

# Eco-architect Liddell dies

 27 February, 2013 | By [Laura Mark](#)


Architect Howard Liddell has died just days before receiving the OBE he was awarded for services to ecological design.

The 67-year-old had more than 30 years' experience in sustainable and community architecture. After working in practice for several years, he became a senior lecturer at Hull School of Architecture in 1971. This was followed by two years as a guest professor in Oslo, where he maintained a presence until his death.

In the early 1980s he founded Gaia Architects, became a founder member of Gaia International and, in 1993, his practice won the UK House of the Year award, establishing its reputation for eco-housing. Liddell was, however, best known for his influence on sustainable building policy, chairing the RIBA Architecture and Ecology Group between 1974 and 1979, before founding the Scottish Ecological Design Association in 1991.

Speaking to the AJ after his OBE was announced, Liddell hoped 2013 would offer hope for sustainable architects, saying: 'As we have seen endless missed opportunities, greenwash and tokenism gain sway over the past 20 years, I have spent 2012 saying "the bad guys are winning"'. To be given a glimmer of hope that this might change would be all I would ask for in 2013.'

## Tribute from Sandy Patience, editor of Greenspec:

Though rarely seen around the fashionable London milieu, Howard Liddell was arguably one of the most influential green architects of his generation.

Whilst at Hull in the late 70s, he contributed to the School's counter-culture zest from the (then) emerging critique of petro-fuelled capitalism. His students were encouraged to think holistically and politically through projects that looked at what a post-growth world could look like. Signifying too about where he was going with all this, he engaged with the local council as to how they could future-proof Hull's vast public housing stock.

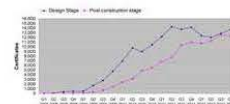
Liddell always felt drawn to the North. In the 1980s he moved back to Scotland and founded Gaia Architects as well as taking up the role of Guest Professor in Building Technology at Oslo. Informed by lessons learnt in Scandinavia, Liddell along with his partner Sandy Halliday, forged a reputation for clearly thought-out and immensely practical buildings ranging from affordable housing, to schools and visitor centres.

Above all, Liddell's value was as a thinker and communicator. His analysis and changing approach to sustainability has in large part been, eventually, followed by the wider industry – though, sadly, rarely acknowledged.

Liddell became a fierce critic of the 'Technical Fix' where some green design grew almost fetishily apart from traditional forms at the expense of simpler solutions. Attacking 'Eco-bling' in one of his many publications, he propounded the idea of 'Eco-minimalism' which in turn contributed to the 'Fabric First' movement of today. The message he leaves us with is that green buildings should be available for all; that they fulfill their design intention; that they should be built from healthy and sustainable materials and that they should be affordable.

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**Tribute from Fionn Stevenson, professor of sustainable design, University of Sheffield:**

Howard Liddell was simply a green giant, upon whose shoulders stand many of us.

He will be hugely missed for his foresight and uncanny ability to spot the next problem to be solved in green building, and to solve it. His holistic thinking about building biology and urban ecology was always well ahead of the pack, and he introduced many new concepts and design strategies to the UK related to: allergy-free housing, long-term ecological housing renovation, low-toxicity design, dynamic insulation, brettstapel timber construction, ecocities made by children, rural community regeneration through wayfinding...the list of his extraordinary breadth of endeavour is endless.

I first met Howard in Edinburgh at a meeting called by himself and Sebastian Tombs, then President of the RIAS, to set up a new NGO - The Scottish Ecological Design Association (SEDA) back in 1991. His subsequent founding of the Gaia Group together with colleagues in Norway and his partner, Sandy Halliday, was a precursor to what is now commonly referred to as a 'Research Practice'. All Liddell's architecture was driven, fundamentally, by hard research and evidence to back up his ideas. For him, the notion of a 'building performance gap' was something to be design out from the start, and he took pride in being able to omit large amounts of building services from his buildings by ensuring that the building itself performed environmentally. In this sense, his design approach is equivalent to that of Laurie Baker in India, or Glen Murcutt in Australia, allowing the building to passively control its own environment in a locally positive and dynamic way.

His urgency to reform the architecture profession led him to help establish the world's very first architectural sustainable design accreditation scheme for the RIAS in Scotland. This required architects to demonstrate that they had not only designed good green buildings, but that these buildings had also performed well in reality. Sadly, the scheme was not taken up by the RIBA, on the basis that all architects should be able to design sustainable buildings as a matter of course, and that practices that claimed to design green buildings were already listed separately. Perhaps now the time has come to review the need for such a scheme on a UK basis, given the persistence of the performance gap.

Liddell was a hugely energetic man, a wonderful orator, with a great fiery warmth that simply encouraged you to join him in his wonderful adventures. His intelligence was fiercely inquisitive and he did not suffer fools gladly. This gave his work huge integrity, but also cost him dearly in terms of mainstream recognition - he simply would not compromise his principles to bureaucracy or poor thinking adopted by various institutions. I am sure over the years to come, however, his legacy will be mined continually and provide constant inspiration for future designers.



## Tribute from Bill Bordass of the Usable Buildings Trust:

Howard Liddell was a polymath and a hands-on pioneer of green building. I first met him at a Building Pathology conference in 1989 and he became a good friend. He spoke about ecological buildings and Findhorn. I spoke about the good and ill effects of building services in traditional buildings. Afterwards, three Swedish ladies warned us to "beware the mechanical ventilation mafia" that had come to dominate their country, and to develop solutions that were more flexible, robust and easy to look after.

Cut to 1995 - I invited Sandy Halliday to a seminar at York University. She couldn't make it, but was passing through York on her way to Scotland. Could we meet afterwards at the Station Hotel? There was something she wanted to discuss. To my great surprise, she turned up with Liddell and they announced they were going to get married.

They moved to Edinburgh and made a fantastic team, working in an old monastery. On the top floor, Liddell and his colleagues produced buildings and masterplans. Below, Sandy's Gaia Research led the investigations, both for the general good and in support of Gaia's architectural work, both making major contributions to SEDA, the Scottish Ecological Design Association, which Howard co-founded in 1991.

Liddell's long-overdue OBE cited both SEDA and his other charitable work. This included the Children's Eco-city, where in 1992 Howard was the only architect to respond to a request by RIAS to facilitate a week-long event in Edinburgh where forty 10-12 year olds from several countries would envisage their ideal city. This turned out to be just the beginning, as it led to similar weeks in other cities, and to the Scottish Children's Parliament. In 2008, Howard was invited to Tanzania to work on a day care centre for orphans in Songea. It worked out brilliantly: some building actually started during the fortnight he was there. He continued to dedicate time and money to all these activities until his death.

Liddell was always way ahead of the curve. When I first met him, he was deep into healthy, low impact buildings and maximising the use of renewable non-toxic materials. He was in close touch with practice in other countries, especially the twin company Gaia Lista in Norway, established by some of his former students in Oslo. Particular interests included measures based on building physics - not just natural light, ventilation and solar, but dynamic insulation and vapour-permeable humidity-stabilising structures. Where possible, he endeavoured to design out not just the building services but the building services engineer - seeking to make even large non-domestic buildings as domestic as possible.

At the end of 2012 he retired as a practising architect, to write, talk and educate. His career in practice finished on a high, including two projects in the Tweed Valley: Plummerswood, a house with Passivhaus certification and the Forestry Commission Scotland's Glentress Peel visitor centre. Both got top awards in 2012: Plummerswood for architectural excellence and Glentress for green tourism.

Having blazed the trail, Howard became unhappy with the way markets and governments have responded to the green buildings agenda, tending to prefer rules, tick-boxes and add-on gizmos to a deep professional understanding of fundamentals. He also rued the obsession with carbon to the exclusion of other things, and was preparing to write a "zero-carbon" book on ecological building, in which carbon would not be mentioned. He saw the key objective of "sustainable development" as to maintain biodiversity. In his response to the AJ following his OBE, he observed bitterly that "the bad guys are winning". But Gaia may yet have the last word.

Howard would have received his OBE at Buckingham Palace this week, had his cancer not tragically cut things short. The second edition of his book Eco-Minimalism will be launched at Ecobuild next week. Sadly, a project we had planned together - a series of recorded dialogues about a variety of subjects related to eco-minimalism - can no longer happen. The first was to have been about the ventilation mafia.