

Sir Anthony Wheeler PPRSA

RSA Obituary by Diane M Watters RSA

Transcribed from April 2015 RSA Annual Exhibition

Anthony Wheeler was born, educated, and began his architectural training in Stranraer. Like his contemporaries his formal classical architectural education, begun in 1938 at the Glasgow School of Architecture in the Royal Technical College, was interrupted and extended by war service.

Making up for lost time, he qualified in 1948 securing an assistant post to the Oxford City Architect, and in 1949 became Senior Architect at Glenrothes Development Corporation.

His design for the first shopping and community precinct at Woodside, Glenrothes New Town, was influenced by the picturesque late-1940s planning ideas of the English architect-planner Frederick Gibberd, and displayed an artistic townscape flavour. In 1951 he left the corporation for private practice (initially teaching as a Senior Lecturer at Dundee School of Architecture), and established Wheeler & Sproson Architects when he was joined by Frank Sproson in 1953.

His first sizable commission was a scheme for fifty council houses, The Bowery, in the historic centre of the small burgh of Leslie. It received the 1956 Saltire Society Housing Award for good housing, and launched the firm's career in the field of housing.

It heralded over twenty years of near-dominance in the design of place-sensitive housing intervention in the heart of Fife's dense burghs, often blighted with historic mine workings (the practice won a further twenty-one Saltire and twelve Scottish Civic Trust awards).

It was Wheeler & Sproson's multi-phased redevelopments in the coastal burghs of Burntisland (1955-77), and Dysart (1958-77), that established the firm as pioneers of what Wheeler called 'modern restoration.'

Here he employed an urban ensemble planning approach which contrasted old and new in a wider layout - this involved the restoration, and in some instances demolition and reconstruction of historic properties for modern housing. Their housing was a very consistent, long term effort.

Wheeler was not afraid to fix on one big idea and pursue it, with only detail variations. Although Wheeler shared with today's urban designers a love of the excitement and drama found in difficult small sites in historic towns, his approach was also subtly different.

He saw variegated colours, materials and highly complex building profiles, as 'dangerous', and preferred grey concrete and texture and very strong and pure elevation patterning.

Outwith his commitment to social housing, the firm had a fruitful and extended relationship with the National Trust for Scotland, as favoured architects for their ground-breaking 1960s 'Little House' restorations in Crail and Pittenweem.

Wheeler's experimental centrally-planned design for St Columba's, Glenrothes (1958-61), raised the intellectual and architectural level of the Church of Scotland's postwar churches. His in-keeping red sandstone design for Edinburgh College of Art's Hunter Building, 1972-77, formed a successful urban courtyard complex.

Ever-busy in practice and from 1990 retirement, Wheeler was a member of the Royal Fine Art Commission (1967-86), trustee of the Scottish Civic Trust (1970-83), President of the RIAS, Vice-President of the RIBA (both 1973-5), and received an honorary doctorate from Robert Gordon University in 1991.

He was elected President of the RSA from 1983-90, and established the successful Friends of the RSA membership. He remained a prolific and skilled sketcher and watercolourist.