

Edward Cullinan: 1931–2019

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When I first walked into the office of Edward Cullinan Architects – as a callow and eager part 2 student hoping for a sniff of a job – I could not help noticing the sawdust. It seemed to be everywhere. On the meeting room table, on the charcoal grey carpets, even in Ted's trademark black mohair pullover. This was clearly not the typically slick and spotless commercial London office. It was Easter 1989 and the practice had just been announced as the winner of a competition to design a major new commercial building on the south side of St Paul's Cathedral. It seemed like a tipping point in the history of a practice then best known for smaller scale community-based projects: a first chance to showcase their work on the highest of high-profile city centre sites. Still, it was clear that not everyone was quite ready for double-breasted suits and Vodafones. In one corner of the meeting room, another dark-clad figure (who I later found out was Ted's son Tom) was hunched over a vintage treadle bandsaw, frantically whittling layers of plywood into a massing model of the Peter's Hill competition scheme.

The office was then housed in a run-down Victorian warehouse in a back yard off Camden High Street, shared with a London taxi garage, but within earshot of the trendy Camden Market. It was informal, to say the least, but clearly a hive of activity, and I was eventually offered what seemed like the perfect 'part 3 placement' job, to start the following July. After surviving the initially intimidating encounters with Ted's larger-than-life presence in the office, I even came to enjoy tripping over him in the early afternoons as he napped on the



1 Ted Cullinan at his drawing board.

floor underneath his drawing board [1]. My abiding memory is of Ted's generosity and encouragement, especially towards those of us from humble beginnings. This included the companionship of late nights working in the office, often followed by supper around the table at his Camden Mews house.

In beginning to assess the prodigious and eclectic output of Edward 'Ted' Horder Cullinan, who died at the age of eighty-eight on 11 November last year, it is difficult to resist the art-historical challenge of trying to pin down some of his potentially pivotal formative influences. Many commentators have drawn attention to his early

experience as a wartime evacuee in Canada, under the guiding influence of his artist mother Joy with her fondness for modernist furniture. Rather than following his father into a more conventionally middle-class career in medicine – not to mention his illustrious maternal grandfather who had been personal physician to Kings George V and VI – he chose instead to strike out in his own direction. This was partly inspired by his mother's creativity and partly by his uncle Mervyn's disdain for historical pastiche in architecture. He later recounted road trips in the home counties punctuated by his uncle calling out



2 The National Trust visitor centre at Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal, 1992.



3 Horder house in Hampshire, 1960.

pejorative stylistic labels such as 'mock-gothic' and 'pseudo-Tudor', as the buildings speeded by. 'Jaguar Georgian' remained one of Ted's favourite epithets for what still passes today as upwardly mobile suburban housing.

Returning from Canada to complete his schooling, Ted took up a place as a boarder with the monks of Ampleforth College in North Yorkshire. He reported regularly risking hypothermia out on the moors with his sadistic art

master who believed that the best technique for laying a perfectly translucent watercolour wash was to use water on the point of freezing. If this paints a picture of the young Cullinan as someone to relish a physical challenge in pursuit of inspiration, other early experiences confirm the suspicion. Weekends would involve long-distance cycling trips around the ruined abbeys of northern England, including Rievaulx, Jervaulx and, of course, Fountains Abbey where he would return years later as the designer of the National Trust's visitor centre, completed in 1992 [2]. However, these weekend jaunts pale in comparison to his pilgrimage to Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp during his student days – cycling a mere five hundred miles each way.

After graduating from Cambridge and the AA he spread his wings even further, to the University of California at Berkeley, supported by a George VI Memorial Fellowship. The late 1950s was a heady time to be holed up on the US west coast, with the spirit of Jack Kerouac and the Beat Poets heavy in the air. After a personal encounter with Frank Lloyd Wright, and an architectural one with Greene and Greene's Gamble House in Pasadena, he began to merge an English arts and crafts sensibility with the more free-spirited west-coast vernacular. What emerged in his early one-off self-built projects like the Marvin House in California (1959) and his uncle Mervyn's house in Hampshire (1960) was a more playful DIY aesthetic of unfinished materials, coupled with a mischievous self-builder's eye for repurposing off-the-shelf components in unconventional ways [3]. In their plan layouts both of these houses also clearly illustrate – *avant la lettre* – the distinction between 'served' and 'servant' spaces later made famous by Louis Kahn.

These youthful perambulations took him back, by the early 1960s – as one of his heroes James Joyce might have said 'by a commodious vicus of recirculation' – to Camden Town and its environs. Here, in Camden Mews in 1964, he self-built a house just a few minutes' walk from his parents' John Nash-designed Regents Park townhouse, where he had spent his formative years, and almost equidistant from the Royal College of Physicians, a project he had worked on in Denys Lasdun's office, alongside the 'ziggurat'

accommodation blocks at the University of East Anglia. Indeed, the foundations of the house benefited from some conveniently rejected bricks from UEA that mysteriously found their way to London. This house, in microcosm, contains the key ingredients of what later became so characteristic of the Cullinan approach. The 'Rietveld' detailing of overlapping timber battens; the south-facing orientation to maximise solar gain; and perhaps above all the 'upside down section': a glass-sided open-plan living space on top of a clerestory-lit 'basement' of bedrooms and bathrooms, securely concealed behind a bastion of London stock bricks [4, 5].

By this clever conceit, this two-storey building is rendered as a single-storey 'shack' on top of an 'earthwork', a modern recombination of what the eighteenth-century theoretician Quatremère de Quincy described as the two great primal sources from which all buildings are ultimately derived – the cave and the tent. Quatremère also proposed the timber hut as the logical outcome of combining these two ancient archetypes and – as a whole lineage of thinkers from Gottfried Semper in the nineteenth century to Joseph Rykwert and Kenneth Frampton in the twentieth have all proposed – the so-called 'primitive hut' could be seen as a kind of *ur-form* for architecture across the ages. In all these cases, the basic composition involves a tectonically expressive and additive timber frame resting on a stereotomically massive and subtractively sculpted masonry base. These ingredients can be seen as recurring elements in many of the most characteristic Cullinan projects, ranging from the Lambeth Community Care Centre (1985) [6], where the mix of concrete and timber framing of the early projects was reinvented in white-painted steel, to the Fountains Abbey Visitor Centre, where a similar offset clerestory section is extruded and wrapped around a monastic cloister. Even some of the apparent outlier projects from Cullinan's office – like Archeolink in Aberdeenshire (1998) and the unbuilt Stonehenge Visitor Centre (both concrete caves), along with the 1990 RMC headquarters in Surrey, a vast *southern* linking freestanding brick pavilions [7], or the spider webs of timber seen in both the church restoration at St Mary's, Barnes (1984), and the



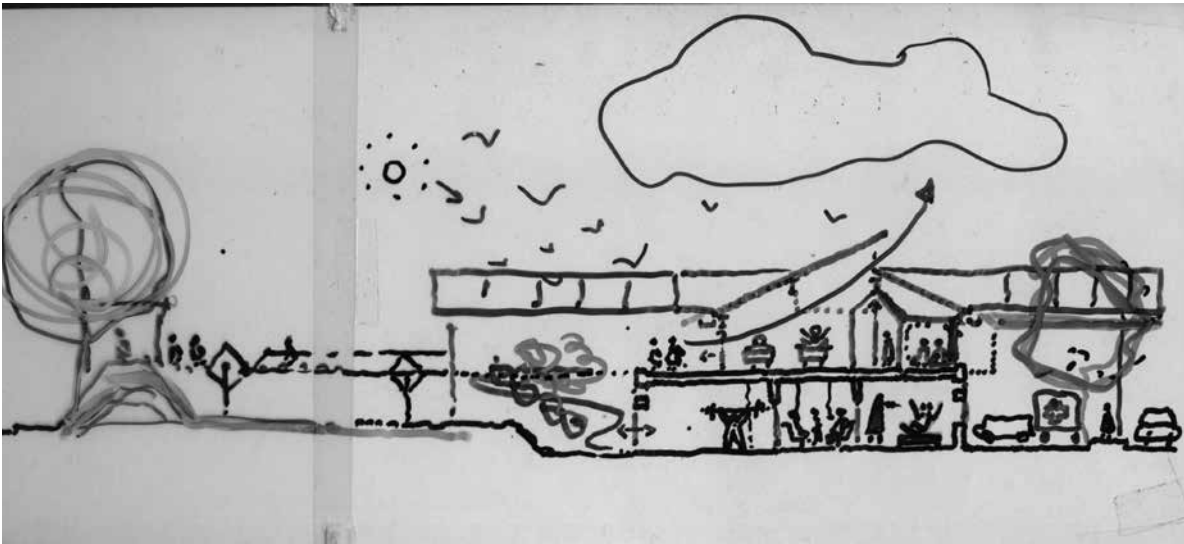
4, 5 Cullinan house, Camden Mews, 1964.

Weald and Downland gridshell (2002) – all seem to draw on the same set of primal tectonic sources [8]. The latter two almost literally, as balloon-frames of timber tied down to a stone or concrete base.

One of the limitations of this approach is the emphasis on a dominant roof geometry, again perhaps inherited from Frank Lloyd Wright and the Arts and Crafts. It is often manifest in Ted's fondness for the aerial axonometric view: brilliant in its explanatory power, as he so often demonstrated in his overhead projector lectures, but perhaps also something of a trap as a compositional tool [9]. Here perhaps lies part of the reason why the Cullinan 'language' has never fully transferred convincingly into dense urban settings. After all, even Wright himself struggled with a similar problem: how to take a basically single-storey and essentially roof-

based prairie architecture – open-ended and expressive of infinite expansion – and make it sit happily alongside its predominantly wall-based urban neighbours. Wrestling with this challenge at the New York Guggenheim, Wright resorted to desperate measures, taking what could otherwise have been a spiralling conical roof form and turning it upside down.

The practice was also occasionally accused of wilful over-complexity, such as by *The Architects' Journal's* cartoonist Louis Hellman, who labelled it 'over-detailed pseudo-community'. In fact, there was a genuine sense of community at the heart of the Cullinan ethos, but it wasn't simply that of future building users. It was also the more immediate and collegiate community of designers working together within the practice. From its inception in 1965 as Edward Cullinan Architects, it was founded



6 Lambeth Community Care Centre, 1985.

on the principles of the Spanish Mondragon Corporation, where *inter alia* the highest paid person earns no more than three times the salary of the lowest. The practice thus ran as a workers' cooperative in which all staff became equal partners (latterly 'directors') after serving an initial twelve-month probation. While Ted was always ultimately 'the boss' when it came to disagreements over design decisions, it was otherwise a refreshingly non-hierarchical

structure in which everyone felt a shared sense of ownership. As well as having a stake in the management of the practice, all staff were encouraged to express themselves as designers, very much in line with Ruskin's celebration – in *The Stones of Venice* – of the pleasure of the workman in his work. A year-out student would be given a free hand to design a fire escape stair, and often even the smallest task would blossom into a lovingly crafted project-within-a-project.

Another factor in the success of the practice in the early decades was a growing reputation for gaining planning permission where others had tried and failed. This was especially so for restorations and extensions of historic buildings, but also for new interventions in protected and sensitive landscapes. Built on prominent early successes such as the conference centres at Minster Lovell Mill (1967–74) in Oxfordshire and Uplands (1980–4) in High



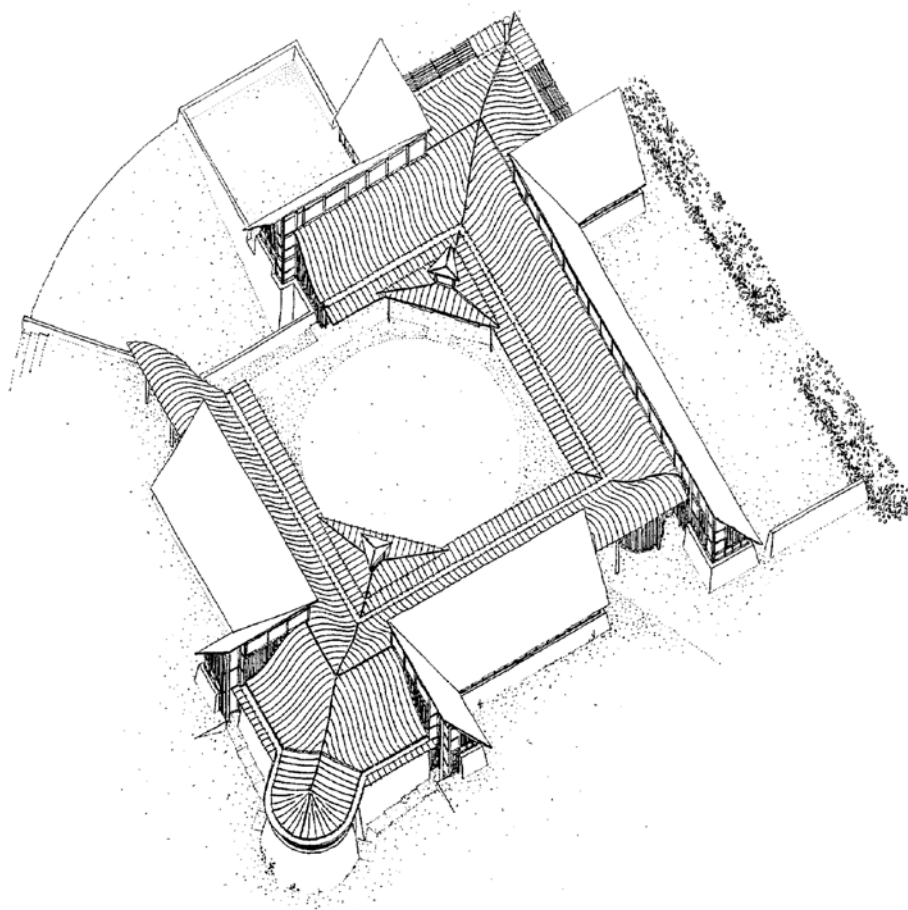
7 The RMC headquarters in Surrey, 1990.



8 Weald and Downland gridshell, 2002.

Wycombe, later projects such as RMC and Fountains show an acute sensitivity to the singular qualities of the context – both the context of the project within its larger physical and social setting, and also the many subprojects nested within the context of the building. This willingness to engage with historic fabrics without attempting to mimic them usually involved setting up a clear distinction between existing and new elements. Somewhat reminiscent of Kenneth Frampton's 'Critical Regionalism', it was described by the *Architectural Review* editor Peter Davey as a peculiarly English 'Romantic Pragmatism'. Ted himself meanwhile hated being pigeonholed in this way and saw the risk to his reputation within the profession of being singled out for praise by the Prince of Wales. Nonetheless, during the style wars of the mid-1980s, the Cullinan approach appeared to offer a kind of 'third way' for British architecture: a comforting yet edgy alternative to the white heat of high-tech and the historical whimsy of postmodernism.

While Ted's personal generosity shines through in this kind of



9 Axonometric drawing for Fountains Abbey Visitor Centre (1992) by Alec Gillies.



10 BFI Master Film Store in Warwickshire, 2012.

responsiveness to the uniqueness of each project, he also built a significant reputation for nurturing the individual talents of those with whom he worked. Whether as an inspirational studio teacher, visiting lecturer, or guest critic he had a keen eye for the distinctive contribution that any individual might make. This always included supporting ambitious colleagues to fly the nest and set up on their own, as well as sharing out the opportunities to take up part-time teaching appointments or represent the practice by giving lectures. Among those who imbibed the Cullinan spirit and went on to achieve success in their own right were: Julyan Wickham; Tchaik Chassay; Sunand Prasad and Greg Penoyre; Tony Peake and Alan Short; Simon Knox and Sasha Bhavan.

It was as much for his influence as a teacher and lecturer that Ted Cullinan received the RIBA Gold Medal in 2008, recognising a lifetime of achievements that spread the ethos of the practice far beyond its mainly UK-centred buildings. Ted's own teaching took many forms, including an early spell as a visiting professor at MIT in the 1980s and latterly a similar role

at the University of Nottingham, with a number of other notable appointments scattered in between. His contributions at Nottingham perhaps best encapsulate the breadth of his influence among students: masterminding an annual two-day introductory design 'charrette' in which the whole school gets involved – now a permanent fixture of the Nottingham academic calendar.

It could be argued that some of the most successful Cullinan projects are those with a more restricted palette of materials: such as the stone and timber of the Fountains Visitor Centre, or the gridshell of Weald and Downland. Both projects narrowly missed out on winning the Stirling Prize, or its earlier equivalent, the RIBA Building of the Year. Recent projects suggested a shift towards a more sober and stripped-down aesthetic. For example, the BFI Master Film Store in Warwickshire (2012) [10], which – while formally still a recognisably 'Cullinan' project – also suggests the opening of a new chapter in the history of the practice. Within the office, computers have generally replaced the stand-up drawing boards and

band-saws, but I would like to think there is still something of the self-builder's spirit swirling around in the inevitable void left by Ted Cullinan's passing.

Ted Cullinan is survived by his wife Roz and their children, Emma, Kate, and Tom.

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