

Aesthete of Living

The ways and timings with which life brings people together and takes them apart are sometimes strange. I first arrived in Los Angeles in September 2001, as a scared exchange student in her early 20s who had never lived outside of her small hometown (Venice, Italy). That was just a couple of days before 9/11 and about one year after Denis had moved to UCLA. Having completed my PhD and second postdoc, I left the city for good in July 2007 – only a few months before he left this world. For me and many other international students who had the fortune to work with him at UCLA, Denis has been more than a model advisor. He has been like a true father and certainly one of the most inspiring figures that have crossed the pathways of our lives. No matter where we came from and what we were looking for: Denis helped us make Los Angeles our home – and a good home.

For Denis Los Angeles was not the placeless metropolis narrated by humanistic geographers in the 1970s, nor was it the postmetropolis of shining surfaces and empty simulacra alive in the geographical imagination of most post-cultural-turn human geographers. Los Angeles and Southern California were for him places rich with history, crossroads of different cultures, and thus sources of continuous fascination. His Los Angeles was the Los Angeles of the 1920s and 1930s: a city of golden sunsets, in which the automobile was still a vehicle of leisure, and where, as he said, ‘the geographic nexus of land and life was transmuted culturally into *landscape* and *lifestyle*’. It wasn’t Disneyland, the Bonaventure hotel, and the other glamorous icons of postmodernity that attracted Denis, but rather the picturesque detail of a bygone era: the white stuccoed arches and Roman tiles of Spanish missions, the Tudor half timbers shingles of ‘English-style’ suburban houses, or the art-deco facades of Department of Water and Power buildings, disused cinemas, and old gas stations. It was that elapsed cultural history, sometimes obscured and sometimes highlighted by the dizzying glamour and onward rush of cultural innovation in Southern California that Denis found fascinating.

I do not owe my appreciation of Los Angeles to popular writers, nor to famous actors, but to a forgotten newspaper artist and cartographer who worked for the *Los Angeles Times* between 1921 and 1952 and for *Touring Topics* sometimes in the 1920s. Charles Hamilton Owens – this was his name – was one of the local characters Denis brought back to life from the dusty archives of the *Los Angeles Times* and the UCLA libraries. Owens’ automobile excursions in the desert with his friend novelist Harry Carr, one of the celebrators of Los Angeles’ early cosmopolitanism, kept us good company for years. Owens first attracted Denis because of the distinctively pictorial style and ‘air-age’ orthographic projection of his ‘collage war maps’, which like their author had long been sitting forgotten in the archives. This unknown artist soon turned if not into a hero, certainly into a source of continuous excitement for Denis. As his research assistant, I was fortunate to accompany Denis and Owens on their journeys of discovery. The artist’s on-spot perspective sketches of the aqueduct, the harbour, and other landmark urban infrastructures, as well as his bird’s-eye views of the city and scenic itineraries for automobile tours led us into the heart of an early cosmopolitan Los Angeles which was still in the making. In this Los Angeles even engineering works responded to a very specific aesthetic taste, or what Denis liked to call ‘the modern picturesque’: dams and bridges surrounded by irregular rocks and vegetation, unexpected ethnic features next to art deco forms, eclectic mixtures of natural, cultural, and technological details. The ‘modern picturesque’ was pleasant to the eye but never too serious – like Denis himself. Perhaps that’s why he liked it.

The Los Angeles in which Denis worked and lived was the extension of Charles Owens and Harry Carr's *Nuestro Pueblo*. The cosmopolitan identity of the city fascinated Denis and certainly inspired much of his late work on global tolerance. He often called Los Angeles 'a city of hope for the future'. He enjoyed lecturing to UCLA ethnically varied undergrad classes: they challenged his Euro-centric formation. We (Denis' grad students) were a cosmopolitan bunch of the most diverse geographical and disciplinary origins. Our diversity reflected Denis' openness of mind and the vastness of his intellectual and human horizons. If creativity was Denis' trope, tolerance was his ethos, and humanity his natural disposition. His extreme humbleness mixed with his characteristic sense of humour was a constant source of inspiration for all of us. He listened to everyone, from the most illustrious speaker to the last undergrad, with equal respect and attention. I was always impressed by the amount of time Denis spent with his students, in spite of his extremely busy schedule. No matter what he was doing in that particular moment; no matter who you were: he always welcomed you to his office with a smile, even if only for a few moments. He would always answer your e-mails in matter of hours, sometimes even minutes, offering a piece of brilliant advice, a comforting word, a joke, a glimpse of humanity that would change your day. He made people believe in themselves, push themselves, face into difficult questions, and produce their best. In both his academic and private life Denis always put his neighbour before him – and this, I believe, has been the greatest teaching he left us with.

A humanist who had made Neo-stoicism a mode of life, Denis was not so much interested in power-knowledge as much as in self-knowledge. For him the goal was to become better selves. He was an optimist and a believer in the beauty and goodness of life. His vision of life radiated from his scholarly work, and his scholarly work gave him life – until the very end.

At the end of August 2006 I was in Venice for the holidays. One evening I received a phone call from Denis, as I was going through the first draft of the manuscript of his last collection of essays *Geography and Vision*. He was in France also on holiday, but he said he had been really sick for the past week, or so. He said I should not worry about it and we would see each other soon in Los Angeles and talk about *Geography and Vision*. A few days later he went to London and was diagnosed with stomach cancer. I first visited him there in September. He had been unable to eat for weeks and had lost 20 kilos. Daniela Dueck's *Strabo's Cultural Geographies*, Giorgio Mangani's *Cartografia morale* and Alessandro Scafi's *Mapping Paradise* were keeping him good company in his hospital bed. Few weeks later he was sent home to start a long cycle of chemotherapies. Over two-hundred cards from all over the world started to arrive. Most of them were from former students and colleagues. Others came from scholars and students who had only known Denis through his writings, but had never met him. Denis always said that these cards made a real difference in his struggle with illness. Coloured pieces of world, they transformed the living room into a true microcosm of affects, perhaps somehow reminiscent of the *Wunderkammern* of the Renaissance scholars he so much admired. From Korea to Estonia, from Greece to Japan, from the US to Italy, each card brought him a positive thought, returning some of the love and care he had always shown to the world.

In October, in between one session of chemo and the other, we were working on the final edits of *Geography and Vision*. By the end of November, we were able to submit the manuscript to the publisher. Denis had regained his full weight and we returned to Los Angeles, which he had been very much missing. For almost two years, Denis continued to devote his life to his family and academic life, as he had always done. He continued to teach undergrad classes and grad seminars with the same energy and enthusiasm that had always characterized him. He continued to be a prolific writer, and to go to international conferences and workshops (some of which he even organized). He continued to be the positive person he had always been. He

continued to hope. Before leaving to Chicago for the AAG meeting he jokingly told me: 'People will think that I made everything up, when they see me...' (referring to his regained weight and seemingly boundless energy and enthusiasm).

In September 2007 I moved to the UK to start a new appointment. I met with Denis two months later at a conference in London. We left each other on a rainy evening, promising to continue to stay in touch and visit each other soon again. I could never imagine that was the last time I would have seen him. Since Christmas his health started to deteriorate. As the months passed by, his visits to the hospital started to get more and more frequent and protracted and our e.mail correspondence more sporadic and brief. I last talked to him on the phone in February, I believe. He was again at the hospital and sounded very weak. He asked how my job was going, how I was enjoying teaching in Bristol, etc. I congratulated on his recent nomination as the Getty Distinguished Scholar and on the prestigious fellowship he had just been awarded for 2008-2009. I told him how much I enjoyed working at the Getty Research Institute as a postdoctoral fellow in 2005. I told him about the stimulating seminars and cultural events which were expecting him there. I told him about my strolls in the Getty Center's scenic garden and described the wonderful views on the Ocean I used to enjoy from my office. 'Then I really need to get well!' – he said. 'Yes, you do. And I will come to see you soon', I answered.

I visited UCLA in May for a symposium originally meant to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of *Iconography of Landscape*. Denis had been very much looking forward to this event, to which unfortunately he never made it. It was strange to return to a place I had made home, but I knew was no longer home. On that day the Californian sun was not shining as I remembered it. It was a gloomy rainy day, not very dissimilar from those I had gotten used to in the UK. But not much had changed on campus. And Denis was still there. I heard his slightly hurried footsteps in the corridor of the department. I saw him having lunch at our usual table amidst the eucalyptus trees. I heard him talking to students through his office's glass wall. Above all, I saw him in the people that had come from all over the world to attend to the symposium and memorial: in their hearts, which he had warmed with his humanity; in their lives which he had touched with his generosity of spirit. I left his beloved Los Angeles reassured that he still is and will always be with us.

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