

The Honorary Graduand: Dr Robin Nicholson CBE

The Orator: James Burch

Dr Robin Nicholson CBE is to be awarded the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Design.

I am an architect with over fifty years of practice, interspersed with teaching, lecturing, championing design quality and responding to the climate and biodiversity emergency; forty of those years were as a partner in one of the oldest UK architectural cooperatives, Edward Cullinan Architects, now Cullinan Studio.

Many architects necessarily work on mainstream commercial projects but at Cullinans, I had the good fortune to work with some of the most creative architects and engineers, on socially useful buildings in health and education and then urban regeneration. Ted Cullinan was a visionary, but the architecture was difficult for the critics to place; it was both free and formal but our architecture arose from its construction and not as an applied historical or hi-tech style. From the start it was environmentally aware, and the design process was collaborative. We practiced public consultation and we listened, but we were the architects. When we successfully masterplanned the redevelopment of Bristol Harbourside, we were led by public consultation.

From an early age, I was interested in change by working with others and slowly this focused on design quality and what we called sustainability. There came a time when, with the full support of the practice, I stepped out and was elected to RIBA Council, becoming a Vice-President for 2 years at a time of great change. That led me on to the Construction Industry Council (CIC), which brings together all the Professional Institutions in construction where I was elected chair, just as New Labour won (1997) and wanted quality public buildings. The following year the Egan Report Rethinking Construction was published and I was appointed as the only designer on the Movement for Innovation Board. We tried to change the industry with evidence of the benefits of doing it differently, but the industry didn't want to change, just like it is still largely in denial about climate change and the biodiversity emergency.

Still working full time at Cullinans, I was invited to become a commissioner at the Commission for the Built Environment (CABE) and put in charge of the enabling programme. After much resistance, CABE embraced the climate emergency and worked with the Core Cities, including Bristol, in developing a web-based database. At the same time, I chaired a task force for the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) to show Government how to ensure all new schools would be Zero Carbon by 2016. Our report was implemented in early 2010, only for it to be cancelled, along with CABE, by the Coalition Government.

In parallel, I co-founded the Edge, a voluntary thinktank for the built and natural environment (www.edgedebate.com). In 2010 I was appointed to chair the Cambridgeshire Quality Panel to oversee the quality of the urban extensions and new settlements in the region. The key quality of both organisations is that they are multi-disciplinary, driving change for the greater good.