

Peter Eley

Born 1939

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Above: Peter Eley, c. 2003.
Below: Peter Eley.



Obituary from The Architect's Journal - 27 March, 2008

Peter Eley, an architect, CABE enabler and co-founder of workplace specialist DEGW, has died.

Born in 1939, Eley left DEGW in 1989 to set up his own practice focusing on the reuse of old buildings and community clients with an emphasis on the arts, until he became ill with cancer. In remission, he became one of the first CABE enablers and did other consultancy work. Peter is survived by Joanna (Jo) his wife, his daughter Sarah, sons Patrick and Michael and grandchildren, Sophia and Laura (Sarah's daughters).

John Worthington who jointly submitted his final-diploma dissertation with Peter on graduating from the Architectural Association (AA), reflects on Eley:

'Frank Duffy, Peter and myself worked together for the last three years of our time at the AA on a number of major projects. On graduating, the three of us in sequence studied in the United States on Harkness Fellowships. I initially went to the University of Pennsylvania to study with Louis Kahn (1965-66) and was followed by Peter who took a masters in urban design (1966-68). On returning to England, Peter worked with Shankland Cox on the proposed new airport for London before joining Hillingdon as a housing project architect, and then joining Frank, myself and Luigi Giffone to establish DEGW as a partnership in 1973.

'A few in DEGW will remember Peter as a work colleague, whilst others will have recognised Peter as a face. Many may not even know the significance of the initials of Duffy Eley Giffone Worthington. Peter's contribution to the practice was to bring a concern for the processes of delivering buildings, combined with an engineer's concern for detail - he had been commissioned for National Service in the Royal Engineers.

'Peter had a love of good craftsmanship and old buildings. Together we did a series for *The Architects' Journal* on reusing redundant industrial buildings later published in 1984 by Architectural Press as *Industrial Rehabilitation, The reuse of old buildings for new enterprises*. This work drew together our experience of working with the emerging knowledge economy growing out of the electronics sector and the urban-design dialogue which Peter was involved with, finding new uses to revitalise our declining inner urban areas.

'Peter was happiest working for local communities and

public-sector clients. Jacksons Lane community centre, Kingsland Workshops, and the dance studios at Rotherhithe were all examples of his tenacity to bring a sense of hope and quality to declining areas on a shoestring budget.

'In DEGW's rapid growth during the early 1980s, Peter was responsible for the delivery of some of our largest corporate interiors, such as Ernst & Young, as well as continuing to work for the public sector, a new building for Tower Hamlets, and on urban regeneration studies.

'In 1988, after the practice incorporated, Peter left to start on his own, where he could focus on returning to a size where he could have direct day-to-day contact with the client as user and enjoy the building as an artifact.

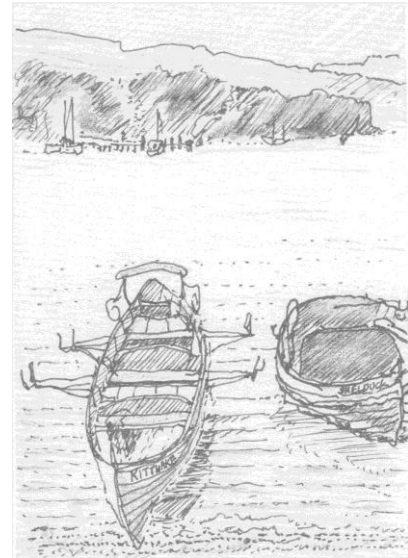
'Peter's lessons for DEGW, were that no job or client is too small, detail counts and to have the tenacity to keep fighting for what you believe in. Peter never under optimized, he kept to his high expectations.'

Architects Journal

Peter's wife Joanna Eley wrote:

Peter's parents, David and Barbara (Bar) Eley, adopted Peter as a six-week baby in spring 1939. Almost immediately David, a serving soldier in the Engineers, left for six years of war in various places. He thus spent very little of Peter's early years with his new son, leaving Bar to bring him up in the company of another soldier's family in a house in the country. This may have influenced the fact that his parents were unable to tell him he was adopted and asked his prep school head master to do so when he was about to leave for secondary school - a bit of a shock to the system and to self confidence. He never searched for his birth mother till his parents were both dead, by which time it was too late though he longed to know more about who he was. His lack of 'family' meant he was passionate to have one of his own - he said he would have liked six children. He had three - Sarah, Patrick and Michael - and they meant a great deal to him. The AJ obituary, above, describes much of his architectural career, so these paragraphs consider other sides of his life.

His father insisted that he did his National Service before it was phased out. During this time he waited at table in the officer's mess as a private, became an officer in the Engineers,



Above: Drawing by Peter Eley of two of the boats at Lake End.

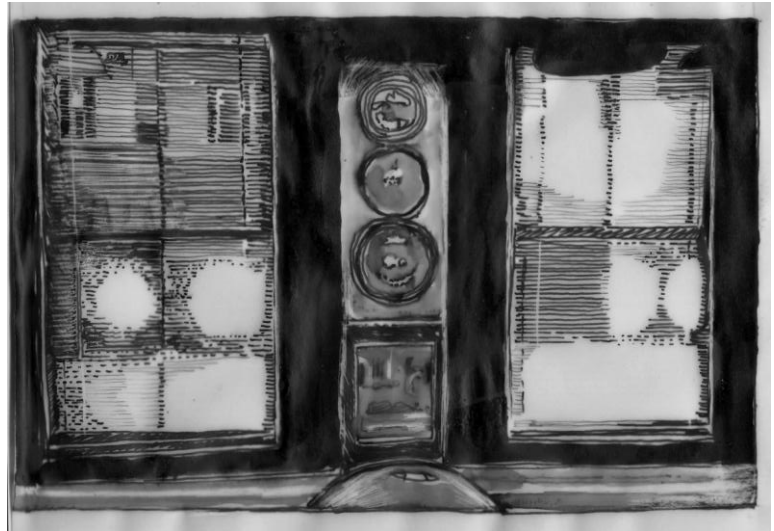
Below: Peter Eley in early 1990s.



Below: Art work by Peter Eley: Sawn-off plank ends become a terrace of houses. Decoration for Sarah's wedding 2002.



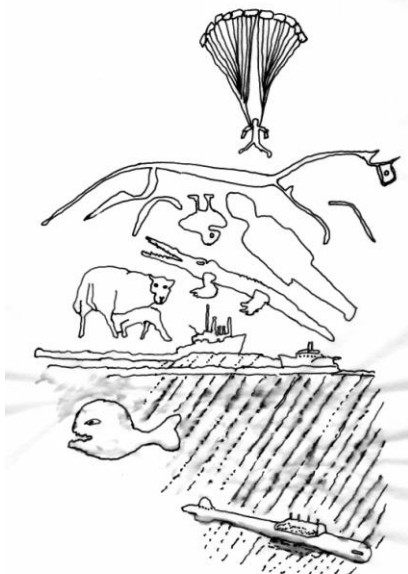
Right: Art work "Mirrors and reflections" by Peter Eley.



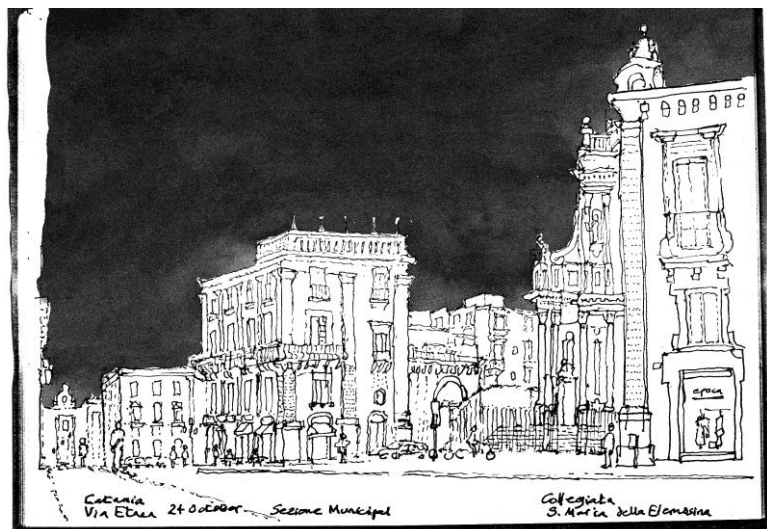
Above: Stained Glass by Peter Eley - top: "Sheep by lake", above: "Volcano".

Below left: Drawing "A wonderful world" by Peter Eley.

Below right: Drawing: a town in Sicily, by Peter Eley, in around 2000.



taught sailing in Germany, built Baily bridges and briefly started to smoke. While in the army he met an older man who had graduated as an architect prior to National Service, and this spurred him on to take up this career. His love and understanding of places and his skills in drawing and painting were used in his professional life, but also his personal life. He was used to travelling. He went to boarding school aged six, and was sent in the summers to stay with his parents stationed in Cypress - on an air journey taking three days. In his teens his parents lived in Gibraltar where he spent happy sunny summers, and these experiences gave him a life-long delight in the Mediterranean. As a student at the AA he deliberately chose to live in a different flat in each year, in different parts of London, to explore the city. He took long bus journeys to see other areas. He hitchhiked to Durham where his parent lived by then. At the AA he did a measured drawing exercise at Pakenham Mill, a windmill in Suffolk, and persuaded his parents to retire to that part of the world.

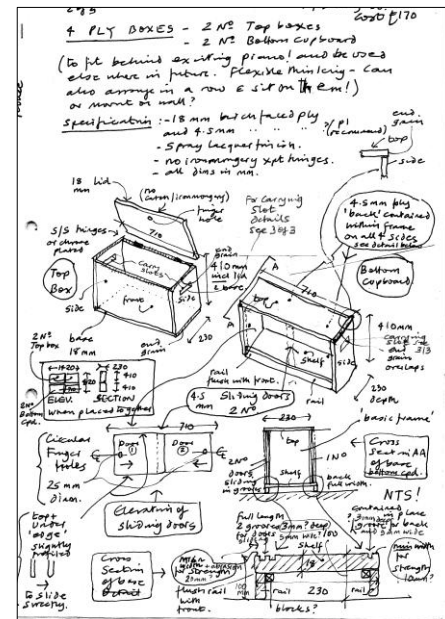


Family holidays took place in the Lake District amongst the wider family, where few realized how well he could sail as he took to the hills generally leaving the beach to others. Many years a couple of weeks were spent in the summer exploring Europe – often ending up for part of the time by the Mediterranean, sometimes bringing café glasses, tables, chandeliers from French Brocantes ‘a plein air’, sometimes taking his mother-in-law too – an example of his kindness and tolerance. He created records of these travels in his ‘black books’. These consisted of postcards – usually aerial views of villages and towns - ephemera and his own sketches.

They supplemented the many photocopied building plans he had prepared in advance of the trip, to add to a few selected guide books from his large collection, to ensure that nothing noteworthy was missed. Even when ill with leukemia, when he was able, he travelled to Moscow, to Warsaw and to Dehli, where his great friends the Carters hosted him in their ever-changing World Bank postings. As some of the pictures show, he loved headgear. He also had a formidable collection of bags and cases and a waistcoat holding all his sketching material in a myriad of pockets, designed by himself and made up by a tailor in Dehli’s Kahn Market.

Peter’s creativity covered far more than architecture. He always drew and painted, setting up perspectives with miriads of tiny dots that often remained as part of the image. He took up stained glass (accompanied by Sarah), no doubt entranced by the bright colours and textures available, and creating rather unusual scenes – a volcano, a sheep by the water. Sadly the map of Pangea never quite got leaded though the pieces were all cut. Mirrors and reflections were a constant source of inspiration. Eccentric, but very useful storage furniture was designed with careful notation about making the furniture. Metal and clay sculptures were made possible in Morley college classes. His poetry writing, a form of communication developed after he became ill, led to captions for the Bonkers sculptures that he created out of waste materials – the collections themselves a work of art: drawers full of different brushes, masses of miniature boxes, metal oddments no-one else had a use for, and road squashed tin cans.

Below: Art works by Peter Eley: below: "Road Squash + OK", and bottom "Dinosaur" Morley College 2006.



Above: Drawing of storage boxes, by Peter Eley - early 1980s.