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consultancy for the built environment

Bill Jack: the entrepreneurial driver of BDP London.

Bill Jack, who has died at 89, was for 30 years the leader of BDP's London Office and a major influence in the practice and on the architectural scene. He joined the firm just before it was reformed as Building Design Partnership and fresh from a period in the USA and at Cornell University where he became enthused with the ethos and work of SOM. He found BDP to be a service and process-oriented practice but with no particular design approach. It was also focussed on the public sector work of the 1960's, on which it grew rapidly. Bill counterbalanced this with his American-influenced interest in commercial development and modern design. His ability to befriend such clients opened many doors and he instinctively knew what they wanted. One client, asked by Bill what he was seeking in the project said: "Bill, if I thought that I had to explain that, I would not have appointed you".

Bill moved rapidly up the BDP hierarchy into the equity partnership. His confident swagger transmitted itself across the office and won numerous commissions, including the Banco Espirito Santo in Lisbon, an adventurous experience as it crossed the period of the Portuguese Revolution. But he also reached out beyond BDP when offered the opportunity to link up with other architects. He teamed up with William Whitfield at Connaught Place, Marble Arch, with Douglas Stephen for Swindon town centre and with Adrien Fainsibert at the Musee de la Villette in Paris. The smaller firms reached out to Bill to help them carry large commissions. Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, short of work, sought to have a share of a BDP project. This was duly organised, only to be stopped before it started when P&R learned that they had won the Pompidou Centre.

This open door worked another way when Bill considered how BDP might win the Royal Opera House competition. Analysing the brief, which called for 18 skills to be embodied in named individuals, he correctly saw that no one firm could offer them. Jeremy Dixon, with whom Bill had teamed on a previous competition, agreed to Bill's invitation and the rest is history. Both firms contributed staff to a joint office which ran for 18 years until the final triumphant opening.



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Bill also grew BDP's capability by inviting his wife Janet Jack to bring her landscape architecture practice into the firm. It became one of the keys to master planning work and to mega projects like the all-BDP Channel Tunnel Terminal at Folkstone. He set up an interior design unit under Rodney Cooper which has proved very dynamic. He also drew in talent. Expecting to interview a Bartlett graduate, he found four lads awaiting him. They said that they wanted to be hired together and planned to form a firm once they had learned enough from BDP, and so we now have AHMM as a major rival.

Bill built a house for Janet and himself in the back garden of BDP partner Bob Smart, leading to the unusual address of 1 ½ Southern Road. He retired in 1992 as so many architects did with the severe downturn of that year and became an adviser to the London Docklands Development Board. Janet died in 2016. Bill is remembered as a dynamo, a tireless entrepreneur and enthusiast who shaped the firm.

Richard Saxon CBE. October 2023.

Richard was at BDP from 1964 to 2005, chairing the practice from 1996 to 2002.

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