. Before coming to the academic side, I was very much a practitioner and worked in industry for several years.

It was during the MPhil and later PhD that I gradually shifted from design to research, and began to address architecture with very different approaches.

FP

Indeed. When you do a PhD, you have to favour depth rather than breadth. Often you do not collaborate with anybody else. It is just between you and your supervisor, and maybe you have a supervisory team, with a second supervisor. By and large you dig very deep in a very small field. You have to be very focused and forget about the rest of the world, because it's what you have to do. But after finishing the PhD, the reward is that you are free to engage with other disciplines, working with scholars in film, geography or performing arts...you feel your mind is expanding.

YL

Yes. When I was organising seminars this year with the Geography Department, I also realised that it was important to talk to someone outside your discipline but with the mindset alike, in a way to find a common language that connects different parts.

FP

Yes. It is refreshing to have different perspectives. For me interdisciplinarity is one of the great joys of academia – reaching outside your own field.

YL

I'm also curious that, once you became a member of the department, often you are assigned multiple roles in teaching and researching. How did you manage to balance them?

FP

Obviously, once you become a member of the department, there are three types of interests: lecturing, researching, and doing administration. Hopefully there is a synergy between lecturing and researching, feeding your research into your lecture, potentially also into the studio through your lectures. As for administration, it's something that we have to do, taking turns, swapping roles – it comes with the territory.

Being a practitioner was another component. When I joined the Department as a PhD student, about half of the staff, including the Head of Department, were actually in practice as architects. Nowadays, very few people in schools of architecture are both academics and practitioners – this is where the role of design fellows become crucial as they bring the architecture profession into the Department.

YL

What made the difference between now and then?

FP

The difference is that now all UK schools of architecture have to submit their research to the Research Excellence Framework (REF). It's an exercise that takes place every four years or five years. This was introduced in the 1990s. For better or for worse, academia nowadays is now judged almost entirely on the basis of this research performance indicator.

You asked me at some point if there was a crisis in my career. The most difficult challenge I had to face was caused by the results of The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 2001. The Department dropped down the academic ladder in relation to our competitors. Sadly, the University took a dim view of the results and attempted to close us down. (Figure 5)

YL

Well...It is unimaginable for us current students.

FP

But lots of people came to the rescue of the department, there were demonstrations in town...these were extraordinary times. To cut a long story short, the Department was saved but emerged as a slimmed down version of its former self. Six members of staff took early retirement or moved on, the diploma was chopped, two out of our three MPhils were rescinded, including mine, and the CUMIS was closed down.

YL

I am heartbroken to hear that.

Do you think the incident in a way restructured the balance
between practical training and research?

FP

Indeed. It was challenging for a while, but quickly new colleagues joined the Department, design fellows were introduced and eventually the diploma restarted through the MPhil in Architecture and Urban Design (MAUD). It was time for me to move on and I helped to create a new interdisciplinary MPhil in film studies, based in the MML, which is still going. I contributed to this MPhil until very recently. It brought me new PhDs from very different backgrounds. It was very enjoyable.

YL

Only people like you who have been through all these things
still remember the entire process of drastic change here.

FP

Yes. It explains why research has become so important in the Department and why we devised the system of design fellows. It comes back from this time.

YL

You had many roles in your career – from a PhD student to the
Head of Department before retirement. Looking back, do you have
any words of advice for our current staff and students?

FP

Not really. As we say in French, ‘graveyards are full of indispensable people’ (*laugh). I think what it means is that we just have to accept that whatever we have done, we have done our best, and the next generations will do the same. I can only wish and hope for the department to do very well in the current REF. After all, I have contributed to it, through my research, for the last time, so I still feel some sort of responsibility!