Honorary doctorate awarded to professor Rosalind Williams

Laudatio presented by professor Johan Schot

Rosalind Williams is specialist in history of technology. Truly interdisciplinary, the field combines social sciences, humanities, and engineering sciences. History of technology brings into focus how and why certain design choices were made and how these choices changed the world. In the end for Rosalind Williams design is the expression of human personality. Driven by their imagination, they create order and meaning of the world around them. Studying technology means, therefore, not just understanding past and present societies. It is about our dreams, emotions, and desires; it is about us and what moves us; it is about the engineers and the human-built world they help to create.

As a cultural historian of technology and a woman she enjoys working in a technical environment. For her it feels like home as she comes from a family of engineers. At the same time, it is also an excellent vantage point from which to explore the psychological, social, and political implications of living in a technological world. In her first book *Dream Worlds. Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France*, published in 1982 she explores the implications of the consumer revolution. It brought material wealth to many, but it also led to deeply felt conflicts about personal and social values. The great hope of the nineteenth century was that production could expand indefinitely to meet the needs of everyone. Luxury would be democratized. At the same time, it begged the question whether or not such high expectations were perhaps a fallacy and whether or not the consumer should come to grips with the limits of the material world and resources. In this book Williams investigated a highly relevant topic, exploring the dilemmas of modern consumption from an unexpected and innovative vantage point: the history of and responses to the consumer society. She made a pioneering contribution which brought users into focus.

Rosalind Williams not only has been an outstanding and unique scholar in her field. She also has been an inspiring leader at MIT, whose scholarly reflections about the past has been a guide to the institution’s future. She served as Dean for the Undergraduate Education and Student Affairs. In the history of MIT, she was the first humanist to whom the responsibility had been entrusted. In *Retooling: A Historian Confronts Technological Change* published in 2002, she reflected on the nature and challenges of engineering education drawing upon her experience as a historian of technology. She argued that engineers should retool their tool box in order to cope with the big problems of the world of today: what it means to live in a virtual world, how to design in a user-centered way, how to manage the sustainability challenge, and how to deliver high-quality health care and mobility systems. Such challenges require an education which helps students to deal with the social and cultural aspects of technology, including fears and anxieties of the general public. Engineers must prepare for ill-defined problems, for navigating through dilemmas, and for exercising judgment in ambiguous situations. They should be able to work across disciplines and be able to understand non-technical factors that profoundly influence design. Ahead of her time, then, in all books she went back to history to find and explore the same dilemmas we are facing today.
Professor Williams came to MIT in 1980 as a research fellow in the Program in Science, Technology, and Society. From 1991 to 1993 she served as Associate Chair of the MIT Faculty and from 1995 to 2000 as Dean of Students and Undergraduate Education. From 2002-06 she was Head of the Program in Science, Technology, and Society. Her main professional affiliation outside of MIT is the Society for the History of Technology (SHOT), of which she served as president in 2005-06. In 2008 she received an honorary degree from the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) in Stockholm, Sweden. Eindhoven University of Technology is proud to add Professor Williams name to its list of honorary doctorates to acknowledge her unique contributions to the field of history of technology.