

Edward Cullinan

Born 17.7.1931

Life story by his colleague Robin Nicholson.

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Adventures with Ted

Every morning this past week I have laid in bed and relived a different set of adventures with Ted, so rather than write a conventional obituary these are a few of those memories; some may not be completely accurate but that never stopped Ted telling a good story or quoting a meaningful statistic.

I met Ted after we had drifted into the second year at Cambridge in 1964 which was being led by the congenial if very Cambridge Peter Bicknell. Then Ted came up from Camden Town to teach us in breaks from building his house in Camden with his and his wife Roz' hands. It was his first of many teaching appointments around the world and totally energized us with his understanding of history and construction, of geometry and space, of form and function, of delight; he was a real architect and we loved it. When he brought 'Big Jim' Stirling to the final crit of the year, we were in awe in as far as a Cambridge student can be. It was fifteen years and many office lunches later that I was invited to join the office. Forty years on it will take a while for the relationship to settle.



Edward Cullinan Architects in 1985 on the roof of the office in Jamestown Road. Back row left to right: Greg Penoyre, Frances Hollis, Robin Nicholson, Alan Short, Claire Herniman, Tony Peake. Front row left to right: Mark Beedle, Tony Belcher, Ted, Sunand Prasad, Mungo Smith.

Ted's official story is well known and well documented with hundreds of articles, three practice books, 15 items in the British Library's Architects Lives, many tv films and the 12 filmed talks he gave to the office between 2015 and 2017; the first was the one in the Church of St Mary Barnes to celebrate the practice's 50th anniversary and the Churches' 800th. So many people and not just architects have Ted stories, especially about his lectures when he drew stories building schemes up in three dimensions on the overhead projector. All over the world there are multi-coloured acetates that people would ask for and he willingly gave in UK and Ireland, Canada and USA, Norway and New Zealand, Japan and Singapore.

Ted drew all the time - ideas, people, big-leaved jungles and carefully composed proposals. But most important was the drawn combat that I found so exciting when I joined the practice; backwards and forwards, unplanned and opportunistic, any persons' drawing could trigger a discussion with Ted and others about how to do it, whatever it might be, better or at least differently. This was usually both thrilling and productive if occasionally painful, especially when the drawings were ready to be issued to the client.

Ted's lectures always set the architecture in an historical context, often starting with William Morris and Philip Webb and usually including the contemporary political context and the development of the motorcar, all drawn live. Ted not only composed and drew but he wrote in an arrestingly poetic way. Sometimes this would all come together in a set piece like the RSA Bossom lecture 'Where does my baggage come from?' in Jan 1987 which was summarized in the 1995 Academy Editions Anthology by Ken Powell.

There were other heroes ranging from Le Corbusier and his Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamps to which Ted cycled as a student, Frank Lloyd Wright, who laid his hands on Ted's shoulders when introduced by the President of the University of California at Berkeley and Glen Murcutt. Denys Lasdun was his link to Berthold Lubetkin and his great friend, with whom he designed the University of East Anglia ziggurat terraces and did the competition for Christs College Cambridge New Court. However, Ted was not so happy when the very supportive editor of the Architectural Review Peter Davey called Richard MacCormac, Peter Aldington and Ted Cullinan 'romantic pragmatists'. He didn't like being pigeon-holed like that but there was a happier encounter orchestrated by Davey with Peter Cook and Peter Smithson, another of Ted's heroes who said in his strong northern accent 'Cook's a draftsman, Cullinan's a builder and I am an architect'.



Trio of drawings by Ted Cullinan of Frank Lloyd Wright's early career in architecture

The self-built passive solar Cullinan House in Camden Mews was listed Grade II* in 2007 but in the early seventies Ted and Roz bought Gib Torr Farm, a run-down small holding in North Staffordshire above the snow line for escape and parties, which became an epic re-building and farming project. Generations of family, practice families and their children have week-ended there to rebuild the great stone barn, ski with a home-made ski lift, swim naked in the Three Shires' pool (much to the surprise of any campers) and to eat and drink in the courtyard sitting in a typically Ted circular stone and grass seat around a fire.

One weekend before I joined the office, my wife Fiona and I started the main stair in millstone grit under the direction of the then 11-year old Kate Cullinan. On another weekend and with more difficulty Ted and I cut the openings to house the doors in two stacks of pre-cast sewer rings, one for the loo and one for the shower. In later years Ted orchestrated the next generation to plant a huge four ring ellipse of trees. Now Gib Torr is a 14-bed 'hidden gem' that you can rent on Airbnb, but former Cullinan member Brendan Woods describes it in AR Sept 1983 as having "contributed considerably to (Ted's) growing assurance as an architect... It is an instance of the architect as bricoleur."



Ted taking a break after tree planting at Gib Torr with one of the younger members of the Cullinan 'family'.

There were three offices; first two rooms in Uncle Mervyn's publishing house in Henrietta Street in Covent Garden then a small three storey Camden warehouse in a yard off Jamestown Road and finally Baldwin Terrace in Islington moving between two adjacent warehouses. There were many adventures in each and although I visited Henrietta Street, I joined the eight-person Cullinan Co-op in Jamestown Road where we were on the first floor, while Max Fordham and his cooperative were on the top; on the ground floor the astonishing former Hackney Labour councillor dyeline print-lady Janet ruled the entrance hall with the single loo in the

storeroom behind; Ted had assembled the squat loo with a basin balanced on a salt-glazed pipe beside it in a small repurposed greenhouse.

Ted had removed the row of cast iron columns down the middle of the office as they were in the way but when Fordhams moved over the yard to the Piano Factory, we moved upstairs and realized the floor was so live that we couldn't draw properly. The columns had long gone, so undaunted (he never was) Ted and his son Tom built a stressed skin wall in 6mm ply, the stress coming from the laden bookshelves on both sides; this was resolved with a circular 6mm ply drum as our archive.

As our lease was running out, we were looking for an empty warehouse along the canal, the three Baldwin Terrace warehouses south-facing over the Regents Canal found us. We immediately set to work at weekends preparing them for our occupation. We were nearly ready to move, when, on the way back from a meeting in the City and much to Ted's frustration, we diverted the taxi via Baldwin Terrace to pick something up and went in to see how it was looking. There, upstairs in the empty Building B, the table was laid out for 60 people for Ted's 60th birthday lunch. But the table was no ordinary table; Mary Lou Arscott and Sunand Prasad had spend the previous weekend making it as four-legged propped cantilever ellipse made with materials found in the building – heroic!



Four-legged propped cantilever ellipse table made from salvaged materials by Mary Lou Arscott and Sunand Prasad for Ted Cullinan's sixtieth birthday.

It was no surprise that as part of the self-build conversion of Building C, Ted grabbed the coffee point, which he built as a six-foot diameter brick three-quarter drum, while the rest of us patched brickwork, moved steel stairs and built glass block walls; this was an integral part of our 'practice'. The design requiring the most skill was Mary Lou's 4mm stressed skin 8 foot by 4-foot airfoil doors for the loos and the boiler cupboard, which she designed and then trained colleagues to make them.

For twenty years I sat upstairs in that building facing Ted, board to board, as friend, facilitator and filter. When Richard MacCormac became President of the RIBA he

invited Ted and other friends (including Morrison, Hopkins and Jiricna) to stand for Council; however I persuaded him much to Richard's displeasure that I should stand so that Ted could keep drawing as this was one of the most productive periods of work, despite Thatcher's biggest recession. We rode most of those out with across the board pay cuts with the pay differential tightening from three to one to two and a half to one for the oldest; but this recession needed us to shrink. Shrinking is the most difficult thing for a cooperative to do and this one hurt badly; but as we later learned those who left all went on to do great things.

Sunand Prasad was RIBA President when Ted Cullinan was awarded the RIBA Royal Gold Medal in 2008 in recognition of his 'inspirational practice and teaching'. While the teaching is universally admired, the work of the practice is more problematic in this period of easily digestible iconic starchitecture and their 'archi-stars'. Cullinans' work was both more complex and more traditionally architectural in so far as the art lay in understanding the context, the task and the users then designing for construction. He designed complete propositions in three dimensions in his head, often in bed or while driving to Gib Torr – extraordinary. Ted didn't do architecture by asking three assistants to draw up options for the 'master' to choose from because he wanted to design it all with the team.

The first line of the plan was drawn with the whole in mind; latterly, he would often start by drawing a section through the stair as that would predict the elevation. Before photocopiers could change scales, Ted would insist on gridding the OS map and blowing it up to the workable scale by hand, by the end of which he said he understood the size of the site.



Uplands Conference Centre for Nationwide Building Society completed in 1984, and Grade 2 listed in 2014.

There were too many really important projects to list here but after the initial houses and the ground-breaking Minster Lovell Mill transformation, there were more

projects where the existing buildings were pruned back before developing a new architecture drawn from the old. When I joined, they were working with Max Fordham on a zero-heat conference centre for Nationwide Building Society; this proved too expensive, so Uplands was created out of the original house, suitably pruned and flattered by symmetrical extensions.

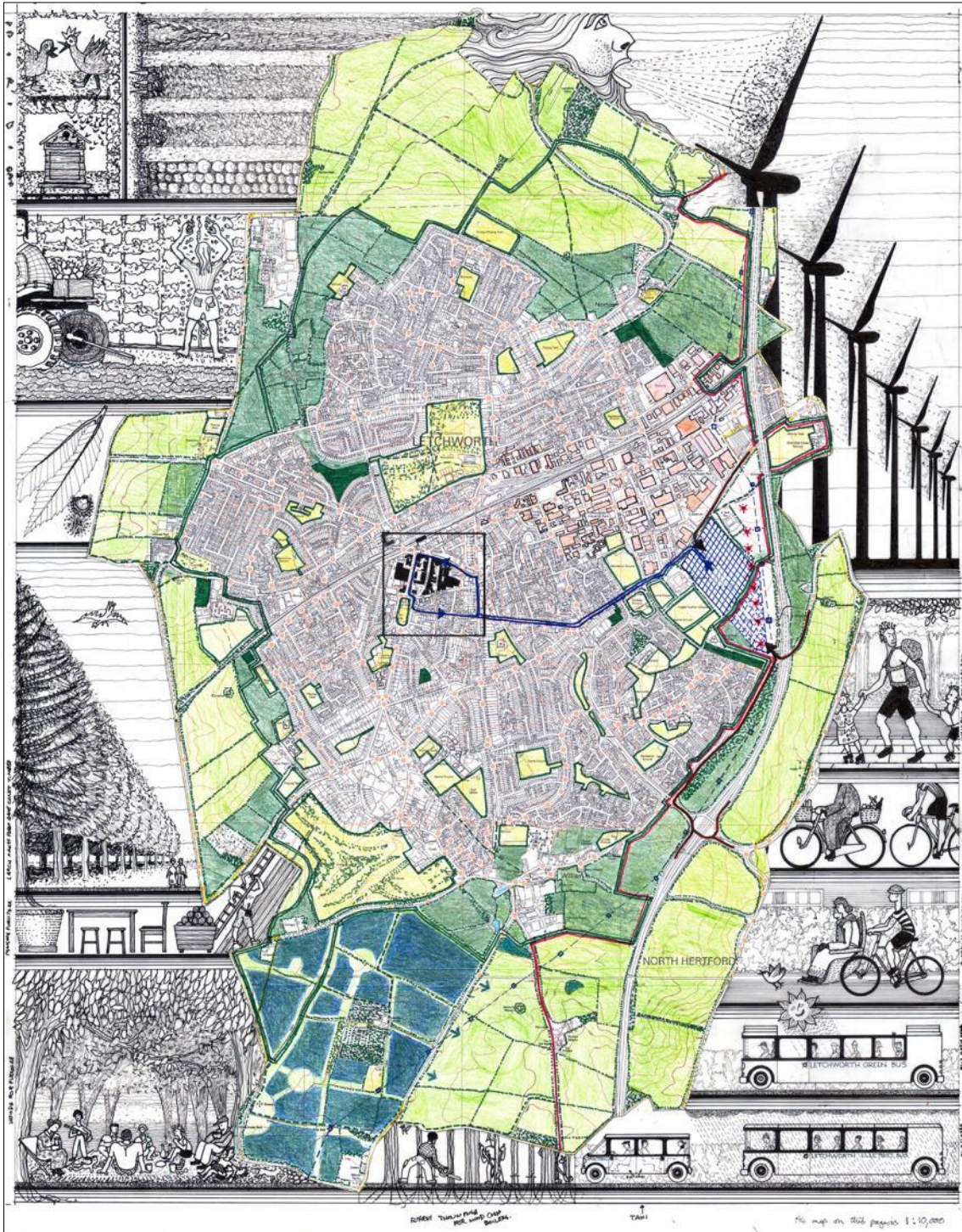
Every set-back whether financial or planning was seized on as an opportunity to find a better solution; this iterative journey would often lurch hither and thither so although the general parti for Uplands was fixed early on, the pavilion elevations saw many variations before settling down to the calmly rethought classical composition that was built. Typically, the coursed limestone was laid the wrong way round, rough side out allowing the unseen smooth side to define the insulated cavity.

This was followed by three innovative but very different projects, the reconstruction of St Mary Barnes, a hotel for the homeless in Basingstoke and the radical health proposition for care in the community at Lambeth Community Care Centre. Then the university work began just as social housing became financially impossible. Key projects include Fountains Abbey Visitor Centre, the International Headquarters for RMC, the Centre for Mathematical Sciences, the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge, the Downland Gridshell and Maggie's Newcastle. And there were the great masterplans for the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, the villages and towns in the Tama Forest outside Tokyo and, later, the community-led masterplan for Bristol Harbourside.



Looking diagonally through the courtyard of Fountains Abbey Visitor Centre towards the forbidden tower of the Cistercian Abbey in the valley below.

Some of the great projects got away. Of course, we did many competitions which we didn't win but there were two we so nearly won at Worcester College Oxford (1980) and the Royal Opera House Covent Garden (1984) where the same Sainsbury sponsor overruled his jury. Others like the redevelopment of Petershill House to the south of St Paul's got away in another Thatcher recession and Morrison Street, Edinburgh where we didn't have the right connections; Roger Madelin always describes this as "the best scheme Argent never built".



Proposal for turning Letchworth into the world's first carbon neutral city, for Mark Whitby and Transition Letchworth.

It is extraordinary that architects who have got relatively poorer and less influential over Ted's lifetime, still give away their best ideas for free and don't even get compensated when projects are cancelled. Grenfell and the Climate Emergency might change this.

It is difficult to write about an architect of Ted's generation without mentioning the Prince of Wales. As it happens the Prince described Ted as 'a man after my own heart' in the (in)famous 1984 Hampton Court Royal Gold Medal Speech that led to the collapse of Ted's AA contemporaries and close friends Ahrends Burton and Koralek. However, this speech unblocked the path for our Community Care Centre, which he later opened with his new bride Diana. In order to be there and not miss one of his MIT lectures Ted persuaded us he should fly back from New York by Concorde, which he adored.

Beyond a boundless love for his family, the extended Cullinan clan, and all children, whether related or not, and his passion for the architecture that he described as 'a social act' in a practice manifesto in 1978, he had many other interests including individual sports like skiing, wind-surfing and hang-gliding, the patterns of weather, native Canadian art, forestry, growing vegetables and travel.

Whenever we could afford it, we went on an office trip preferably to an island off Britain's varied coast. The most extreme was to visit the sixth century monastery on Skellig Michael, the tiny twin-peaked rock 8 miles off the coast of Kerry. Now a World Heritage Site with limited access, the weather ensures that it is visitable only 100 days a year in 1988 we drove in a minibus from Camden to Swansea and put it on the overnight ferry; we explored Cork briefly and kissed the Blarney Stone nearby before driving to the west coast.

The next morning, we set off up the coast in glorious sunshine to get the ferry to Skellig. By the time we got out into the open sea the wind had got up and we realized why we had been given tarpaulins to put across our knees or backs. Many of us thought that this was the last ride of Edward Cullinan Architects but when we landed and climbed up through the puffins to the mist-covered stone beehive cells, we began to understand the power of the place and those who used to travel by coracle to get there.

Eight years ago, Ted nearly died in UCH where they kept him in a coma for 3 months. Although we had been talking for a couple of years about him doing less in the office he was worried about the quality of the work if he was not there to check. Effectively absent for a year we had no option but to continue and thereby start the succession.

When he came back to work, he began to relax (a bit) as he witnessed Roddy Langmuir overseeing the design quality along with Peter Inglis and Carol Costello. Roddy was working out how to get Ted on the office outing this week to see the recently completed National Automotive Innovation Centre for JLR and Tata Motors that now welcomes you as you drive onto the campus. Sadly, Ted never did see NAIC, the culmination of over 25 years work with the Warwick Manufacturing Group, led by Lord Kumar Bhattacharyya, who died 8 months ago.

Many words will be spoken, and many drawings drawn but we have the built and unbuilt oeuvre and the many experiences of life with the great libertarian socialist Edward Cullinan.



John Romer, Ted and Johnny Winter arriving at Skellig Michael.

18 November 2019