

## **Alan Reiach RSA**

### ***RSA Obituary by Stuart Renton RSA, transcribed from the 1992 RSA Annual Report***

Alan Reiach, Architect, born London 2 March 1910. Educated Edinburgh Academy, Edinburgh College of Art. Apprenticed to Sir Robert Lorrimer, Andrew Grant Scholarship to USA, USSR and Western Europe 1935-36. Assisted Architect to Robert Atkinson, London 1936-1937. Research Fellowship, Edinburgh College of art 1938-40.

Architect/Planner, Scottish Office 1940-46. Senior Lecturer, Edinburgh College of Art 1947-57. Principal in private practice 1946-75 joining with Eric Hall in 1965 to form Reiach and Hall. Consultant 1975-80. OBE 1964. Elected member of Royal Scottish Academy 1969 and Academician 1986. Married Patricia Anne Duncan 1949. One son, one daughter. Died 23 July 1992.

Since 1946 when he returned to Edinburgh Alan Reiach who was to become one of the City's most distinguished architects was immediately identifiable as one of its colourful characters. For years his jaunty worn beret and bow tie were his hallmark.

John Kay, barber, miniaturist and social commentator was a notable figure during Edinburgh's Golden Age. Between 1785 and 1820 the self taught artist produced etchings which have since been an invaluable record of the city's social history of the time. Some of us were discussing recently who would be among the Kay's Portraits of today, there is no doubt in our view that Alan Reiach was amongst those at the top of our list.

Many architectural students of my generation were inspired by Reiach's vitality, knowledge and incisive critical ability when we moved into our final year at Edinburgh College of Art in the post war decade. He was by all standards a great teacher.

We were continually impressed by his ability to recognise precedents to solutions we were seeking, and after discussing our projects with him, he would appear an hour later with an issue of 'Werk' magazine, of some years before, which aptly illustrated the point he had been making. It is interesting to consider the number of architects whose subsequently eminent careers in teaching or practice have been profoundly influenced by him.

Reiach was educated at Edinburgh Academy which he left in 1928 to become an articled pupil of Sir Robert Lorrimer, where he contributed to work on the university of Edinburgh's new science campus at King's Buildings and to St Peter's Church in Morningside.

In 1933 he moved to complete his studies at Edinburgh College of Art where he won three national prizes including the RIBA Silver Medal. E.A. Rouse was a dynamic Chief Instructor at the School of Architecture at this time and Reiach was particularly fired by visits by Eric Mendelson and Walter Gropius which Rouse arranged.

After a further year of post graduate study in the recently created Town Planning Course, in 1935 he was awarded a major Andrew Grant travelling scholarship and for nine months travelled in the US, the USSR, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Scandinavia.

This experience and subsequent travel informed his work and his teaching. In retrospect he considered that he was most influenced by Scandinavia where the northern masters of 20th century architecture - Gunnar Asplund and Alvar Aalto inspired understanding of form, materials and craftsmanship, textures and an appreciation of the northern quality of light. These factors have become part of a heritage which continue to influence the work of Reiach and Hall.

When Reiach returned to the UK he worked in the offices of Robert Atkinson & Partners and in Grey Wornum before returning to Edinburgh in 1938 to take up a Research and Teaching Fellowship at the College of Art.

Research study produced an extensive and beautifully photographed record of the native buildings of Scottish small towns and countryside which was a significant source for a seminal book of its time called 'Building Scotland' published initially in 1942 and written in conjunction with Robert Hurd. It illustrated a sensitive way forward for post war Scotland with examples of appropriate European and Scandinavian projects in a straightforward comparison of the Good, the Bad and the Ugly.

Reiach and Robert Matthew (later of LCC and eminent practitioner) had become close colleagues and had entered several architecture competitions together. In 1938 they were successful in winning 1st prize with their submission for the Community Centre (a fashionable social subject at the time) including swimming baths and the gymnasium for Ilkeston in Derbyshire but the outbreak of war meant the project was never built.

From 1940-46 Alan Reiach joined the Scottish Office and the team responsible for the Clyde Valley Plan. One of Reiach's particular responsibilities, built on his research experience, dealt with regional architecture. Many of his exquisite drawings appear in the report.

When Reiach returned to Edinburgh he set up a small practice to complement his teaching work. One of the earliest commissions was for a pace setting project at Whitemoss, East Kilbride, probably the New Town's first commission. There followed in 1949 the new College of Agriculture for which he was appointed with Ralph Cowan. It

remains a building of sensitive human scale with admirable detailing evolving out of Scandinavian influence.

The practice grew on a diet of churches, schools, veterinary research buildings, university buildings and hospitals, mostly quite large projects for a compact office. George Macnab and I became partners in 1959 and, in 1965 following an initiative by Eric Hall, two practices came together to create Reiach and Hall.

In the larger organisation Reiach's role changed. He chose the projects he could best influence. One of these - and one he particularly enjoyed - was the New Club in Princes Street, Edinburgh for which he was commissioned in 1963. It involved replacing the William Burn building which the club had decided could no longer serve them and the challenge of incorporating panelling, furniture and works of art was exciting.

The design which is contained within the rather extraordinary constraints of Princes Street Panel is recognised as one of the best of this period and the principal interior spaces have an exciting relationship to the 3 storey heart - the first modern atrium in the city.

Reiach became a member of the Royal Fine Art Commission for Scotland in 1966 and served until 1980. Professor Sir Robert Grieve who chaired the Commission during the latter years remembers Reiach's sharp, precise and sometimes explosive thoughts and opinions and his reluctance to suffer academic, intellectual or aesthetic vagueness. He considered him a kind of benchmark by which many environmental and architectural matters could be judged.

Reiach was appointed OBE in 1964, elected an Associate of the Royal Scottish Academy in 1969 and Academician in 1986.

From his schooldays, Reiach was an accomplished draughtsman and watercolour painter and many of his friends cherish his drawings or paintings in their collections. An important pencil drawing of Reiach's which he did of the Forum Romanum on a short study tour after winning the Title Prize hung in the RSA in 1934 and sold. 55 years later it turned up at a Phillips Fine Art auction in 1989. Reiach bought it. It is one of his finest, delicate and apparently, effortless.

In all his endeavours, Alan Reiach by example reminds us, and this is particularly true in times that hardly seem propitious for our profession, to have the strength of character to hold on to inspiration when productive use of imagination and our fundamental standards are under threat.

Those of us who had the privilege of knowing him as a friend and colleague cannot fail to have been constantly re-energised by his zest for life. Surely this was evidence of a

happy man fully supported in his endeavours by his wife Pat with her calm presence and occasional wry smile. We remember with great affection her charming hospitality and delightful parties at the Reiach's house, as students, office colleagues and as friends. Alan Reiach is survived by Pat, their son John and daughter Mary Jane.