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consultancy for the built environment

H.W. (Bill) Pearson: 1926-2010.

Bill Pearson, who died at 84 on February 17th, was a formidable architect and leader. Born in Coventry and educated at Birmingham University, he spent the great majority of his career based in the Manchester office of Building Design Partnership (BDP). As a partner there from 1964 he created memorable buildings and mentored a generation of rising talent in all the practice's disciplines.

Bill seemed quiet and aesthetically focussed, with his flaxen hair, beige suits and sports cars. But he knew what he wanted to achieve and motivated clients and colleagues with charm and determination. A succession of great projects filled the office in the 1960s: the BBC Manchester HQ, Salford City Art Gallery and Museum, the Bank of England Branch in Leeds and the Halifax Building Society HQ in Halifax. Each emerged from Bill's brown Pentel as a monumental, horizontal composition with over-sailing upper floors. Only the Yorkshire projects were actually built and these both exhibit the finest of materials and detailing, inside and out. The Halifax, completed in 1973, is Bill's masterpiece, like an oil-rig striding down the town's main street. Its massive, triangular stone piers predate those of IM Pei at the National Gallery in Washington DC and its rhomboidal top storeys of bronze glass and metal fly over the valley confidently. The sloping townscape flows through below them. The building both fits in and expresses the incongruent situation of a national financial services powerhouse in a provincial town. Based on careful briefmaking and research, Halifax won all the awards going and also, at Bill's suggestion, pioneered what we would now call partnering, involving the client, contractor and consultants in collaborative management of the job and training of groups of youngsters at each firm. The British Council for Offices gave it their Test-of-Time Award in 2000. Would that the occupying business had similarly stuck to what it knew.

He also continued some of George Grenfell Baines's town planning consultancies, notably in Derby and Chester, dealing with the issues of inserting new infrastructure and retailing into established centres rather than out of town.

Bill was an unselfconscious modernist but in the 1970s and 1980s he presided over buildings in a variety of manners by his protégés as they responded to the end of certainty in modernism. Durham Millburngate Centre successfully used a 'mean' vernacular to fit into the riverside, winning Europa Nostra's first medal. Other buildings in high-tech and neo vernacular styles convinced clients and award judges. But when the mood became historicist

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Bill took up leadership of the practice and of its architectural profession rather than participate. He was the first Chairman of the BDP Council of partners. He retired in 1990 to his home filled with modern design classics and to European travels.

His protégés were numerous as Bill was easy to work for and attracted talent. Many stayed with BDP and formed the next generation of leaders in Manchester, London, Belfast and Sheffield offices. Three future practice chairmen passed through Manchester: myself, the late Nick Terry and Tony McGuirk. Others, like Roger Stephenson, John Townsend, John Hickey, David Leavey and Ian Simpson left to form or join their own successful firms. Bill's influence flowed on long after he put away his brown Pentel.

Richard Saxon CBE. Richard first joined BDP's Manchester office in 1964, moved to London office in 1986 and later became a vice president of the RIBA.

Captions: portrait, with photographer credit

: The Halifax Building Society HQ, 1973.



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