

# Tribute to **William J. Mitchell**

## A Student's Reflection

By **Ryan C.C. Chin**  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This 17th form•Z Joint  
Study Journal is  
**dedicated**  
to



**William J. Mitchell**  
1944 - 2010

*... the paths projected but then  
not taken are as interesting and  
revealing as those that were.*

From *Imagining MIT*, by W. J. Mitchell, 2007

When I first approached Bill Mitchell with the idea of starting a project to rethink the automobile, I didn't know he was just about the only person who would take on a 25 year old architecture student who knew next to nothing about cars, and who would take that student seriously enough to invest the next 10 years on not only reinventing the automobile, but also on reinventing the cities in which they operate. At that time, I only knew him as the Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT and that he had brought in star architects like Fumihiko Maki, Steven Holl, Frank O. Gehry, Charles Correa, and Kevin Roche to charrette on a new plan for MIT's campus. I didn't know he had written countless books, journals, and papers on Computer Aided Design (CAD), architecture, digital media, and cities; and that he would go on to write another eight more books in the next decade. I didn't know he already had changed how universities educated architects in the 1970s and 1980s, by being the strongest proponent for the potential of CAD systems and by having the audacity to suggest that each student should have a CAD workstation right at his or her desk. I didn't know that it was his design studio that explored complex geometries and forms that could only be built with the aid of computers that quietly led to a new movement in architecture, showcased so wonderfully in the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. I didn't know that he was the first person to publish a book (*City of Bits*) that was offered online for free, in order to take advantage of the rapid growth of the internet in the mid-1990s. I guess I didn't have to know, because he believed in the power of imagination (especially from students).

Bill Mitchell's greatest strength was his relationship with his students, and their mutual respect. The world of architectural education can be especially tough on students during reviews when professors and visiting critics often provide searing criticism. More than once during my studies, I saw architectural scale models literally fly across the room. This style of education was viewed as providing the pressure needed to succeed, to better justify design choices, to create competition amongst students, and to make you tough for the real world. It also created an unhealthy and cutthroat environment where students sometimes sabotaged other students' work. This was not Bill's style. Bill once told me that the art of a critique (which he learned from Charles Moore) was to look for just one element of the design that was redeeming, no matter how terrible the project may be, and to focus on how to reinforce that good idea. This accomplished two goals: First, it created the respect needed for the student to listen to the critic. Second, it allowed both parties to move on to the next phase of the project and to build upon what was worth keeping. This simple reasoning set Bill apart from almost everyone, and it allowed him to take on students from a myriad of disciplines and from disparate age groups. It was no coincidence that Bill almost always had the most talented students, because he gave them the respect and freedom necessary to grow as people.

Bill Mitchell was also a supreme judge of talent who could see the potential in people when detractors thought otherwise. In the fall of 2003, when we conducted our first concept car design studio in collaboration with General Motors and the offices of Frank O. Gehry, we had anticipated that many more students would be interested in taking the course than would fill the allotted 15 spaces. It was my job to interview the 80+ students who signed up. I had it all worked out. I had evaluated all of them and had 10 definite acceptances, 10 maybes, and the rest were definitely out. One of those in the “out” pile stood out above the rest. He had been antagonistic during the interview, questioning why we were even doing the studio and our knowledge base of the automobile industry (which he correctly identified as nearly zero). It was almost like he wanted us not to accept his proposal to attend the course. After reviewing all the potential candidates with Bill, he proceeded to pull Mitchell Joachim’s name out of the “no” pile. Apparently, he saw something in him that none of us did. This went on to be one of the best personnel decisions made by Bill for the sake of the project. Mitchell Joachim was not enthused that he had to devote time to this course; however, just one year later, he became the biggest advocate for the project by providing much of the blue sky thinking needed at this phase of the project. Concepts like soft cars, gentle congestion, transology, air pillows as skins for cars, and sneaker cars were just some of the ideas Mitch brought to the table. Today, Joachim is one of the leaders of zero impact design for cities.

The foresight that Bill Mitchell possessed allowed him to be one of the world’s leading urban visionaries. His books, including *City of Bits*, *e-topia*, and *Me++*, focused on the impact of digitalization and connectivity on the way we designed spaces and places and ultimately designed our cities. It was this research and his architectural advisory role to the president of MIT (Charles Vest) that would make a lasting impact, particularly to MIT’s campus, where over one million square feet of new construction would be built under Bill’s guidance during his Deanship (1992-2003). The campus redevelopment was long overdue, and the impact created by the Brutalist and 1960s era buildings with their double-loaded corridors spread throughout the campus. Both Bill and President Vest were convinced that a redevelopment campaign was necessary to prepare MIT for the 21st century. Armed with this commitment, Bill set off to build a team that could do the job. It was Bill’s ability to bring people together to work on challenging projects and to provide clarity to a vision that endeared him to his colleagues and students. He was probably one of the few architects who could bring other architects to work in concert with one another. He also knew that the dot.com



From the cover of the book *Reinventing the Automobile*.

bubble would not last forever, and that the time to build was imminent. It was the timing and confluence of these factors that enabled quick progress.

Although the sense of loss is difficult to comprehend at all levels, particularly for his family, I know Bill would not want us to dwell on the negative. Just before he passed, so many positives took place that were directly a result of Bill’s leadership. First, the new Media Lab building designed by Fumihiko Maki was completed. It was the last of the buildings under the new campus plan. In my opinion, the building possesses the highest architectural quality of space, light, and attention to detail of any new construction to date on any university campus. Its construction was long overdue and now sets the standard for multidisciplinary research facilities. Second, Bill was able to complete his last book, *Reinventing the Automobile: Personal Urban Mobility for the 21st Century*, jointly written with esteemed automotive experts Chris Borroni-Bird and Larry Burns. This book establishes a new model of sustainable mobility in cities based on the work we did together in his research group, Smart Cities, at the Media Lab. This book tackles the complexity of urban systems and the interconnectedness of existing infrastructure, energy networks, urban design, and automotive engineering. The impact of this publication may not be determined for decades, because we live in such a transitional period where the electrification of transport is just beginning. Finally, Bill was able to secure an agreement to industrialize the CityCar within three years with one of the sponsors of the Media Lab. I believe this gave Bill the most joy, because the project was initiated by students who didn’t know why they should not succeed. The work was done almost exclusively by students and was managed by students. The obstacles were many, but we never gave up because we believe in the strength of the ideas, in the clarity of the vision, and in Bill’s undeterred wisdom. What we do with these ideas will materialize into Bill Mitchell’s legacy, just as certainly as the books he has written, the buildings he has realized, and students he advised who now have students themselves.



**Ryan C. C. Chin** is a Research Associate and PhD Candidate at the MIT Media Laboratory in the Smart Cities research group. His research in Urban Mobility Systems addresses the energy and mobility problems of 21<sup>st</sup> century cities such as energy efficiency, congestion, urban land-use, and carbon emissions leading to global warming. Chin in 2007 co-founded the MIT Smart Customization group (SCG) with Professors William J. Mitchell, Marvin Minsky, and Frank T. Piller with the task of improving the ability of companies to efficiently customize products and services across a diverse set of industries and customer groups. Chin’s research in SCG currently focuses on the environmental, energy, and material benefits of smart customization in products.

Websites: <http://cities.media.mit.edu> (Smart Cities), <http://scg.mit.edu> (Smart Customization).