

Obituary



Nicholas Wilkinson: An Architect, An Academic, An Editor

During his 75 years of life from the 9th of March 1942 until the 28th of September 2017 Nicholas Wilkinson was a very productive and hardworking individual. He grew up in the north east of England in Corbridge, a small rural town in Northumberland. He was the third child of Zara and Tom Wilkinson and grew up together with his brother Warwick, his sister Joanna. He told me that as a child he played a lot by the riverside, and in their large family house garden and that, amongst other things, his outdoor childhood promoted a deep love of nature in him. His mother Zara had artistic abilities and his father, Tom a very good sense of judgement; Nicholas inherited these talents and characteristics from them. He was educated at Corchester Preparatory School in Corbridge and then at Bryanston School in Blanford, Dorset.

After completing school he decided to go straight into work and as he was interested in eastern cultures and travel, he started working for Fyffes, the banana company. He was with Fyffes for seven years driving trucks, working in the office and also eventually contributing to the planning and design of how the bananas were transported from the boat to the trucks. This sparked his interest in design and he became dissatisfied with his work at Fyffes.

He met his future wife, Maria, during this time and with her support together with that of his mother's, he began his journey into higher education and gained a place at the AA (Architectural Association) in London. Nicholas and Maria married within a few years and had four children: Tim, Gemma, Benjamin and Maarten. Currently Nicholas and Maria have eight grandchildren.

Nicholas was very good at hand-drawing and so he very soon attracted the attention of his teachers at the AA and his time there was full of success stories. Before he graduated from the Architectural Association in 1971, he and his friend Nabeel Hamdi, presented their ideas on: "Community and User Participation in Housing and Urban Development" to the Minister of Housing, the Rt Hon Anthony Greenwood and to the Principal Architect of the Greater London Council (GLC) Kenneth Campbell. These ideas were based on John Habraken's theories on, 'Open Building'. Nicholas read a lot during this time and particularly liked Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's, "The Phenomenon of Man," Robert M. Pirsig's "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" and the theory books of John Habraken. Nicholas and Nabeel produced architectural projects based on Habraken's theories during their time at the AA.

Nicholas passed the RIBA exam for professional architects soon after his graduation from the AA. During his professional studies Nicholas worked as a research associate at the GLC, (Greater London Council) in the Research and Development Group for Community and User Participation projects. He conducted research on design, technical and cost implications in participatory low-cost housing. Between 1972 and 1974, following the completion of his studies, Nicholas worked for the GLC's Architects Department. Design, contract stages and participation procedures of user participation projects were their main concern. Nicholas was subsequently employed as a senior architect for Clifford Culpin & Partners in London until 1975, and designed low-cost dwellings for the Borough of Southwark in London.

It was only when we asked Nicholas, about his work that he told us that he and Nabeel had been on television and in the newspapers in the UK, raising the profile of the concept: "power to the people in architecture." This was John Habraken's approach to architecture to which Nicholas dedicated his whole life. This approach suggests user participation in architectural projects and being open to change during the life time of buildings. Nicholas also told me that his and his colleagues' work influenced the housing policies in England and that they were in discussions with government authorities regarding this. Later on in his life Nicholas discussed and explained the details of his professional research experience with great excitement when he was teaching academic research at the Eastern Mediterranean University, and his students learned a great deal from him.

Between 1975 and 1982 Nicholas worked for the Foundation of Architects Research (SAR) in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. He was involved with research and consultancy work for the Dutch government and building industry on housing, and the support/infill theory of John Habraken. He told me that when he first started work there he could not speak Dutch but became fluent in the language within a short time and started working in Dutch. He also spoke French and German. It was difficult for him to learn Turkish when he lived in Cyprus because everyone spoke English to him – or rather he taught everyone English!

Nicholas founded his journal, Open House

International in 1975 during his time at SAR. The focus and content of this journal remains on open building and the built environment and public/private interventions in the building process. He continued, as its editor, up until his very last day. This journal was like a child of his.

In 1982 Nicholas joined Newcastle University, School of Architecture, Centre of Architectural Research & Development Overseas (CARDO) as a lecturer. He became the co-ordinator of the MA courses and he supervised five Phd students which he took great pride in. Fuad Mallick says that the students he taught and supervised were from all over the world and different cultural backgrounds. He could communicate with them with ease and make them feel comfortable. Some were even invited to his home in Hexham for barbeque lunches in the park.

Nicholas worked for the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) within British Council Higher Education Consultancy concurrently with his work at Newcastle University. He gave lectures and workshops worldwide on community and user participation in housing and urban development, mostly in less developed countries (P.R.China, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, Turkey, Paraguay, Mexico, MIT and McGill University etc.). Nicholas was interested in geography and travelling. He was proud of visiting (almost) all countries in the world. He liked meeting with different people and experiencing other cultures.

Nicholas lived in Bombay/Pune, India between 1994 and 1997. He was the Training Director of the Professional Development Centre of Maharashtra Housing & Area Development Authority which was under contract between the ODA and the Indian government. Nicholas very much enjoyed India and its smiling people. He appreciated Indian artists and there are two paintings in the living room of his house produced by a very talented Indian artist. He frequently told me about his interesting experiences in India, such as the effects of the monsoon rain season on daily life.

In 1997 Nicholas came to Famagusta, Cyprus and he lived in this sunny country until he died. He was employed as an academic in the Eastern Mediterranean University's Department of Architecture. He contributed to many courses in this department including architectural design, open building, architectural research, academic research.

I think Nicholas was the happiest and the most modest figure in EMU. He liked to sing songs and had an excellent sense of humor. He never told anyone about the successes he had experienced in the past and the important connections he had with people in his field of architecture. He received greeting cards from Amos Rapoport and John Habraken, but he didn't tell anyone. He did everything to avoid intimidating others, especially his students and his colleagues. One day I asked him why he was so modest and how this could be possible. His answer was: "I became very successful when I was very young, and this is not important for me anymore."

Nicholas Wilkinson was an academic who made a huge contribution to the academic life of his colleagues and his students. Some of his students

called him Uncle Nicky.

Nicholas also provided a consultancy service on housing and urban development during the 1980's and 1990's for: Istanbul Technical University concerning slum and squatter types, migration patterns and housing development types; the Jordan Badia Research Programme at the University of Jordan about existing habitat settlement formation and the economic potential of the built environment; for Istanbul Technical University, TUBITAK (Scientific Research Council of Turkey) and CARDO concerning low-income housing; for the ODA about the transformation of government housing projects in four cities in Egypt and Bangladesh; for the Egyptian Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction about the new cities settlement project in Egypt; for the Ministry of Housing in the Netherlands about an urban renewal study to set up a housing typology based on pre-war housing stock to show various levels of renewal and improvement and costs, and a housing evaluation study of dwellings built between 1920 and 1940, including the analysis of neighbourhood layouts and dwelling plans. Some of these works were in the funded research category.

Nicholas Wilkinson ran his journal, *Open House International*, throughout his professional career; the journal went everywhere with him. It started in the Netherlands, then went to England, then to India, then to Cyprus. He always planned to write a book on his experiences of running a journal single-handedly for over 40 years but unfortunately this did not happen. He led the editorial process with his editorial board and ensured that proof reading, formatting, cover design and printing all worked together. He obtained these services from different people whenever required. He packed and carried the printed copies to the post-office himself. He is remembered by some of his colleagues at the EMU by the typing noise he made whilst working on the journal! It was not easy to be an academic and an editor simultaneously, but he never complained.

Open House International is a respected journal, which is indexed by many international indexing institutions and Nicholas ran this journal for forty-two years in a very objective way. He was a very straightforward person in academic life and he said that he was educated to say what he thought. This way of being was also apparent in all his dealings with people, be it professional or personal. He was open, honourable and never insincere.

Writing the editorials of the *Open House* issues was very important for Nicholas and he had always done this with pleasure, but in August, his last month, he needed my help which I was pleased to offer. I wrote the editorial, which summarised the articles in that issue. I gave it to him for editing and he said it was bad. I asked why. He said it was too conventional. I asked him how an editorial could be unconventional. He said that one can write anything in an editorial and, at the same time, one can also provide information about the content of the issue. However, he published that editorial as I had submitted it. There was no time to change it!

This was the reason that when I started writing an obituary for him I wished I could write some-



Figure 2. Nicholas Wilkinson's house at Yeniboğazıcı, Famagusta

thing unconventional. It is not easy. Nicholas was an unconventional person and he liked reading and talking about biographies, autobiographies and obituaries.

Nicholas was interested in all the arts and nature. He liked listening to music, especially the clarinet. He loved listening to singing, particularly melodic tenor voices and he had a good voice and tone himself. He liked Pavarotti, Freddie Mercury and Demis Roussos. He liked listening to piano etudes. He liked painting and sculpture and was sensitive about forms. He liked all literature and wrote and published a novel called, "Willing Party," which was the biography of his grandfather who was a solicitor. He was proud of the fact that birds nested in his house and cats choose his place as their home. Nicholas was a strong and sensitive person.

Fuad Mallick says that Nicholas also mastered the famous Cypriot tradition of the barbeque, in fact he was better at it than the Cypriots themselves. He treated it as if it was an art and those who have tasted his grills know that they were the best. He even designed a big "mangal" (a barbeque) to order by providing scaled and precise drawings.

Nicholas's last architectural project was the designing of his own house at Yeniboğazıcı, Famagusta, Cyprus. He created excellent hand drawings and he very much enjoyed the design process of this house. You can see the photo of this house below. The architecture of this house was like his personality.

He did not design it as a piece of architectural gymnastics. He designed his house for him to live in as he wished. It is simple and nice. It has a large living room with the largest fire place I have ever seen; Nicholas liked making fires. He made fires at home, on beaches, everywhere. He even made fires in hot weather and in the rain.

His house also has a large courtyard facing south and east and the colours he selected for his house are very relaxing and warm. He brought out some old furniture from England; the rest of his furniture was made by Cypriot carpenters and he had his

curtains tailored very carefully. When he moved to this house he started using the colourful cups and dishes he had brought with him from India.

He was very sensitive about his garden. Gardeners frequently visited his place to take care of his Benjamin and fire trees, vines, bouganvilleas and other flowers. He only lived six years in this very pleasant house. Now his twelve cats and two of his friends are taking care of his home.

According to Emmanuel Chenyi: "toujours la politesse" was his famous French expression and he implemented this in all domains, especially amongst his closest entourage. His desire for work was equally matched by the dragon spirit he had for life. When asked about his age, he remained 39 years old for 10 years, then later he changed it to 49 and the word 'retirement' was not in his vocabulary. He worked continuously even in his last moments. Nicholas always spoke his mind even when he had to pay the ultimate price and to this he answered: "pay and repent".

Nicholas Wilkinson currently rests in peace at the family grave of Maria Wilkinson in Munich, Germany and remains in the hearts of his family, his friends and his students. It was very very lucky to be a colleague and a friend of Mr. Nicholas Wilkinson.

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