Professor William J. Mitchell passed away on June 11th in Boston after a cancer. Former Dean of the School of Architecture at the MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Prof. Mitchell was the president of the International Experts' Committee, advising Zaragoza City Council on the development of the Information Society.

When in July 2003, shortly after being elected as mayor, I met with Prof. Manuel Castells in Huesca to ask him for his advice on our projects to foster technological innovation in the city, particularly on the Milla Digital project, his main recommendation was decidedly clear: “You need the world's finest on that domain”.

The world's finest was William J. Mitchell. Australian-born Bill Mitchell was at that moment academic head of the well known Media Lab, at the not less legendary MIT. He had previously been, throughout a decade, Dean of the School of Architecture in that renowned university, holding that position after lecturing at Cambridge, UCLA and Harvard.

Thanks to the mediation of Prof. Castells, Mitchell quickly became interested in Zaragoza and its projects. Both in the offspring meetings at the MIT, and in his first visit to our city – on January 2005, in one of the coldest wind days in the last years – we could immediately appreciate his personal humbleness, his calm intelligence, his generosity on his work and his extraordinary ability to teach.

After that first visit, Mitchell came back to Zaragoza on several occasions, to lead the International Experts' Committee that, sponsored by the Zaragoza City of Knowledge Foundation, advises the City Council on the development of the Information Society, and to work on the Milla Digital project. He also chaired the jury for the Call for Ideas for the Portillo and Almozara Park, led by the Zaragoza Alta Velocidad corporation. In one of his trips, accompanied by his wife, Jane Wolfson, they visited the Ordesa Valley in the Pyrenees.

Personally, I was honored to be with him in Barcelona, together with Prof. Castells, when he was awarded as Dr. Honoris Causa by the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya in Barcelona.

Last time he visited Zaragoza, in September 2008, it was a few days before the closing of the International Expo held in the city that summer. He toured the Expo site with interest, and with the wise look of someone assessing the Architecture as a sophisticated language of unintelligible signs, only in case the observer does not bear in mind several aspects: the social and cultural framework of each environment, and the flows of data conforming that invisible “city of bytes”, without which any city can be, in this XXIst century, comprehensively described.

Despite his illness, he kept on working until the very last moment. Just a month ago, he promised us that, once the doctors allowed him to travel again, he would return to Zaragoza. Meanwhile, he would work on several guidelines of our city. In the early morning of Saturday, June 12th, we received the news of his early death, aged 65.
William J. Mitchell's legacy will remain for being the author of some of the reference manuals used to assess the impact of new digital technologies in urban design and architecture. An Architect, Urban Planner and reputed technologist –he introduced his friend, Frank Gehry, in the field of computer aided design that would make possible, years later, the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum-, his solid, humanistic culture, was always present in his books, articles, and lectures.

Educated in several universities (Melbourne, Yale and Cambridge), he was the director of the Design Lab at MIT, where he also lead the research group on Intelligent Cities, and was also the Alexander W. Dreyfoos Professor of Architecture and Communication Science at the MIT. He also chaired the Committee on Communication Technologies and Creativity in the American Academy of Science and Engineering.

When many of us had barely heard about the Internet, Mitchell started an essential trilogy that framed the main features of the virtual city; its new spaces of intersection with the physical city; and, especially, the changes that were about to come in the conception of the architecture and city planning, bound to give an answer to the new ways of working, socializing and learn in the digital-era city.

A digital city that, against any hyper-technological cartoon, he visualized as a framework of opportunities and risks, in which it is still possible and necessary to preserve and foster the qualities of the traditional city and its public realm. As he stated in one of his works, “creating a true public realm is the way that the city has to stress the fundamental liberties for its inhabitants: Freedom of Reunion, Freedom of Expression, and Freedom to Protest”. This will remain equally valid in the inevitably digital, XXIst century cities.

In these last years, he dedicated part of his research efforts to develop new concepts of urban mobility, starting from a radical reassessment of the car, its structure, design, use, and technology. Many of us in Zaragoza were delighted to hear him develop these concepts directly in a remarkable lecture he gave in our city in 2007.

For Zaragoza, it was really a must, and a true honor, having the opportunity to count on his advise, his vision, and his closeness, that we will be grateful enough. His intellectual legacy will remain, especially, on the new Art & Technology Center (CAT), currently under construction on the Digital Mile area. The innovative program and content of this facility is directly inspired by many of Bill's findings and developments. The CAT will be the platform that will allow us to keep on working on the domains that he pioneered on the evolution of the XXIst century cities.

His premature death has left us without many hours of learning, without many books that we were expecting. But his legacy and his memory will not disappear. In Zaragoza, in his Zaragoza, they will remain always alive. May he rest in peace.