

Obituary

Anthony Hunt, 1932–2022

FIStructE, HonRIBA

TONY HUNT, WHO DIED ON 16 AUGUST, was a visionary designer whose influence on a generation of structural engineers changed the face of our profession. He was awarded the IStructE Gold Medal in 1994.

Tony was born in 1932. At aged 16, he was apprenticed with engineer Wheeler & Jupp, attending Westminster Technical College on day release. Inspired by the Festival of Britain – in particular by Felix Samuely's Skylon – Tony, having just completed his four-year apprenticeship, applied to the practice (F.J. Samuely & Partners) where a 25-year-old Frank Newby interviewed him and offered him a job (Samuely was away in America).

Tony worked at Samuely's for the next seven years, on projects that included the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square, London (architect Eero Saarinen). He acknowledged this was the genesis of his engineering career and practice, where he was to meet many of the Modern Movement's architects.

However, he was also passionate about industrial design and, aged 27, having been given an honourable mention in an international furniture design competition, he left to join Terence Conran as a designer. He survived there for only six months before joining the architect Hancock Associates. Here, he was introduced to Sir Hugh Casson and the Royal College of Art (RCA), where he became a tutor on its new architecture and industrial design course.

These were formative years. When he was 30, he left Hancock's rather abruptly, perhaps inevitably setting up Anthony Hunt Associates (AHA). He survived initially on subcontract work from Samuely's. It was the 1960s and while the practice operated on a shoestring, the work was stimulating.

Tony's natural flair brought him more and more into contact with the emerging generation of architects, most notably with Team 4 – the practice of Norman Foster, Wendy Cheesman, Su Brumwell and Richard Rogers. Working as an equal partner with them and other architects, Tony blossomed and AHA developed a reputation for tactile engineering design, crafted from his exquisite structural sketches that formed the armature of the new architectural style, High Tech.

His natural flair also brought a form of patronage from architects such as Neave Brown, who appointed AHA on the Alexandra

Road housing project, which gave the practice financial stability. As Norman Foster's practice grew (Team 4 dissolved in 1967), Tony was to be the engineer for a string of High Tech's most notable buildings, such as Foster's Willis Faber & Dumas building in Ipswich and Sainsbury Centre in Norwich, and the Hopkins House in Hampstead.

These were the foundations of Tony's practice. He went on to engineer buildings such as the Inmos microprocessor factory in Newport with Richard Rogers, the Schlumberger Research Centre in Cambridge with Michael and Patty Hopkins, and the Waterloo International Terminal and Eden Project with Nicholas Grimshaw.

James Dyson, a student of Tony's early days at the RCA, was to seek Tony's advice on planning a new HQ. Tony recommended architect Chris Wilkinson (ex-Foster and Hopkins) and together they delivered another iconic building.

Many engineers of the time failed to really appreciate Tony's talent for design, which in some respects emanated from his naivety. His ideas didn't work, they just needed to be made to work. It was in Tony's nature to offer the minimal. Frank Newby famously criticised Tony's work in a lecture at the RIBA entitled 'High Tech or Mis-Tech', revealing the conservatism that enveloped the profession. When I left Buro Happold in 1981 to join AHA (as did Neil Thomas in 1986), Ted Happold commented that Tony was a 'collector'. But the process of working with Tony was liberating, and with him we all went from being nursemaids to magicians.

A number of Tony's 'old boys' pondered recently as to why the practice didn't grow with the rise of Foster, Grimshaw and Rogers. The reason may have its roots in Tony's peripatetic manner. He could go missing for weeks. But it was also that he had two very able lieutenants in the form of John Austin and David Hemmings, whose guard held back potential talent.

Both John and David were enthusiastic when Tony suggested they merge with the listed architectural practice YRM in 1989, a process that led to Neil Thomas leaving to set up Atelier One. Tony was particularly uncomfortable with the title chairman, and the proximity to YRM's architects limited his ability to collaborate with his former colleagues – although it did help the



TONY HUNT, GLOUCESTERSHIRE, 2019. © NORMAN FOSTER FOUNDATION

practice to move on from High Tech to more mainstream projects, such as the Museum of Scotland with Benson & Forsyth, won in an open competition.

The collapse of YRM in 1997 led to AHA being bought back by the then directors, with Tony seriously hurt by the experience (emotionally and financially). He chose to take more of a back seat, ultimately retiring in 2002 when the practice was sold to SKM.

James Dyson described Tony as 'a great teacher and designer ... a pioneer and modern-day Brunel'. Architects see him as an equal to Peter Rice and Pier Luigi Nervi. There is no doubt High Tech wouldn't have been the same without him, and as a result of his passion, UK architecture and engineering have outstanding international reputations.

Tony is survived by his wife Helene, Diana his third wife, and Pat, who he married first and second and with whom he had two children, Polly and Julian. Tony loved sailing and Polly recalled at his funeral how he taught her on a night watch to navigate by the stars. Tony is one now.

MARK WHITBY