

Michael Brawne:

1925–2003

Architect, author and teacher, Michael Brawne was also an *arq* contributor and referee. His article 'Research, design and Popper' published in our second issue (1/2, pp 10–15) was an analysis of the similarity between architectural design and scientific research based on Karl Popper's hypothetico-deductive theory. It cut straight to the heart of the declared subject of this journal. Reading it again, one can almost hear Michael – with his characteristically precise enunciation (and often exquisitely drawly voice) – elucidating his argument.

The following celebration of Michael and his contribution to architecture speaks eloquently about the man and his teaching but surprisingly little about his completed buildings – especially those of the '60s and '70s. There was something very rigorous about these. Indeed, Charles Correa asserts that the houses in Hampstead are 'among the half-dozen most important pieces of architecture' constructed in the UK over the last 50 years.

It was in the first Hampstead house that, in 1962, there emerged the surface mounted vertical mullions that were to appear again – always subtly related to the internal spatial arrangement – in later projects. And there was his use on the upper levels of his buildings of steeply sloping Cor-Ten sheet (something that today's generation, who seem to have rediscovered this problematic material, could well learn from). In plan, his buildings often made a powerful use of the diagonal (the Cambridge influence perhaps?) and occasionally revealed his admiration for Alvar Aalto's work. This thoughtful, highly distinctive body of work extended from country cottage conversions and extensions to competition designs such as his 'groundscraper' high-density housing entry for the Portsdown competition.



Michael Brawne: a daunting critic with a whimsical sense of humour

And what of Michael's exhibition designs? Following the 1965 publication of his book, *The New Museum*, it was a field in London which he seemed to dominate for much of the late '60s and the '70s – with shows such as the stunning *Art in Revolution* at the Hayward Gallery in 1971 and the exquisite *Age of Neo-Classicism* at the Royal Academy in the following year. In the mid '90s, his work for ecclesiastical museums in Germany

was equally elegant and well-judged. And, over the last six years, recalling his artist father, he turned to making sculpture at Bath College.

Michael Brawne is remembered here by some of his contemporaries, fellow teachers and students. The first contribution, by Bob Allies, is reproduced by permission from *The Independent* newspaper in which it appeared on 16 August 2003.

PETER CAROLIN



2 a House in Hampstead, 1962. Garden side

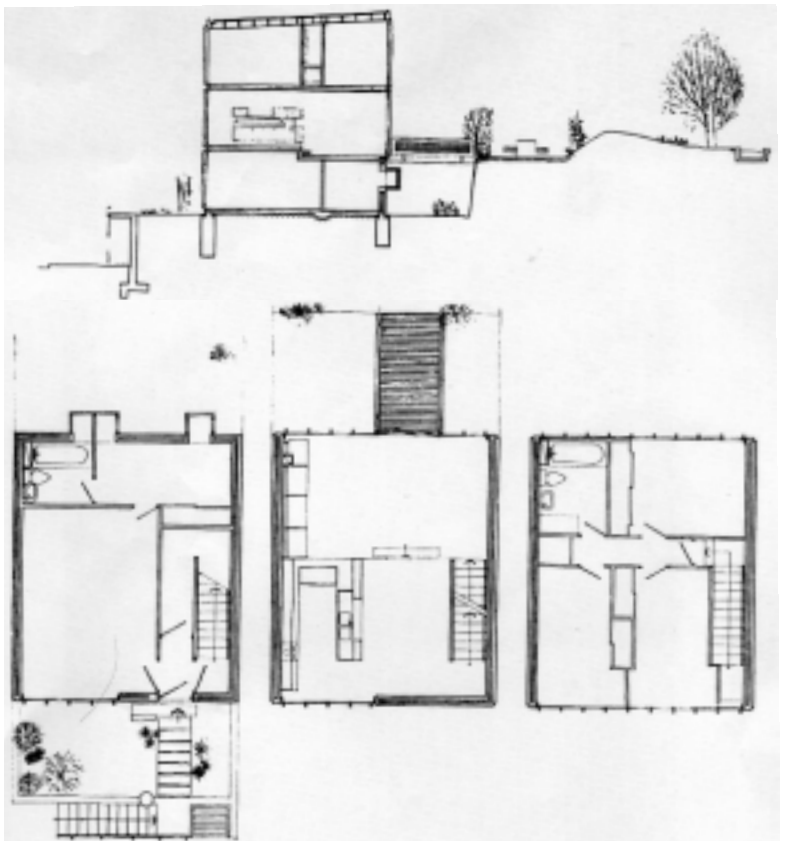


2 b Interior. In Charles Correa's opinion, among the six most important buildings in the UK in the past 50 years

Architect concerned as much with process as product

That the death of Michael Brawne at the age of 78 will be followed in the autumn by the publication of his final book, *Architectural Thought: The Design Process and the Expectant Eye*, is a fitting tribute to his unceasing commitment to, and engagement with, the theory and practice of architecture. Its title is also a reminder that his concern was as much with process as with product, with how architectural decisions are made and hypotheses tested, with the significance of precedent and experience as well as innovation and invention. Brawne was a disseminator, generous in his role as teacher, advisor and consultant, but also a collector, travelling, observing and absorbing the work and experience of architects and institutions throughout the world. His contribution to the discipline took many forms: a continuous involvement in practice, a lifelong commitment to teaching, and a constant preoccupation with writing, whether as critic, commentator, historian or theoretician. It is a mixture which is now all too rare. Today the pressures of contemporary practice and the intricacies of academic bureaucracy seem to militate against a modus operandi which for his generation of architects and teachers seemed fundamental to their pursuit of the subject.

Michael Brawne was born in Vienna, the son of a Viennese Jewish father and a Roman Catholic mother from Croatia. His father was the artist Rudolf Braun, who taught for a short time at the



2 c Section and plans – l to r: ground, first (garden level) and second floors

Bauhaus in Weimar; his mother had come to Vienna from Zagreb to study music. A year after his birth, his family moved to Prague, where Brawne spent the first part of his childhood, speaking German with his father, Croatian with his mother and learning some Czech.

The rise of Nazism led his mother to send the 13 year old Michael in 1939 to England. With the help of a group of English Quakers he was dispatched by train from Zagreb to Paris, Paris to London and London to Edinburgh. In Edinburgh he was

looked after by a spinster GP before the first air raids on the city led to his evacuation to Selkirk and a new foster mother. His mother followed him to England after the war. His father, however, did indeed fall victim to Nazism and died in a concentration camp.

For many of Brawne's friends and for the majority of his students this account of Brawne's early life may come as a surprise, not least because his impeccable English, with its clearly articulated syllables and clipped consonants, gave no hint of

his origins. And while it still seems almost inconceivable that the young Brawne should have spoken no English at all when he first arrived in the country, his subsequent elegant mastery of the language, like that of so many 1930s émigré scholars, can perhaps best be explained by his cultural background. What is also true is that Brawne was intentionally elusive about this aspect of his past, concerned always to be judged for what he was and not through some sensitivity to the trauma of his childhood.

From school, he moved to the University of Edinburgh to read mathematics before volunteering for the RAF in 1943. In the air force he trained as a meteorologist and served under Mountbatten in Ceylon. At the end of the war he was posted to the Canal Zone in Egypt, giving him an unexpected opportunity to study the antiquities.

On leaving the RAF in 1947, he received a grant to study at the Architectural Association followed by postgraduate research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he met and married his first wife, Rhoda Dupler. Work in San Francisco on industrial building systems was followed by practice in London, first designing buildings for the British Transport Commission and then in the office of Sir Denys Lasdun. Here he worked on new laboratories for the University of Cambridge and the masterplan and buildings for the new University of East Anglia.

Brawne established his own practice in 1963, working primarily on museum, library and university projects. These included laboratories for the University of London and the Agricultural Research Council at Babraham, and the Students Union and Conference Centre for Royal Holloway College at Egham. Museum designs in this country included schemes for Dorchester, Barnsley, Rochdale and Bath. He also designed a series of major exhibitions in London, including 'Henry Moore' (Tate Gallery 1968), 'Magritte' (Tate Gallery 1969), 'Pop Art' (Hayward Gallery 1969), 'The Ceramic Art of China' (Victoria and Albert Museum 1971), 'The Age of Neo-Classicism' (Royal Academy 1972) and 'Arts of Islam' (Hayward Gallery 1976). For Brawne, one imagines, the cultural and intellectual dimensions of these commissions must have been particularly rewarding.



3 Dorset County Museum, Dorchester, 1970



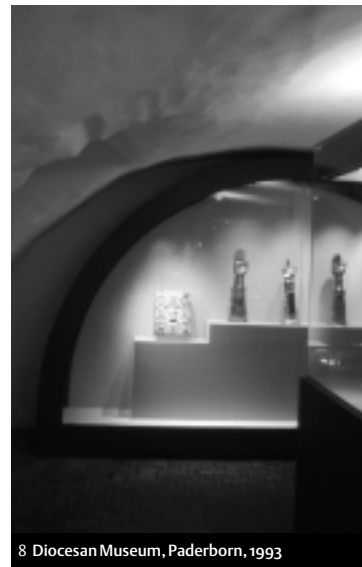
4 'Art in Revolution', Hayward Gallery, 1971



5 'The Age of Neo-Classicism', Royal Academy, 1972



6 Physics Laboratory, Royal Holloway College, 1975



8 Diocesan Museum, Paderborn, 1993



7 National Library of Sri Lanka, Colombo, 1975-88

The display of objects and the role of the designer in eliciting the significance of historic or artistic artifacts, became the subject of Brawne's first book, *The New Museum*, published in 1965. At once a survey of modern museums and a discussion

of the key technical issues that underpin museum design, it introduced to a British audience the work of a series of international architects – Scarpa, Albini and BBPR from Italy, Bo and Wohlert from Denmark, Louis Kahn from



9 Spinning Head sculpture, 2002

America – at a time when only one completed British building, the Commonwealth Institute, merited inclusion. This was followed five years later by a second book, *Libraries: architecture and equipment* which was, like *The New Museum*, published with parallel texts in English and German. It also included a brilliant introductory essay in which Brawne described, through the frame of Antonello da Messina's painting of St Jerome in his Study, not just what a library might be, but what it is that constitutes an ideal place of study.

It is typical of Brawne's approach that architecture should be understood fundamentally in terms of how it serves society. Hence his concern to record and analyze specific building types. Hence too his involvement as a UNESCO consultant on library design, advising on projects in the People's Republic of China, Tunisia, Mozambique and the former Yugoslavia, and on the design of the National Library of Sri Lanka in Colombo. More recent projects included museum buildings and interiors in Munster, Paderborn and Fulda. He also designed the 'Architecture of Information' exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 1996.

Throughout his career, Brawne taught, influencing generations of students, initially as a lecturer at the University of Cambridge and more recently as Professor of Architecture at the University of Bath until his retirement in 1990. At Bath he transformed the intellectual and creative atmosphere, inviting new colleagues – including Peter Smithson – to join him while at the same time nurturing the special relationship between the School and the Department of Engineering,

then led by the late Sir Edmund Happold.

Brawne's reputation as a teacher was, it must be said, as a sometimes daunting critic. But just as his habitually serious expression belied his often whimsical sense of humour – evident not least in the hand-drawn Christmas cards that were the delight of his friends – so his strongly expressed opinions in project reviews were invariably followed by patient help and guidance at the drawing board.

He is survived by his second wife, the architect Charlotte Baden-Powell, whom he married in 1983, and by his three children, Peter, Alison and Nicholas, from his first marriage.

BOB ALLIES

Michael Braun (Michael Brawne) architect: born Vienna 5 May 1925; Lecturer in Architecture, Cambridge University 1964–78; Professor of Architecture, Bath University 1978–90 (Emeritus); married first Rhoda Dupler (two sons, one daughter; marriage dissolved), second 1983 Charlotte Baden-Powell (née Neave); died Bath 28 July 2003

Finesse and iron-tough rigour

I first met Michael Brawne back in 1953, when we were both studying at MIT. Michael was, without doubt, the most gifted and articulate among the twenty of us who were enrolled in that programme. He had come straight from the AA in London – then at the height of its powers and influence – and so apart from his natural gifts, he astonished us with the ease with which he could move from conceptual ideas to working details, always with a sure grasp of the architectural issues involved.

Rhoda was a fellow graduate student in the Urban Planning programme. We spent many happy evenings together, discussing everything from movies to politics. In those days one travelled by ship, and so when I left Boston in 1955 to return to Bombay, and they moved on to San Francisco, I never thought I'd see them again. But every Christmas one would get those wonderful pictograms drawn by Michael, depicting their lives in San Francisco, or wherever they were living at the time.

Then, on a visit to London in 1960, I met them again. They were extremely kind to me – and Michael was his usual encyclopedic self, explaining what was going on all

over the world, who was doing what kind of architecture and why they shouldn't be doing it (and sometimes the other way round), etc. In other words, a marvellously English kind of overview of the global scene.

Here I must pause to speak of the house in which they lived in Hampstead. It is, to my mind, an extraordinary accomplishment, one of the half dozen most important pieces of architecture constructed in the UK over the last 50 years. That's high praise – but anyone who has seen the house, with its marvellous finesse and sense of scale, combined with an iron-tough rigour of form, will understand what I mean. It is the urban house par excellence – and it predates by more than two decades the kind of small and very urbane Tokyo townhouses that Japanese architects have been developing over the last 25 years. When the Brawnes' neighbours, the Ingersolls, built their house on the adjacent site, they decided to follow a variation of the same vocabulary – so these two houses appear together on the street not just as random spare parts, but as a glimpse of what the whole machine might look like.

In the years that followed, Michael came out to India quite often – either to lecture at architectural schools, or sometimes on his way to Sri Lanka (where he was designing a major library). On each occasion, Michael was always full of news and ideas. I remember, sometimes in the mid 1960s, hearing him extol the virtues of low-rise high-density housing – which I listened to with increasing skepticism and hostility, until I gradually realized he was dead right. Ever since, this timeless principle for generating human habitat has been a major parameter in all my work.

In recent years, I had requested Michael to collaborate with me on a couple of invited competitions – one of which, an Islamic Museum in a Gulf emirate, we actually won! Unfortunately the ruler decided to override the Jury, so our scheme didn't get built. But it was marvellous working with Michael – and his lucid, incisive analysis was pivotal to our success. For the second competition, the new Memorial Gates on London's Constitution Hill, we produced a wonderfully exuberant and over-the-top scheme (about which I was wildly enthusiastic, while Michael was quietly dubious). The site was

just next to, and well within the influence of, Buckingham Palace. So this time of course we stood no chance.

By now, Michael had married Charlotte and was Professor at Bath – a unique town, which they both enjoyed greatly. We visited them there a few times, most recently when we were in the UK last June. It was truly a very sad day when we heard from Charlotte that Michael had taken ill. And sadder yet, when we learnt that he had died. It all seemed to happen so quickly. Somehow one felt it wasn't fair, that England had never given Michael the opportunity his talent merited. So he never did get to create the body of work he might have, had he lived in another society. But of course he is not alone in this – there are many such examples, the most obvious being Jim Stirling, and also Peter Smithson. Perhaps it's really a cultural thing. The English public has never brought to Architecture the extraordinary attention span it brings to, say, Shakespeare. That combined with the peculiar attitudes of the British Establishment makes the architect walk a very tough and rocky road indeed.

CHARLES CORREA

Charles Correa, a Royal Gold Medallist, practises in Bombay

Seriousness and gentle irony

Michael Brawne was a contemporary of mine at the Architectural Association and one of a circle of postwar students that helped to bring a fresh and vivid spirit to the AA during that early postwar period.

It was an extraordinary period. A period where cities were having to be reconstructed, where new schools and housing and new towns were having to be built, and all driven by an optimistic vision which by and large was held in common. It was a period in which we sought to apply the theory and teaching of the heroic period of the Modern Movement. It was all heady stuff.

He was rare in that generation in combining the roles of distinguished scholar, practitioner, and critic. His intellect and scholarship bred serious discussion, and his contribution was at once quiet and authoritative, with a cultural background and open mind that sustained his

position as a particularly perceptive critic.

I had always known the rigour with which he addressed a subject, and it was a most rewarding time for me working with him when he wrote the monograph on Arup Associates, which he called *The Biography of an Architectural Practice*. We both shared a university background of mathematics before turning to architecture after the war, and in face of his own experience it was reassuring for me that he should have had such a sympathy and understanding for the principles and ideas behind the creation of a multi-professional practice, which was evident in his book. The result was very much and authentically his own. I learned also during this exercise what fun it was, and how stimulating, to play with ideas with him in an open and creative spirit, for behind his seriousness he had a gentle ironic wit.

I, like many I suspect, was surprised to learn from Bob Allies' obituary of his early years before he came to England. It gave one a shock, but also a better understanding of this complex and most gifted man.

PHILIP DOWSON

Philip Dowson is a Royal Gold Medallist and a Past President of the Royal Academy

A teacher of real and lasting values

I was privileged to know Michael both when I was tutored by him in Cambridge in the late '60s and when I taught with him in Bath in the '80s. In both schools he left an indelible mark. Michael was one of the sadly disappearing breed of architects who genuinely split his time and his boundless energy between teaching, writing and practice, making a significant contribution in all three areas. At Cambridge he was remembered for his ferocious intellect inspiring us with both philosophy and architecture, but he was also an incisive design tutor believing in drawing ideas out of students rather than imposing them. 'Look at the Latin root of education' he once said to me as a young tutor at Bath, 'E Ducare'. He would stick to it philosophically though he also inspired with his own interventions often accompanied by the quick flourish of the 6B pencil that was part of his process of encapsulating ideas.

At Cambridge first there was an enigmatic quality to Michael, we assumed that his military

demeanour and impeccable aristocratic English must have had its origins in Eton and the Guards. Of course we couldn't have been more wrong, Michael was born in Vienna in 1925. His father was a successful Jewish portrait painter who perished in the concentration camps. But Michael was sent to England by his mother, arrived at the age of 13 not knowing a word of English, though four years later he volunteered for the RAF and served with Mountbatten in Ceylon towards the end of the war. He was proud of this and told us about it but very rarely talked about his Middle European upbringing.

As a tutor his tough criticism was not really for the faint-hearted. He enjoyed the cut and thrust of a traditional architectural jury where his incisiveness and wit drew crowds of students round him. Clarity of thought and generous praise was balanced with scathing put-downs made tolerable by the fact that Michael could be equally scathing to fellow jurors. The intellectual exhaustion of the tutorial process was often balanced by continuing conversations in the convivial atmosphere of Michael and Charlotte's house with Michael acting as chef, feeding students bodily, spiritually and intellectually.

I have asked a number of former students about their memories of Michael and received a wealth of replies: 'The gravelly voice', 'Those spectacular ties', 'That Popper lecture', the one about 'Sex and the Pediment', 'His penetrating intellect', 'A teacher of real and lasting values', 'The sparkle in his eyes', 'The kedgerie party', 'The fat pen and the paper napkin'. This is a small selection from a vast number of ex-students whose names and faces over 35 years of tutoring Michael could recall instantly. But let's not forget also his teaching abroad and his consultancy work for UNESCO, throughout the developing world. It all amounts to a huge and far-reaching intellectual legacy. And all that from the small man with the sparkling eyes and the impeccable English who couldn't speak a word of it until he was 13.

PETER CLEGG

Peter Clegg is a founding partner of Feilden Clegg Bradley, Bath

A fearsome critic and a firm friend

Michael Brawne was, first and foremost, a teacher; a highly articulate man, who had the gift of

being able to teach others to be articulate in their speech, their thought and their architecture. He had that prized ability to be able to penetrate quickly to the crux of an argument, whether that was a spoken or drawn argument, to identify that crux, to clarify it and to develop it.

There are other characteristics that all his students will also recognize. He was unrelenting – fearsome would be the correct word for most of us – in interrogating his students so that they might learn to clarify and test their intentions in relation to a design and unremitting in his search to make sense of their design and to help them discover what the building needed to be. He didn't suffer fools lightly (or at all) and why should he? In his ambition to compete, not with the student, but with the idea, to discover its form, he was formidably sharp of both intellect and manner, perhaps sharper in the latter than he realized, for his quest was unselfish as he was a kindly and generous person with a ready, if, when necessary, waspish wit. There was always laughter in his tutorials.

It is no surprise that, even though he was the most fearsome of all the highly gifted architects that Leslie Martin gathered together to teach in Cambridge, he was the one who remained closest to so many of his students throughout the succeeding years – a firm, but always sharply and humorously questioning, friend.

He also influenced many generations of students through his two early books on museums and libraries. Despite later technical advances and the building of many more precedents, often influenced by these books, they remain prime sources. This is due to Michael's approach, his incisive ability to identify, in relation to the intended manner of use of a building, the limited ranges of structures and patterns of organization and ordering of form which underlie the designs of many, very different buildings. It was another ability which typified his teaching and which he developed in his students.

One anecdote, my first meeting with Michael, encapsulates so much. In my second year, third term, we were required to design an arts centre for practising artists. In my naiveté, I thought that this space should be neutral, so as not to influence the artists, in my

further naiveté I equated a neutral space with a large featureless room covered by an exposed space frame (this, after all, was 1965). After a day and a night drawing every member of this space frame in a perspective drawing (in ink on Whatman paper, of course) I stood proudly before my drawing explaining what I had done to our visiting critic. Michael kindly but incessantly and formidably, by means of repeated questions starting 'But what do you mean by ...', led me to define exactly what I thought I meant by a 'neutral space'. Having achieved this to everybody's satisfaction, there came that famous rasp of a drawl, 'Ahhhhh, well in that case let us look at what you have drawn'. I turned proudly, and then instantly aghast, to see that jiggling web of hundreds of lines I had so carefully and lovingly drawn. No more needed to be said. Just the single rhetorical question, 'Do you think there can ever be such a thing as a neutral space?' It was a lesson in thinking, a lesson in architecture and a lesson in teaching; lessons never forgotten.

ROGER STONEHOUSE

Roger Stonehouse is Professor of Architecture at the University of Manchester

An intellectual and practical edge

Michael taught Nick Lacey, Robin Nicholson, Roger Stonehouse and the other members of the year of '63 at Cambridge – it was a memorable experience. He travelled up from London every week. Working in London gave him an intellectual and practical edge over members of staff who were resident at the University. He delivered advice and criticism in equal measure with passion and humanity. He could be quite intimidating with the precision of his comments – but these were always carefully considered, always wise and extraordinarily perspicacious. He possessed a considerable intellect. The rigour of his thought process and his knowledge of the historical context always impressed us, but there was always a twinkle in his eye, an innate sense of humour that won the day. His passion for architecture arose from a belief that good design enhanced the life of those that experienced it.

Many years later, when he married Charlotte Baden Powell, we were always welcome at their house in Bath where he entertained most

generously. Together, they were both stimulating, amusing and kind. I shall miss Michael very much indeed.

SPENCER DE GREY

Spencer de Grey is a Director of Foster and Partners

An ardent Popperian

I first met Michael in the mid-1960s, when I had just arrived as a research assistant in the Department of Architecture at Cambridge and he was a studio tutor. At that time the theoretical debate in the school revolved around the opposing positions represented by, on the one hand, Christian Norberg-Schulz's *Intentions in Architecture* and, on the other, by Christopher Alexander's *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*. A remarkable symposium was held in the school at which these two were joined by Sandy Wilson and Lionel March. Many who were at the event have long recalled a passionate intervention from Michael in which he declared himself to be 'an ardent Popperian' and sought to establish a middle ground that reconciled the phenomenal and the systematic. This position encapsulated Michael's approach to the question of design as he set it out in his book, *From Idea to Building: issues in architecture* (1992), and which he has more recently developed in *Architectural Thought and the Design Process: continuity, innovation and the expectant eye*, published this year. In these works theory is never abstract or dogmatic, but is tempered by his experience as both a practitioner and a teacher.

It was a particular delight for me, when I went to the Chair of Architectural Design at the Welsh School of Architecture at Cardiff in 1995, to discover that Michael was already a key member of the visiting teaching staff in the 5th Year. We worked together until my retirement in 2002 and Michael brought his experience and wisdom to bear on the work of the school, helping to raise the level of debate, connecting theory to practice and, hence, adding much to the quality of the work. As recently as the spring of 2002 he enthralled the 5th Year students with an hour of lucid and wise reflections on the nature and methods of architectural design. He will be greatly missed.

DEAN HAWKES

Dean Hawkes, Emeritus Professor at Cardiff University and Fellow of Darwin College, Cambridge, practises as an architect in Cambridge