

Julyan Wickham, architect behind the much-imitated London restaurant Kensington Place – obituary

Telegraph Obituaries

10–13 minutes

With its modernist glass frontage, it was the very opposite of the hushed restaurants that tried to be carpeted cathedrals

Julyan Wickham, the architect, who has died aged 82, would doubtless have worked on the design of plate-glass and concrete universities as tertiary education expanded following the 1963 Robbins Report, had he been born a generation or so earlier; but by the time he had established himself, after leaving the Architectural Association in 1966, that succulent gravy train had passed.

Instead, Wickham became part of a fluctuating group of entrepreneurs, chefs, designers and chancers who, in the last decade and a half of the 20th century, changed the face of London bars and restaurants with, so to speak, such vigorous liposuction, derma-planing and wholesale quantities of Botox that by the millennium the face was plumply unrecognisable.

Wickham brought to the architecture of pleasure a high seriousness more usually associated with the architecture of

pedagogy. He designed more than 30 restaurants for, among others, Harvey Nichols, the diversifying wine merchant Corney and Barrow, the Fish chain, the Bank chain, the Zanzibar, whose bar was wavy as a crinkle-crankle wall, and, famously, Kensington Place.



Kensington Place: such was its success that plagiarism was wholesale Credit: COURTESY OF FAMILY

Its frontage was all glass, as though it were on the point of expanding on to the pavement; it was wittingly lacking in privacy, as there was nothing to hide; it was the very obverse of hushed restaurants that were like carpeted cathedrals; its modernism was sui generis and chromatically aggressive.

Such was its success that plagiarism was wholesale. Not just the look but the entire ethos of Kensington Place – the cooking, the style of service, the hard-edged-bouncing din, the diligent

management, the strikingly original furniture – was ripped off time and again, with varying levels of witless approximation and ham-fisted imprecision.

Wickham was not flattered. He was, rather, contemptuous of architects with a “brand”, an identifiable signature which was, often as not, someone else’s. If Wickham had had a royalty for every theft, if architectural designs could be copyrighted, if the copyist sheep paid the inventive goat who was the source of their frail mimicry, then he might have become a very rich man.



The interior of Kensington Place Credit: COURTESY OF FAMILY

He had, after all, created a building type, though it was not much appreciated by Terence Conran who, having bought Kensington Place, missed the point and inflicted on it “improvements” – loud floor tiles, folksy wooden chairs, pot plants, junk shop troves and, above all, a break with Wickham’s restrained palette.

This hurt and infuriated Wickham, not least because his father had been a sort of tutelary presence in the young Conran's life, and he did not hesitate to tell Conran what he thought. Indeed, he rarely desisted from favouring truth over tact. He considered it unimaginable that any Parisian developer would have dared or wanted to trash a rightly listed historic monument such as La Coupole, which was one of the inspirations for Kensington Place, along with Jacob Epstein's Rock Drill and a generalised ideal of Russian constructivism. In London, however, without statutory protection, the restaurant was prey.

While the bandwagon-jumpers were being sold pups that aped Kensington Place, Wickham himself deftly changed style for Zander in an opulent hotel in Victoria whose art-nouveau interior court, atypical for London, he brought back to splendid life. The precisionist murals were by his daughter Pola. The brushed-metal bar was 50 metres long. There was nothing like it in London, maybe nothing like it in the world. A commentator wrote: "His response to any commission is to achieve a tour de force." It was indeed dramatic.





Wickham's Bank restaurant at Aldwych

Wickham's earliest work was for Edward Cullinan's architectural cooperative. It was an almost bucolic essay in stone, which attracted the attention of Arthur Drexler, director of the Museum of Modern Art, who wrote that "the middle ground between high art and the vernacular has been exploited with great success... some of the most persuasive work seems prompted by survivals from the mediaeval past: stone walls whose roofs have vanished, castles, barns."

In his occasional journalism Wickham was critical of British volume builders, their graceless designs, dysfunctional suburbanism, mendacious claims of "affordability", car dependence, waste and infrastructural neglect. He did not work for them.

He designed local authority flats in Waltham Forest, communal living spaces in North Kensington, a neo-croft near Oban. His conversions were as discreet and elegant as his restaurant designs. They were demonstrations of a resolve to preserve the already existing, no matter how damaged.



Kensington Place's glass frontage

Julyan Michael Wickham was born in Berkshire on August 14 1942 into a family of exemplary post-war bohemianism when, as Muriel Spark had it, “all the nice people were poor”. His parents painted, potted, woodworked, photographed, joined the Communist Party, entertained prolifically and lived somewhat hand to mouth. At one point his father Michael Wickham lived in the remaining kitchen wing of Coleshill, the 17th-century house near the baroque village of Highworth that had burnt down in 1952.

Wickham believed that living well was compatible with his generally Leftist position: he enjoyed Citroëns, good wine, obscure digestifs. He cooked well and enjoyed disputing the origins and components of recipes.

His education was impeccably gauche caviar: he went to Holland Park Comprehensive, the Architectural Association, and then on to Edward Cullinan’s burgeoning practice, which was like a postgraduate school for architects whose gifts would not be masked by their sporadic periods of modishness.

In November 1979 he turned up at 9 o’clock one morning at the Bride of Denmark, the private pub in the basement of the Architectural Review’s building in Queen Anne’s Gate. He hoped that his unsuccessful, though commended, competition entry for the Taoiseach’s House would be published (the competition would be annulled by Charles Haughey when he became Taoiseach a few weeks later).

The puritanical editor Lance Wright took an ante hoc dim view of Wickham, whom he had heard of as a night club designer, and thus presumed to be frivolous, possibly libertine. He was also possessive about Dublin – he had once co-written a whole four-

page piece on the city. He disliked the design. And he was outraged when Wickham, offered a cup of tea, declined and demanded a Guinness. He created his own walls to run up against.



Wickham in his studio Credit: COURTESY OF FAMILY

Despite being gregarious, sociable and always up for an argument, Wickham belonged to no group, was not associated with any school, nor with any formal ideology or theoretical programme. The supreme arbiter of post-modernism, Charles Jencks, granted him only the faintest praise – apt, given his eschewal of that craze.

Wickham was unsympathetic towards jokey architecture. He possessed a strong familial and intellectual link to the European avant-garde through his wife Tess, daughter of Aldo van Eyck, the leading Dutch modernist who adhered to the collectivist precepts of modernism long after they had been abandoned in deregulated, money-crazed Britain where “accessibility” (or infantilism) had become de rigueur.

Wickham’s memorable Horsleydown Square to the south of Tower Bridge might be drily described as a mixed-use development. It is that, but it is also visually exciting, a restorative treat in an area of London which lacks such facilities. It takes, again, from constructivism, and nods towards the dozens of playgrounds which Aldo van Eyck developed all over Amsterdam, the city to which Wickham and Tess moved part of their practice in the early 1990s, combining it with her father’s.





The health centre in Almere Credit: COURTESY OF FAMILY

Their work in the new satellite town of Almere is startling and joyful: dazzling cadmium-yellow crescents of houses with bulbous bows, a long low purple health centre that is partially buried.

Without any direct quotes or references, it all betrays a consciousness of the Amsterdam school of a century ago.

Julyan Wickham is survived by his wife Tess, his daughter Pola and his son Rufus.

Julyan Wickham, born August 14 1942, died April 26 2024

[License this content](#)