

Learning from

Form and Detail

Mackintosh school head
Christopher Platt on the formative
architectural and academic
influence of Robert Maguire



Left

'Shared Space (white and grey)' (2015),
sculpture by Robert Maguire.

Below

Theatre entrance and hall at Dormston
Comprehensive School, West Midlands,
Maguire & Co (2000, phs: Charlotte Wood).



I first encountered the work of Maguire & Murray as a 17-year-old part-time student in 1974 when Bob Maguire gave a lecture at the Mackintosh School of Architecture. Images of atmospheric churches and thoughtfully-detailed schools lingered in my memory. Later, reading Bob's 1976 RIBA conference address on the practice's approach struck a deep chord. Still today I find it fresh, profound and the clearest description of an architect's uniqueness that I have read — its annotated pages remain on my bookshelf.

I visited the Bow Common and Crewe churches, the Lutheran Centre and university projects in Oxford during the summer holidays and I knew that this was the practice from which I wanted to learn my craft. It wasn't until after I had worked in Glasgow, London and Berlin, however, that I came to join the Oxfordshire office, at a time when the practice was being restructured and Bob's personal and professional lives were undergoing profound renewal.

Bob was a consummate architect and teacher with an encyclopedic knowledge of architecture and construction. He was also a gifted craftsman and built furniture, musical instruments, boats, and architectural models and components. His draftsmanship was immaculate and his energy boundless. He had an answer for every question that was asked, and for many that weren't.

Bob's initial sketches appeared naive but he quickly developed them to reveal a convincing concept that was nurtured through its realisation. He would establish a project's architectural destination and had an astonishing ability to retain every aspect of it in his head. "Working drawings are very much part of the creative process", he would remind us as he flitted from drawing board to drawing board.

As a young architect this was both inspiring and frustrating. Having been educated by Bob's contemporaries and friends Andy MacMillan and Isi Metzstein, I understood his need to control the quality of the practice's architectural output. Bob would listen patiently to my frustrated ambitions and probably made more effort to accommodate them than I realised at the time. "You're interesting, because you don't see things exactly as I do", he once said by way of encouragement. He was generously candid, claiming that despite his confident exterior, he would 'sweat blood' when alone at his drafting machine facing a blank sheet of paper.

I helped realise a group of residences for Christ Church and Corpus Christi in Oxford, won in competition. Bob would often arrive in the morning with a sketch of a detail that he had pondered overnight, and I always looked forward to our drawing-board sessions when we reviewed the working drawings and talked about the architecture.

Now in his 80s and 'in retirement', Bob lives and works in a multi-generational barn house he designed, full of inventive and witty details, in the Scottish Borders. His restless three-dimensional interests continue through making abstract sculptures, some of which were exhibited recently at the Open Eye Gallery in Edinburgh.

Bob would protect the artistic content of a design through the realisation process to the final artefact, knowing intuitively where the key details would be. He inspired, led, collaborated with and cajoled people into effective teams to deliver memorable architecture. He opened my eyes to the idea of 'Baukunst', the art of building as a noble contribution to society. Working on a design or a detail in Studio KAP, I often find myself thinking, "Would Bob be impressed with this?" That's the legacy of both a great teacher and an inspirational architect. *AT*