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Architecture

Howard Liddell obituary

Architect at the forefront of ecological building design



▲ Howard Liddell and Gaia Architects' house Plummerswood is built of prefabricated timber and consumes minimal energy for heating. Photograph: Sandy Halliday

Chris Butters

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The architect Howard Liddell, who has died aged 67 of cancer, was a pioneering figure in ecological design and community planning. When he went to Aberfeldy in the Tay valley in 1978, the idea of ecological design - let alone what would much later become universally accepted as sustainable development - was hardly spoken of. However, Howard was already looking for ways to integrate the triad of place, work and folk. In doing so, he took forward the legacy of the Scottish biologist and planner Sir Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), and always sought to achieve ecological goals through simple solutions with minimal technology.

An early statement of these principles came in an Aberfeldy manifesto, and Howard co-founded an action body for local regeneration, the Breadalbane Institute. His architectural work included designing the Aberfeldy recreation centre, and he became chairman of Aberfeldy community council, co-founder of a local newspaper - and even broke his leg in the first Aberfeldy raft race.

In working with communities, Howard displayed patient commitment and encouraged user participation. Over a period of 18 years from 1986, he was a key figure and architect behind the revival of the deprived Fairfield housing area in Perth, working with its inhabitants and the authorities. The final phase of affordable, ecological housing, "low-allergy" in the sense of being built to minimise environmentally caused allergies and asthma, was crowned by a UN World Habitat award in 2003. Howard ran many community-participation processes: a fruitful interactive workshop series with schoolchildren, the Children's Ecocity events in Scotland and Belfast from 1992 onwards, led to the creation in 1996 of the Children's Parliament in Edinburgh.



▲ Howard Liddell worked on some of Scotland's earliest ecological designs

Born in Yorkshire, Howard spent his early years in Newcastle upon Tyne, where he conceived a lifelong passion for Newcastle United Football Club. His family moved to Edinburgh in the late 1950s. Following a sporting and active outdoor youth, and a prospective career in linguistics, at the age of 18 Howard talked himself into the Edinburgh School of Architecture. Though he lacked any of the appropriate qualifications, he went on to graduate with a first.

After practising as an architect, in 1971 he went to Hull School of Architecture as a senior lecturer and then director of research. His time at the University of Oslo as guest professor of building ecology from 1979 led to the formation of the Gaia Group Norway, and subsequently of the small but influential Gaia International network. For more than 25 years Howard also taught on the postgraduate course I ran each summer at the University of Oslo, with participants from many countries.

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In 1996 he moved to Edinburgh with his second wife, Sandy Halliday, to form the interdisciplinary Gaia Group, combining architecture, engineering, planning and research. It produced cutting-edge environmental solutions with a focus on local context, nature preservation and simplicity.

Howard's projects with Gaia Architects included some of Scotland's earliest ecological buildings, often born out of seeing how a community's aspirations could be realised through sports, leisure and tourism facilities. The Glencoe Visitor Centre, constructed from untreated timber, won a Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors sustainability award in 2003.

Tressour Wood, an all-timber house in Weem, near Aberfeldy, is heated by solar gain and a woodfire stove: in 1993 it won a UK house of the year award. Plummerswood, a private residence overlooking the river Tweed, and Acharacle primary school, Argyll, use Brettstapel (stacked plank) prefabricated timber and have achieved the passive energy standard - consuming minimal energy for heating, with natural rather than mechanical ventilation.

Howard was a forceful organiser and the prime mover behind the establishment and running of SEDA, the Scottish Ecological Design Association, in 1991. His recent book, Eco-minimalism - The Antidote to Eco-bling (2008), goes against today's narrow focus on purely technical solutions, arguing for a holistic perspective and common sense: a second edition has just been published.

Few architects have been such keen advocates of cross-disciplinary thinking, and Howard's energising optimism made him an exemplary educator. In January he was appointed OBE.

His first marriage, to Jenny, ended in divorce in 1981. He is survived by Sandy, whom he married in 1995; by his children, Becky, Emma, Briony and Jamie, from his first marriage; and by eight grandchildren.

• Howard Laurence Liddell, architect and ecological activist, born 7 June 1945; died 23 February 2013

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