

COLIN ST JOHN WILSON

A passionate champion of democratic space

Sandy Wilson (1922-2007) is remembered by friends and colleagues as a great architectural talent, but also as a patron of the arts and an inspirational educator who was always ready to promote the talents of others

PETER CARTER:

'A well-informed friend and mentor on cultural matters'

On our first day at County Hall, I asked Sandy if he might be the author of a series of excellent articles on architecture being published in The Observer newspaper. Upon his somewhat shyly admitting this to be the case, we became friends and that happy state continued over the years.

At County Hall we worked within a stimulating and productive group of young architects, including Gillian and William



Design for Coventry Cathedral with Peter Carter.

Howell, John Killick and Alan Colquhoun, on schemes for the Albert Drive and Bentham Road housing estates.

Our dynamic group soon became energetically dedicated to the council's formidable task of rehousing the thousands of people who had been made homeless by the London Blitz.

Independent of London County Council (LCC) work, Sandy and I decided to submit schemes for three architectural competitions and to participate in the 1956 Team Ten Congress devoted to proposing ideas for city centres. The three competitions were for a new Coventry Cathedral (1951); a Shell Petrol Service Station, which was highly commended (1952); and Sheffield University Campus (1953). All of these proposed schemes were what might today be characterised as hi-tech solutions.

After we went our separate ways in 1956 — Sandy to Cambridge, the British Library and a well-earned knighthood, and I, via Eero Saarinen and Mies's offices, to my own London practice — we met occasionally. Nevertheless, as with many long-standing friendships, we always picked up again without hesitation.

Peter Carter first met Sandy Wilson 57 years ago.



Sandy Wilson in his studio last year.

SPENCER DE GREY:

'His qualities are rare in the world of architecture today'

We will all greatly miss Sandy Wilson. His humanity, intellect and modesty are qualities that are sadly rare in architecture today. These qualities were always evident in his buildings, ranging from private houses such as the Cornford House in Cambridge to public buildings such as the British Library.

Growing out of his experience at the LCC in the fifties, he understood so well the nature of space and how it should be used. He excelled in creating democratic space, nowhere more evident than in the reading rooms in the



Cornford House in Cambridge.

British Library — grand but never overwhelming.

He was my supervisor at Cambridge, and every week we visited the house he had recently completed for himself with its elegant sequence of rooms and its collection of contemporary British art.

His incredible knowledge of both 20th century architecture and philosophy, together with his passion for fine art, was deeply infectious and exhilarating.

Spencer de Grey is a senior executive, head of design, at Foster & Partners.

PETER BLAKE:

'Sandy leaves a fantastic legacy'

I first met Sandy Wilson in the late fifties, 50 years ago. He was one of the first people to collect my work then, and we stayed friends.

I shared and suffered with him the travails and setbacks of designing Liverpool Civic Centre, which after several changes of government wasn't built, then later the long period of designing and building the British Library, and the uninformed and sometimes silly, negative criticism of it when it was completed.

I always wanted Sandy to design a gallery for my collections, and although we didn't ever do that, he did with MJ Long design and convert three beautiful studios and our nice house for us.



British Library: magnificent.

Sandy leaves a fantastic legacy to London with the magnificent British Library, and to Chichester with Pallant House, both with the new building and his collection of paintings.

We shall miss Sandy a lot. Peter Blake is an artist.



Drawing of Liverpool Civic Centre project, 1965.

MARCIAL ECHENIQUE:

'He ran the practice as a studio in an architectural school'

I use deliberately the word educator to describe someone who develops the character and mental power of a student, rather than teacher, one who imparts knowledge, or trainer, one who develops skills. Sandy never imposed his views or style on those around him. He strived to get them to think by themselves and justify ethically their architectural decisions.

When I worked with him in the early stages of the Liverpool Civic Centre project, I was amazed by how he ran the practice as a studio in an architectural school. Those of us working on the project were encouraged to develop our own designs. Every week we would have a "crit" in which we would explain our ideas. Sandy would comment on the designs and make references to buildings which addressed similar issues. He

would rush to his library and bring the corresponding book that illustrated his point.

When he returned to Cambridge as professor of architecture, he continued with his approach to education and always wanted an intellectual justification for a design. Deep down, he admired the classical tradition in architecture exemplified by Schinkel and Asplund, despite his exhortation of the goodness of the organic tradition of Aalto and Scharoun. But above all, he inculcated in generations of architects a sense of propriety as the fourth Vitruvian pillar of architecture.

His legacy is there: there is no Cambridge style, but yes, there is a Cambridge approach which produces thoughtful architects. Marcial Echenique is a head of the Cambridge University School of Architecture.



Poetic tribute To read Theresa Shiban's poem on Sandy Wilson's British Library go to bdonline.co.uk/people

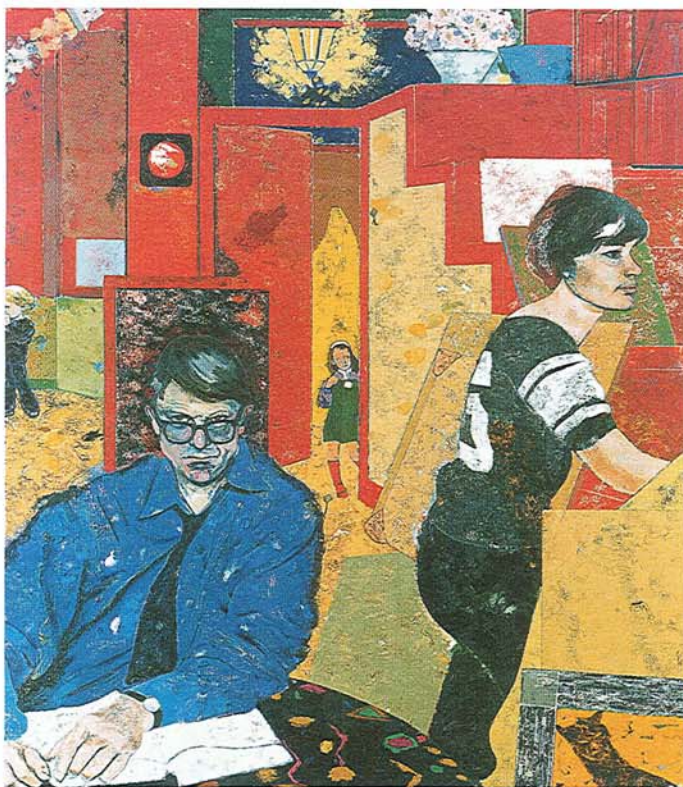
PAUL HUXLEY:
'I see generosity of spirit in his buildings'

I met Sandy Wilson when we were fellow trustees of the Tate Gallery from the early 1970s. He was already the architect of the British Library when it was to be sited next to the British Museum, and I was impressed by his tenacity and courage when he told me it would take him the rest of his life. Not a bad estimate, but thankfully not entirely correct.

I am proud of what the Tate acquired during that time, which was to no little extent due to our shared enthusiasm for many of the works, for instance, Giacometti, Léger and Caulfield. And we joined forces to push for James Stirling to be the architect of the new Turner galleries.

Some 25 years later I got to know Sandy as a friend through his wife, MJ Long, who designed my home. It is a converted industrial building with so many party walls and complications that our lawyer said it should have been a test case for law students.

I remember Sandy's first visit after it was completed. His response was raptur-like. He analysed details of geometry and light, the alignment of columns and nuances that I had failed to observe after two years being in and out of the place. He loved what MJ had done to the building, and said many times in later years how much he wished it was his home. I gradually learned what a huge mentor, supporter and encourager



RB Kitaj's portrait of Sandy Wilson and MJ Long.

he was to his family, his students and friends, as well as to the artists whose work he collected.

Great architects, like top people in any creative field, can often be so self-absorbed as to neglect recognising the achievements of others. Great architect he was, but Sandy was never like that.

His creative imagination was not insular. He was a scholar of architecture and the arts, and in parallel to pursuing his own vision he was an enthusiastic advocate of

those he believed in, through his conversation, his lectures and writing.

I see that sort of generosity of spirit in his buildings. There is no ego or pomposity in the British Library or Pallant House Gallery, they are not built to impress but to use and enjoy. They speak to our spiritual and intellectual faculties, placing us, the users, at the centre of the experience.

Painter Paul Huxley is a former Tate Gallery trustee (1975-82).

ERIC PARRY:
'He has enabled his students in sharing a passion for architecture'

Sandy Wilson straddled the worlds of theory and practice with unmatched vision, clarity and creative energy.

In practice the early small buildings are brilliant tectonic and spatial set pieces, brimming with confidence, full of life and reference to his correspondences with philosophy, literature, the visual arts and architecture.

The Herculean struggle with

the British Library, against the political and architectural grain of its time, has yielded a building that will be understood to be a wonderful defence of the humanist spirit for which he fought.

Through his teaching, research and writing he established a position that on at least three tides of fashion set him apart — international modernism, postmodernism and most recently the

cult of the icon.

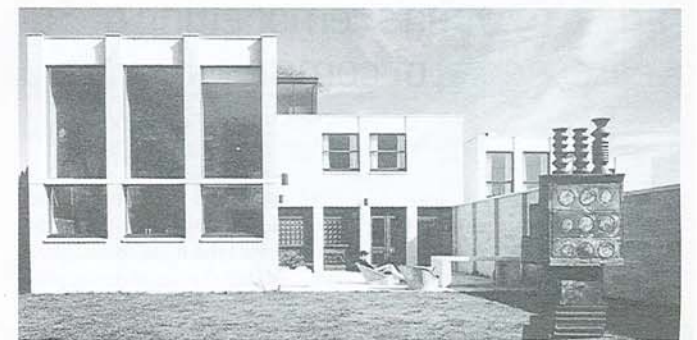
He cultivated a period of creativity and confidence at the School of Architecture at Cambridge which, as he would have wished, has enabled many of his students to follow his example in practising architecture and sharing a passion for the subject on its broadest terms.

Eric Parry is director of Eric Parry Architects.

NICHOLAS RAY:
'Work of his heroes was reinterpreted in a particularly English way'

In 1979 I witnessed the moving effect on the Finns of Sandy's address at the first Aalto symposium in Jyväskylä, providing words that they could not themselves express to celebrate the achievement of their recently departed pre-eminent architect. The British contingent basked in the reflected gratitude. Afterwards with two colleagues we toured Finland, revisiting Seinäjoki, Alajärvi and Paimio, and were entertained to tea by Maire Gullichsen at Villa Mairea.

When I first visited Sandy's house in Cambridge it seemed Corbusian — white with a double-height space. By the late 1970s it appeared as a version of English Free School — the L-shaped plan with an inglenook fireplace. Later it was



Sandy Wilson's own house at Grantchester Road, Cambridge.

obviously neoclassical or reminded one of Loos or Hoffmann in its play of order and axis. So it is with Sandy's other projects. It is easy to spot the influence of Kahn or Aalto, but the work of his heroes was reinterpreted in a particularly English way.

The British Library will

provide material for future architectural scholars for many years. Its craftsmanship and intelligence will also survive as a challenge to new generations of architects as they in turn seek to digest the lessons of their predecessors.

Nicholas Ray is principal of Nicholas Ray Associates.

STEFAN VAN RAAY:
'"You tell me what you want and I will draw it," Wilson said'

When I first met with Sandy Wilson to discuss the brief for the new Pallant House Gallery in 1997 he was extremely benign and generous towards me, a freshly arrived client with an agenda of wishes and demands.

He was the professional architect incarnate, but he firmly drew the line when I picked up a pencil and started to design one of the spaces for the future gallery. "Stef, never ever pick up a pencil" he said. "You tell me what you want, and I'll draw it!"

I never held a pencil in his presence again. I just described a brief, sometimes quite clumsily, which he always translated beautifully into real drawings.

The journey we travelled together over those 10 years was an extraordinary one, and I felt privileged to work with architects who were so extremely passionate about people, art and architecture.

Sandy was not only an outstanding architect, he also was an inspiring teacher and renaissance man with a huge social conscience and, luckily, a great sense of humour. Young people adored him because he always treated them with respect and profound interest.

Of Pallant House Gallery Sandy once remarked, "Perhaps if the British Library is my symphony, then Pallant House Gallery is my quartet." And how it sings! Stefan van Raay is director of Pallant House Gallery.



Top and above: Wilson's 2006 Pallant House Gallery extension.

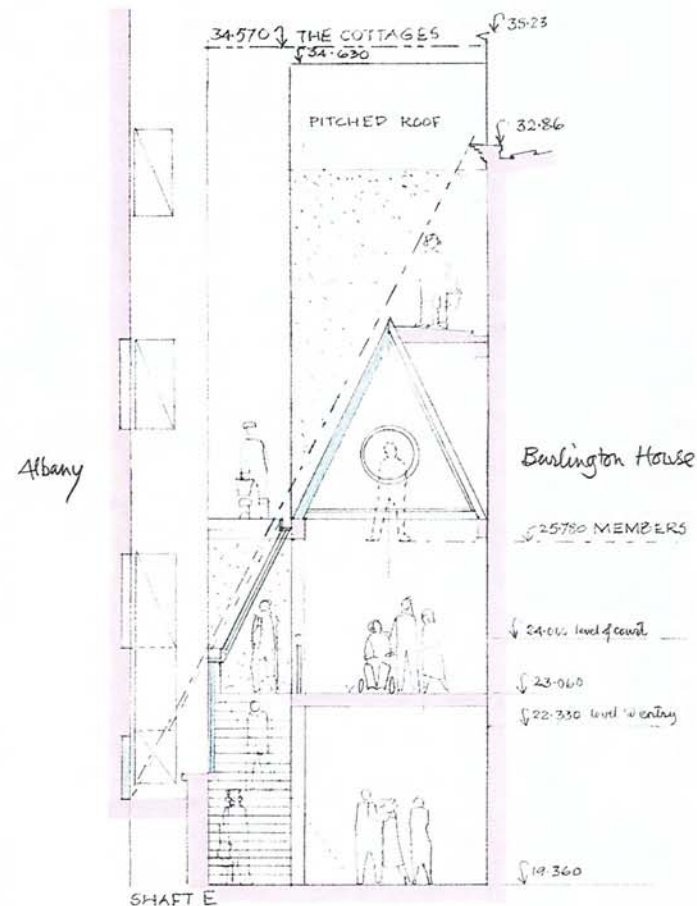
MARYANNE STEVENS:
'Sandy's Royal Academy master-plan is exceptional'

Sandy Wilson was someone of exceptional determination, energy and commitment. Alongside the completion of Pallant House, Chichester, he devoted the closing three-and-a-half years of his life to a project that started modestly but grew both in scale and ambition: the masterplan for the Royal Academy of Arts.

It was the Royal Academy's good fortune that Sandy lived long enough to bring the masterplan to the stage where it can be presented internally prior to a public launch this autumn.

The task was challenging. The physical elements are architecturally compelling but complex. The two buildings that inhabit the 1ha site, Burlington House and 6 Burlington Gardens, are listed and sit back-to-back and at different datum lines.

The brief was demanding as the plan had to accommodate the Royal Academy's past, present and future cultural remits, and the ongoing need for accommodation for staff and infrastructure. The requirement was to make the Royal Academy an academy in the true meaning of the word, fit for the 21st century. Through meticulous and dogged interrogation of the plan and the structure of the buildings, the individual departmental briefs and the anticipated opposition of the planning and listing authorities, Sandy crafted a masterplan that is exceptional in its clarity, coherence and comprehensiveness. The vital north-south link has been plotted, major circulation issues have been re-



Sketch for the Royal Academy masterplan.

solved, and improved facilities for supporters, staff and commercial activities addressed.

As Sandy walked the site, he seems to have responded to the Venetian Gothic south (rear) facade of 6 Burlington Gardens and appreciated the potential of the transitions from confined cavernous spaces to expansive open areas. Taking these as his cues, Sandy would talk about the visual excitement of debauching from a Venetian calle — the new link —

into a generous piazza where Burlington House meets 6 Burlington Gardens. The RA Schools have a front door for the first time, sculpture can be displayed, and the public can move from the Royal Academy's cultural offerings through a newly created urban space, a gift to Central London. This vision will be Sandy's great legacy to the Royal Academy. MaryAnne Stevens is acting secretary and senior curator at the Royal Academy of Arts.

PHOTOS: ED TYLER, MORLEY VON STERNBERG