



Richard Sennett. Photograph by Erik Tanner.

It is 10 a.m. on 12 March. We've just met at Lincoln's Inn Fields, a place with particular significance for us both. There is a warm and inviting establishment nearby where we intend to spend a couple of hours putting together our notes before walking to Richard Sennett's studio in Saffron Hill. The general atmosphere in London is a bit tense. We are on the brink of the coronavirus crisis and there is a feeling of uncertainty, a kind of mistrust, even if the fear of contagion is far less tangible than in Spain. The first thing that comes to our minds is Sennett's chapter from *Flesh and Stone*, where he writes about Venice, the plague, the city and the fear of human contact.<sup>1</sup> We cannot help commenting on how that 'fear of touching' he describes in the book has been able now, four centuries later, to invade our globalized world at a dizzying speed and how it is conditioning the way in which people interact... In these extraordinary circumstances, we sit at a table next to a large window, afraid of receiving at any moment a phone call cancelling the meeting. Fortunately, the phone doesn't ring.

The truth is that, although we could have arranged a virtual meeting by video conference, we were eager to stroll through Sennett's neighborhood, to see where he lives, the path he walks to reach home, the little shops he passes..., convinced that all this would offer us a better understanding of the things he writes about... This area of London is also the setting chosen by Dickens to represent the misery and poverty described in *Bleak House*, although it has a very different character today. We wander for a while, looking for the places Sennett mentions in *Building and Dwelling* when he talks about his own neighborhood:<sup>2</sup> Leather Lane Market, one of the oldest street markets in London; the Bourne Estate, a housing estate with a mixture of old working class, middle-age Indian families and a heterogeneous group of younger Islamic people; and the Hatton Garden, a Hasidic Jewish community involved in the trade of diamonds... We cross Holborn and walk through Leather Lane to find ourselves suddenly tossed in the hustle and bustle of an open-air market located in the

1. Richard Sennett, "Fear of Touching. The Jewish Ghetto in Renaissance Venice", in *Flesh and Stone* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, [1994] 1996, 1st edition Paperback), 212-254.

2. Richard Sennett, "IV. Mixing. The mask of civility", in *Building and Dwelling. Ethics for the city* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, [2018] 2019, 1st edition Paperback), 139-143.

# On the verge of the tactile. A conversation with Richard Sennett

## En el borde de lo táctil. Una conversación con Richard Sennett

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heart of a lively neighborhood. We see an interesting social mix and old industrial buildings recently converted into lofts. From time to time, we come across Orthodox Jews who add a picturesque touch to the social mixture of the neighborhood. For us, this area remains fairly 'authentic', at least apparently. This context fits perfectly with Sennett's double choice of Aristotle's quote to open *Flesh and Stone* and also in the introduction of *Building and Dwelling*: "A city is composed of different kinds of men; similar people cannot bring a city into existence".

Once in Saffron Hill, we stop before the address we were looking for, which happens to be a white modernist building with steel tubular railings in the balconies. When we arrive, the flawless volume with stepped terraces reflects the afternoon sunshine after a spring rain. The building used to be a printing plant that was converted into impeccable apartments about twenty years ago. When the door opens, a friendly, kind, slight figure appears. We enter with a certain sense of guilt, aware of the delicate moment we are living. Richard Sennett does not seem to feel any apprehension for all that is happening outside, and neither does Saskia Sassen, who receives us warmly. This cordial

welcome makes us forget right away the suspicious, tense atmosphere that could be felt in the streets. The following two hours remain in our minds as the last moments experienced with true normality before the definitive outbreak of the crisis.

**Raimundo Bambó:** The aim of issue 14 of *ZARCH*, "Mapping the Boundaries", as we stated in the Call for Papers, is to contribute to enriching the most conventional definitions of limits and borders—understood as places for transition and separation that connect well-defined spaces or environments—to offer a more in-depth reading of their meaning, in keeping with the complexity of today's world. In that sense, your definition of borders and boundaries and your reflection about their differences is especially revealing.

Richard Sennett: Well, I'll tell you a little about where I am and how I came to be interested in the subject faced in this issue of *ZARCH*. You know, I teach at MIT. About a long time ago, I had a discussion with a colleague who is a biologist about the differences between a cell membrane and a cell wall. The same cell can function as a membrane or a wall.

“at the level of the urban  
there are ways  
to create porosity”



Street market at Leather Lane Holborn London in 1954. Wikimedia Commons.

When it functions as a wall, it's impenetrable. It just keeps everything in, but a cell wall has to then become more like a membrane in order to expel, you know, used biological material and to take new things in.

So, I got very interested in how, at the urban level, we could understand that same process. And also at the political level, how we could understand it. I found the conversation with this biologist so revealing, because what is so interesting to me about this is that these are not two different structures. These are two different functions that the same structure has to perform. And that's true for us too at the architectural and urban level. And most of the structures we make now are like cell walls, and they don't have that capacity to become more membranous, to be more porous. But it's an architectural challenge. How do we make a building, say, the ground floor level which can function like a membrane? Mustn't function only like walls? They couldn't. Even if you wanted to change the function, they're built in such way that you couldn't... you can't make steel frame plate glass elements into a membrane.

**RB: Yes, we totally agree. And we think that the idea of threshold, of in-between space, where you are neither inside nor outside—but in an intermediate position—could serve to make a more porous architecture. We believe it's there that the most interesting things happen, not only in architecture, but also at an urban level. We agree with you that it's important not to act in the center, but in the periphery, in the border, because that's where different spaces have the capacity to generate diverse and unplanned situations.**

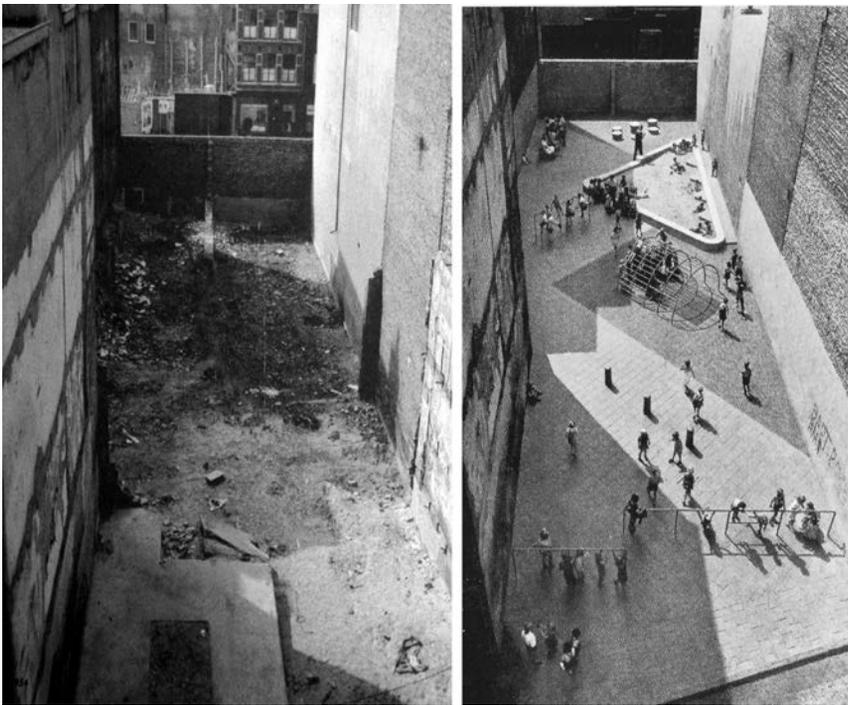
RS: But those... that is at a geographical level. I think a more difficult thing is at the level of the of the structure itself, of the

building itself, because at the level of the urban there are ways to create porosity, you know, those kind of things that are better established, then there are formal and material ways to actually create a threshold. I give you an example of this from the old Greek notion of the *agora*... they were, you know, the *stoas*, these buildings like shoe boxes which were open to one side. And if you stood at the edge of the open side of the *stoa*, you could be recognized verbally, but nobody could speak to you. So you weren't hidden away, but you were in this threshold liminal condition where you couldn't be challenged as if you were actually out in open space. And that's a kind of combination of, if you like, anthropology and architecture, very difficult for us to imagine today, you know, in this built form. So that's the other thing that has really changed in my thinking about this, that this is more a material problem of the building, and it is a harder problem at the level of the building than at the urban level.

**Carmen Díez: Yes, this is a big challenge for architecture. Now that you mention the relationship between anthropology and architecture, some architects from the fifties and the sixties come to my mind; architects related to Team X, for instance, interested in anthropology and social sciences, trying to materialize their ideas by blurring the limits in buildings between inside and outside. Aldo van Eyck, for example.**

RS: You know, the most interesting idea he had of openness to me was the parks that he made for Amsterdam. Those are truly wonderful, many of them are left. They are not simply empty spaces, they have structure, they have rules about where you can and can't go, but they're very porous.

“in urbanism,  
the limit is always the limit  
of capitalism, of power”



Aldo van Eyck, Playground in Dijkstraat, Amsterdam, 1954 | Francis Strauven, *Aldo van Eyck. The Shape of Relativity* (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura, 1998), 162.

CD: Yes, they are porous; they are also flexible, on the boundary between art and life, between life and urbanism—a useful kind of urban art. I would say, however, that, as far as the few means they use are concerned, they are also very simple projects.

In this respect, there is an issue that concerns us as architects. Today, there is such a huge abundance of means that architects are allowed to proceed without apparent limitations.

RB: And yet, the fewer the means available, the better or the more rational architecture is. Maybe the idea can be transferred to an urban level and interventions such as the parks by Aldo van Eyck, that I consider a great example.

RS: Absolutely. If you look at a Baroque building, its forms are very complex, but its structure is very simple. And so I think what you're talking about is at the level of the technical means that exists to build a building rather than the expression. Expression can be very complicated but very porous. Yes. But when you have, as you say, too many tools...

**CD: ... then it becomes dangerous. When too many technical tools are available, buildings risk becoming installations or structural montages rather than architecture. Maybe they are even porous, but they are not architecture as we understand it. As a result of the possibilities that technical means offer, the structure acquires an exacerbated relevance.**

RS: Well, you know, that's also... you know, I have also written about craftsmanship.<sup>3</sup> And that's also true in craftwork.

There, if you have a huge number of tools at your disposal to do something, you don't work as well with a particular tool, you don't learn it. Because when you encounter resistance, you move to another tool. And then when that doesn't do the job, then you move to yet another one.

**CD: Yes, the temptation to take the easy road is huge... And, on the other hand, the new technical tools allow to build almost everything. This makes me think of another kind of boundaries, the boundaries of reason. Nowadays, accepting as reasonable everything that is possible seems a generalized tendency in architecture. Do you think this happens in urbanism as well?**

RS: I don't think that's true, if I may say so, in urbanism, because the limit is always the limit of capitalism, of power. Not anything goes, only anything goes that which makes money or which serves some powerful interest. Whereas in the materials we have, in the means we have for making a particular building anything goes.

Actually Barcelona is a good example of that. Even at the moments of its maximum freedom in the 90s, with the Olympics Games, the amount of experiment you could do urbanistically, even in that moment wasn't rich. Everything seemed possible, not at all. Because you always had this economic curb. But you could build, for the same amount of money, serving the same political end, a building in, as you are saying, an infinite number of ways. And that's where I think this discussion comes.

About the same thing, but in another context... I've left retirement and I've gone back to work for the United Nations on a project about urban development and climate

3. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

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change. And that is what I'm doing principally. And there this contradiction is very, very strong, because there are almost too many tools at the level of built form that could be used for climate change, but only a very few of them are possible to use at the planning level because of power and economics.

You know, so that's where you get that contradiction. We have, and that's a good thing, in this case, that we have many possibilities to build, different kinds of material and so which are good in terms of environmental sustainability. But there are very few of them, which will ever, ever see the light of day. I take the United States off of this because it's hopeless. But even in the enlightened countries the idea for instance of building a structure, which can be dismantled and taken somewhere else, that is truly light architecture. If there's an impending storm is perfectly possible, but it violates every known European building code, to put up a structure which can be then dismantled within a couple of hours and abandoned, you know... Nobody will put money into it, even though it would be the simplest way to deal with disasters. We can fairly well predict it in advance when that would be needed.

**CD: Now that you have mentioned environmental sustainability... I wonder to what extent the blurring of boundaries between architecture and landscape we have witnessed for a couple of decades offers the right answer to this question. However, this discourse that seems so attractive often leads architecture to disappear under a 'green washing' where visual aspects dominate. We need a critic of those architectures that are considered ecological and sustainable but actually have doubtful efficiency and cost. Doesn't this seem like a perversion of the ecological discourse?**

RS: Well, do you think that people who are in landscape, architects... In a way, they, many of them, not all, but many of them, want to sort of build their way out of climate change. Do you know what I mean? That's because it's an organic structure that, in some way, fuels the fantasy... I saw that very particularly in New York. I was one of the judges after Hurricane Sandy, the projects had to deal with the frequency of these extreme storms. And we got proposals from people like Bjarke Ingels Group to build enormous berms. You know, nature is the new building material, and that's what

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Rem is showing at the Guggenheim.<sup>4</sup> But it's... as with these proposals that we got from BIG, from Bjarke's firm, it's a fantasy. Somehow... you can't build a berm high enough that it will never happen again.<sup>5</sup>

**RB: One of the most revealing things we can learn from ecology is that architecture and urbanism are not so much about space, but about time. We think we are designing in spaces, but we should think of designing processes.**

RS: Yes, that's true. And also we should account the fact that the more we learn about what climate change is about, the shorter the framework of time before everything becomes irreversible. So, that means that the projects we design should not be projects like growing a forest, which take 35 or 40 years, because after about 11 or 12 years the effects of climate change will be irreversible. And it's a good thing to grow trees, that's not the issue. But the notion that you can actually design your way out of this assumes that you have all the time in the world to do it. I'm very struck by this. I just talked about this in Stockholm the day before yesterday.<sup>6</sup> You know what a lock is in English? I can show you [*Moves to the computer and opens a presentation*]. This is the storm surge barrier in Rotterdam, probably the best in Europe, quite, quite striking. It is an engineering marvel, but it took 45 years to do it. And in 45 years, it will be useless because of the whole configuration... I'm very worried about.

[*Showing another slide of the presentation*] Phoenix, which is one of those American cities with lots and lots of roads. One of my students proposed this way of planting everything that was not actually physically a road with trees, but it's a 30-year framework. And by that time, it's over. So you know, this is really a question of finding ways of building which are quicker. And that means simpler. You know, you couldn't build that Rotterdam thing...

4. In reference to *Countryside, The Future*, exhibition curated by AMO / Rem Koolhaas at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Catalog: AMO / Rem Koolhaas, *Countryside: A Report* (Köln: Taschen, 2020)

5. Richard Sennett develops this matter in Sennett, "Two Berms", in *Building and Dwelling*, 273-276.

6. Richard Sennett, "The Open City", (lecture presented at the Arkitekturgalan 2020, Sweden's Architects Association, Stockholm, March 10, 2020). Lecture available at <https://youtu.be/mCq2Mb6SFck> (accessed March 24, 2020).

“this is really a question of finding ways of building which are quicker. And that means simpler”



Left: Storm surge barrier, Rotterdam | Right: Proposal for planting trees in highway nodes by a Sennett's student. Source: "The Open City" (lecture presented at the Arkitekturgalan 2020, Sweden's Architects Association, Stockholm, March 10, 2020).

UN is a partner in this MOSE, you know, for Venice.<sup>7</sup> And it's just incredible. That's partly Italian corruption that slowed it down. But it will take at least forty years to really test whether it works well. But by that time...

**RB: ...Venice will be underwater.**

RS: Under the water, anyhow. So again, that's at the level of the building, how do we find something simple, among all these possibilities, that we are allowed to build?

**RB: And that can be adaptable, and resilient, and that we can easily check whether it works and simply change it if necessary.**

RS: Absolutely. As in taking the building down. Yeah. We're doing a lot... Actually, I'll show you this [Slide of the presentation]. It's intended for engineers but maybe you will be interested in this. We're very interested in how to adapt to increasing temperature, obviously. And one of the things we've been thinking about doing is how can we find materials that make buildings more adaptive, not that are more efficient in a high-tech way. And we have been working with a set of firms to develop something called Koolseal goo, which you can imagine what it is. It is for the same reason that Greek houses are all painted white, this is to take the surface of roads and any horizontal surface and use this new material to make it white because roads hold heat. You know, the dark surfaces, the macadam, so they absorb the heat during the day, they hold it during the night and then they can't get rid of it. So, we developed this material, which is titanium infused, and it

7. MOSE (MOdulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico, *Experimental Electromechanical Module*) is a project intended to protect the Venetian Lagoon and the city of Venice from flooding. The project consists of an integrated system of mobile gates installed at the mouths that connect the Lagoon with the Adriatic Sea.

is water soluble. Here is an experiment with it in New York, applied to roof-top [New slide]. And here is an experiment in Los Angeles [Showing another slide of the presentation] where we painted the streets white and combined them with a bioswale which is just a hole in the ground that holds plants which clean acid rain. So the combination of this heat repelling, road... It is funny, like Le Corbusier's idea, you know, cities all turn white [laughing]. But this is so simple! It's so cheap! Even this ran into political resistance.

**RB: I believe that the interesting thing about these solutions, of course, is that they are quick, and they are cheap...**

RS: And they are also democratic.

**RB: ...they are democratic, absolutely, and you can easily check whether they work. The aim is to transform the city and architecture, not to build a new city or a new architecture, but to transform what we already have.**

RS: Right, exactly. So it's really a matter of redistribution, rather than growth. It's about a kind of redistribution of form, rather than adding more form. And it's true. Well, we don't need more technology to deal with problems like... I mean, this is so simple! You know, this is something fabricated in Illinois. This wasn't any high-tech thing. But it was clever. And it was just saying "Why are Greek houses white?" And measuring the degree of reflectivity and other things, could we do that on the ground?

**CD: Yes, redistribution rather than growth, that implies, first of all, understanding what the problems of the city are. This, for sure, would help to recover that 'lost art of urbanism' you mention in your writings.<sup>8</sup>**

8. Richard Sennett, "The Open City", in *The Endless City*, Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic, eds. (London: Phaidon Press, 2007), 290-297.

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**There is another question we wanted to ask you. It's about a key concept for architects. You have said several times that the word 'context' bothers you.<sup>9</sup> This is striking for us, architects who have been educated in a culture where our masters considered the understanding of the place as the starting point for architecture.**

RS: Well, I think it's a double thing. I mean, on the sort of capitalist side of this, most of urban development has been independent of place, you know, people will, particularly in international investment and new buildings, revise specifications based where they look for a place to build in regardless of the context around it.

I'm worried about this in a different way, which is how do you create ruptures and innovations in a city. And what worries me about—this is the other side of this coin—is that the planning regimes, which puts so much emphasis on context, mean that doing something that's disruptive is strangled. I'll give you an example from London that is very worrying to me. If you want to put a health clinic, in the midst of a residential neighborhood, or a school, or a hospice, you will be told that it's not contextual. The context is families living together. How can you have a lot of old people living in a hospice, in the midst of places where children play? And then is a tyranny of context. And in a capitalist way, that's used as a planning tool to expel poor people from middle or upper class places. So that you can use these planning tools to say, "Well, this is just out of context with the rest of the neighborhood, which we don't want, obviously".

But the fundamental issue about this is that almost all urban development proceeds by a kind of resistance to that kind of imposed dominant order context. If we were in America, the planners—and I heard them when I was a student—would say "We can't really integrate neighborhoods racially, because the context is white-middle-class way of life. Poor black people in these neighborhoods... they would never fit in". So that's the side of it that worries me. I understand this is other side, which is a kind of indifference to place. But the kind of context that I worry about is homogenizing and controlling. And that was a great sin of Modernism.

You know, a school looks like a factory, you know, and there had to be this kind of continuity of form. Homogenizing form

“when something looks coherent, it's probably repression what has gone on to make it look coherent”

is a terrible idea. This is not an original idea to me, this was something I learned from Jane Jacobs. When something looks coherent, it's probably repression what has gone on to make it look coherent.

I was in Berlin over the weekend and, you know, around the Philharmonie, that's the cultural quarter. There is nothing but culture there. There are no people on the street, there's nothing that jars you from this. You go there for this function and nothing else. It's like a heroin injection of culture... So that's the kind of contextual thinking I think, which is very destructive.

**CD: This has to do somehow with another kind of homogeneity, which is also destructive. I mean the phenomenon of globalization that all large European cities are experiencing. That is leading to the loss of character even of the city centers. One walks in some of the central areas of Berlin and, for a moment, can think oneself in Milan, in Madrid, in London...**

RS: As I said, this is one side of the issue. The other side, which we see in UN, is much more in developing cities in the third world, nobody ever thought about where they were, they're just investing in a set of specifications, of functions and they put them wherever. So it's ambivalent. It's a double thing.

But, I mean, if I taught architecture, I would ask people "How can you make a building that will make others mad, but that they then can change?" "How do you make a 'Zaha' building but then get rid of Zaha?" And "Okay, what should we do about it?" You're provoked. "Now, I want to change this". Because a lot of disruptive form comes from this sort of thinking.

**CD: Going back to the issue of the character of a city, of a particular neighborhood, we were very curious to know in which neighborhood you would live, in which building...**

RS: I'll tell you what this is. This was once one of the poorest places in London, and then it was very badly bombed in the Second World War. And what was built up were small factory buildings. This was a printing plant. And the reason that it has these terraces is because they would put the sheets of paper out to dry, that they were printing. Now it's becoming quite mixed. This is an apartment building now. This is the diamond district.

9. Richard Sennett (interviewed), Winy Maas, Rory Stott (interviewers), "La città aperta. Intervista a Richard Sennett", *Domus* 1.033 (March 2019): 258-265.

“tourism it’s a kind of arbitrary restriction of experience, you go somewhere else but you see something that’s familiar. And it’s about the mirror rather than the road”



Left: Koolseal goo applied to roof-top, Bronx, NY. Right: Koolseal goo combined with bioswales on a pavement, Los Angeles | Source: “The Open City” (lecture presented at the Arkitekturgalan 2020, Sweden’s Architects Association, Stockholm, March 10, 2020).

**CD: We read it in your last book, *Building and Dwelling*. You wrote about this district...**

RS: Yes, this is quite an amazing thing. When Saskia and I bought this apartment...

**CD: When was that?**

RS: It was about 20 years ago. You know, you could smell the printing ink in this room. I put up all the walls and so... I made many mistakes [laughing].

**CD: While we were walking through Leather Lane, on our way here, Raimundo and I agreed that this neighborhood fits you perfectly. But the truth is that, after reading your books and essays, we did not expect you to live in a modernist-looking building...**

RS: Well, that’s why it was there, because everything was bombed. And in the 50s, it was part of the sort of social revolt against the old Britain, they didn’t want to build new buildings that did look like Imperial Britain. And particularly, with housing, that the housing would be these small little houses with backyard, row houses and so on. But with the industrial buildings in the center... there was also the notion that it should be new, it should be modern. So they took this kind of Bauhaus language and made the Fagus factory-like buildings... as much as they could [laughing].

These are all cavity walls, there’s no insulation, so we had to re-insulate it. There wasn’t much coal or anything, so some of these buildings were heated by open fires.

**RB: We have seen the neighborhood and it’s, as you say, extremely mixed and lovely. In *Building and Dwelling* you**

**said that the ‘gentrifier virus’<sup>10</sup> was blocked by several factors, among others, its border situation.**

RS: Well, I can show you what that is, actually. If you come around here [getting close to the window], you see this little alleyway here. This is the ‘gentrifier virus’, because these are all artists here and they back up on industrial plants over there which are cutting diamonds. So the tension between the two of them is extreme. You consider artist studios, are fantastic! But they want to kill this industry. And on the other side of that street is the housing estate of the Muslims [Bourne estate]. So compressed within two blocks! And then there’s us who are gentrified. But this is the workshop for Giorgio Armani in Europe. So this is an industrial workshop. So that’s, that’s urban! I look out of my window and I see my whole urbanism! [laughing]

**CD: Besides this concept that you define as the ‘gentrifier virus’, there is another one today, the ‘tourism virus’, which is equally dangerous for cities. Politicians want to turn their cities into tourist cities. The danger in tourist cities is the loss of the opportunity to truly live them, to enjoy their real essence, beyond visiting them as tourists. What do you think we could do to avoid turning lively, inviting, dynamic cities ... into theme parks?**

RS: Well I know that the planning strategy here in London is a good one, there are tourist zones and they’re really kept for tourists. The other side of that is a cultural change though. It’s a nice change in language, in English, between a visitor or a traveler and a tourist. And the difference between a traveler

10. Sennett, *Building and Dwelling*, 139.



Left: View from East to the West, from the perspective of Sennett's studio. In the lower part of the image, Armani's workshop in Shaffron Hill. In the center, Hatton Garden and Bourne Estate, on both sides of Leather Ln. Right: The same area from West to East. To the right, the big white roof of Hatton Garden; to the left, at the other side of Leather Ln, Bourne Estate | Google maps captions.

and a tourist would be, if they came to London, they wouldn't want just to see the museums, they would not want to eat in a McDonald's. They would want to explore places like this, I've never seen a tourist, you know, whereas tourism it's a kind of arbitrary restriction of experience, you go somewhere else but you see something that's familiar somewhere else. And it's about the mirror rather than the road.

And that is very interesting to me as a sociologist. When I reside in New York I perceive the same thing. These are all internationalized restaurants, they serve for food you could have anywhere. Why do people do that? Why travel, if you're traveling to something which is a mirror, which you already know?

It's a kind of, you know, *Wandervogel*, these wandering students in the 19th Century were travelers, just they wanted to go someplace other, different. And meld in.

**CD: Regarding mass tourism, the size of the city may help. Large cities like Barcelona, Paris or London allow tourists to focus on certain neighborhoods. But seeing small cities like Florence, Granada, Venice, etc., invaded by tourism is worrying.**

RS: It's a very practical problem in Venice, where the UN is deeply involved in it. The greed of certain elements in Italian government is such that it has brought in all of these massive tour boats, which are literally destroying the city, but they get a huge fee, which goes into a particular ministry, which doesn't have anything to do with Venice, it's national. Every time one of these boats goes through, so it's, as you say, the city is small enough so that this tourist influx is very destructive.

But I'm sort of more interested in why people do this. What is it? Maybe it's just the idea of that you can travel in comfort? I don't know what it is. Why you would not travel rather than be a tourist? So, for instance, here is a planning issue. In the tourist zones like Leicester Square,

anything goes, you could have a hundred Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants. Nobody cares. The moment you move out of that zone, these international corporations are very stringently regulated. And it's an economic problem, too. So you don't need a global corporation to brew a cup of coffee for somebody, but the rents can be raised up and it all comes with that... So I think it's a cultural problem.

A city that is invaded by tourists can't be easily fixed. I mean, well, what will happen in Venice is that it will be a struggle between... I think the numbers of tourist have to be limited... and it will be a struggle between the national government and the Venetian government because there is just too much corruption. I mean, too many people are getting rich off at this mass tourism.

**RB: And also, Venice is such a difficult city for day-to-day living. Housing habitability and accessibility conditions are generally poor, even shopping is complicated, with all those bridges and stairs...**

RS: You know, I wrote a book about Venice. It's called *The Foreigner*,<sup>11</sup> just the first part of it is about Venice. You know, in the in its past it was much more linked to the *terra firma* than it is now. It also had much more local economy. But you are right; it is hard to live there.

**RB: The paradox is that, today, Venice is a static city—partly because the idea of contextualism we discussed earlier—completely frozen in time, while, at one time, it used to be a field of architectural and urban experimentation, in permanent transformation, one of the most disruptive in Europe.**

RS: The idea of it was an enormous threat. There's a city that dealt with porosity in a really sophisticated way because du-

11. Richard Sennett, *The Foreigner: Two Essays on Exile* (London: Notting Hill editions, 2011).



Left: Venice, view from Le Zattere to San Giorgio Maggiore, 2007. A cruise ship is passing through the Giudecca Canal | Photograph by Carmen Díez.  
Right: London, Leicester Square | Source: Wikimedia Commons.

ring its heyday, it was open, it was a completely open city to receiving goods, but to receiving foreigners they could come there, but they all lived in isolation, these *fondachi*, you know these foundations. So, it was an incredibly complicated relationship between being a kind of emporium of objects with foreigners very strictly controlled. A little like Trump yesterday, you know. “No foreigners, please, but send us everything we need. Yeah, it will be good.”

**RB: The chapter on Venice in *Flesh and Stone* addresses this in a fascinating way.**

RS: So, on a kind of theoretical level, I feel like I’ve done the kind of urbanism I want, which is to make it more tactile. What I really cared about was to make the experience of place more tactile, more physical. Because I think there are so many forces, capitalist and political, which dematerialize a sense of being in a place. That’s what *Flesh and Stone* is about. But I am done with urbanism. I will write a book on climate change in cities, but I want to do things that are more philosophical at this point. So, this is it [*laughing*].

**RB: Thank you very much, Professor Sennett. One last question... We totally agree with you that the most interesting situations always happen in porous borders, also at a disciplinary level.<sup>12</sup> We saw the piano there, so we wanted to ask you, how do you think your musical education has contributed to your work?**

RS: Well, just in terms of what we’re talking about, about this issue of context, I guess it’s a physical thing, it has to do with the notion of performance. All performing is a

12. “I’ve come to think that the way forward lies in urbanists stepping out of our professional confines, drawing on other disciplines, no matter how amateurishly”. Richard Sennett, “The Public Realm” (Paper presented at *BMW Foundation Workshop on Changing Behaviour and Beliefs*, Lake Tegernsee, Germany, July 17-21, 2008). Paper available at <http://www.richardsennett.com/site/SENN/Templates/General2.aspx?pageid=16> (accessed March 6, 2020).

play between observing a set of rules and breaking them. Rehearsal has to do with something which is formal, but when you come alive as a performer, you’re not enacting something that was other, you’re doing something which is breaking the mould a little. Now, in classical music, you can’t play the way you could in jazz, but I mean, I guess the idea of performance to me is to do something with this tension between the given and the disruptive, which is a musical mode, and I guess it’s an architectural mode, for me as well.

**CD: This happens also in terms of disciplines. For instance, when reading *Poetics of Music* by Igor Stravinsky,<sup>13</sup> it is striking how many terms he uses that are familiar in architecture. He constructs his discourse based on notions such as structure, typology, proportion, rhythm, composition, continuity...**

RS: But that’s at the level of composition—It’s a wonderful book by the way, fantastic. But the performer is in a different position because you don’t compose anything. Your creative input is in this play with presence, what makes something present, what makes it physically tactile, and even in recordings you have that. Sometimes when we have edited our recording, we have gone for the rougher version of something, that just make people sit up more. But there’s a huge difference between the performer and the composer. I don’t know whether that’s parallel between maybe the architect and the inhabitant. Maybe the inhabitant is more like the performer and the architect is more like the composer. That would make sense because inhabitants should undo what the architect has done. I like that. I have to write that down.

**CD: May I ask you a last question?**

13. Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of music in the form of six lessons* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942).

**ON THE VERGE OF THE TACTILE.  
A CONVERSATION WITH RICHARD SENNETT  
EN EL BORDE DE LO TÁCTIL.  
UNA CONVERSACIÓN CON RICHARD SENNETT**

Raimundo Bambó Naya  
Carmen Díez Medina

RS: Yeah, sure!

**CD: What did Pablo Casals represent for you in your education as a cellist? Have you ever met him?**

RS: I studied with him!

**CD: Really?**

RS: Yeah, very briefly, for a summer.

**CD: Did he somehow influence your playing?**

RS: Well, when I studied with him, he was a very, very old man. He was a great, great figure, a very romantic figure, you know. His technique was very innovative for his time. It was a model. But now we play in a very different way. He played like a pianist, with a very, very digital technique, percussive, from the knuckle. But now we try to use the fingertip much more flexibly... we are not so worried about this... and more about this... *[showing different fingering techniques with his hands]*.

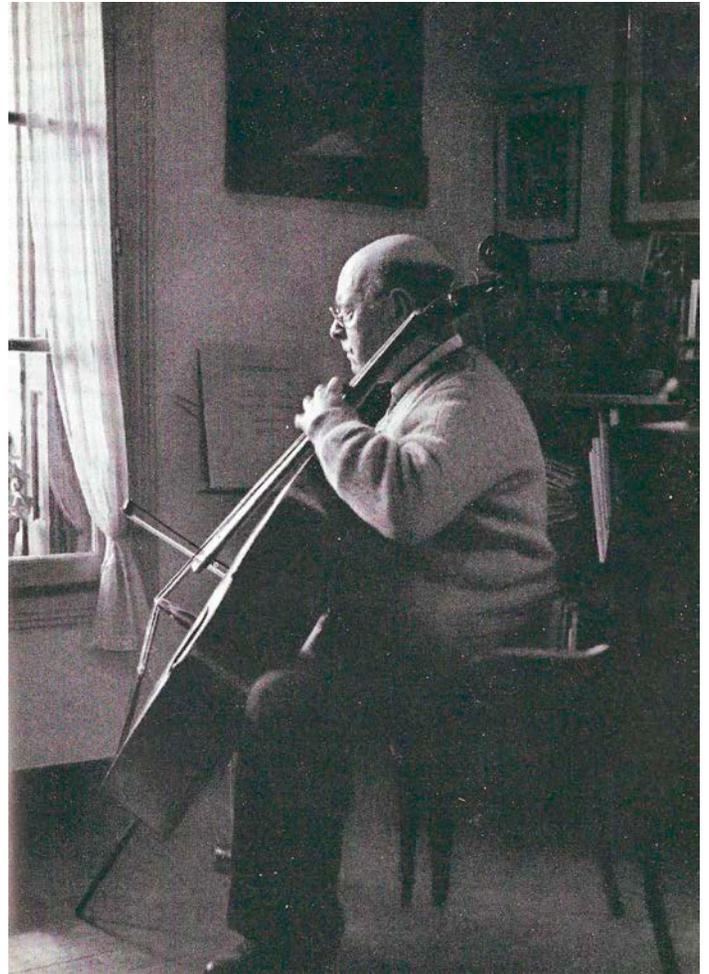
Music, photography, books, analogical recordings... the conversation relaxed and for another few minutes we felt submerged in that timeless atmosphere which had made us forget the threat of the incipient crisis. When we went down to the street, the world was no longer the same.

**Richard Sennett** grew up in the Cabrini Green housing project in Chicago. He attended the Julliard School in New York, where he worked with Claus Adam, cellist of the Julliard Quartet. He then studied social relations at Harvard, working with David Riesman, and independently with Hannah Arendt.

He currently serves as Senior Advisor to the United Nations on its Program on Climate Change and Cities. He is Senior Fellow at the Center on Capitalism and Society at Columbia University and Visiting Professor of Urban Studies at MIT.

Previously, he founded the New York Institute for the Humanities, taught at New York University and at the London School of Economics, and served as President of the American Council on Work.

Over the course of the last five decades, he has written about social life in cities, changes in labour, and social theory. His books include *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, *The Fall of Public Man*, *The Corrosion of Character*, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, *The Craftsman*, and *Building and Dwelling*. Among other awards, he has received the Hegel Prize, the Spinoza Prize, an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University, and the Centennial Medal from Harvard University.



Pablo Casals, ca. 1970 | Joseph Müller-Blattau, Casals, (Berlín: Rembrandt Verlag, 1964), 53.

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Richard Sennett with Raimundo Bambó and Carmen Díez in his office at Shaffron Hill. Photograph by Saskia Sassen.

This conversation took place on 12 March 2020, at Richard Sennett and Saskia Sassen's studio in Saffron Hill, London.