

David Le Lay, RIBA

Chairman of the Chelsea Society



David Le Lay, who has died aged 72, was an architect and champion of the Royal Borough of Chelsea in its many guises.

He was born on January 10 1945 and brought up and educated in Jersey where, as a schoolboy, his design skills were recognised when the float he designed for the Jersey Battle of Flowers was awarded a prize.

He arrived at Canterbury School of Architecture aged 18, completed his three-year course and spent a year with the conservation practice of Purcell, Miller and Tritton. This was followed by two years of study at the Regent Street Polytechnic and a further year with Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe's practice.

In 1970 the newly qualified 25-year-old set up his own practice in Chelsea, where he had lived since 1966. He ran the practice well and built a reputation for achieving planning consent for residential developments on sensitive sites as well as for the restoration and adaptation of listed buildings. For many years he acted for Cadogan Estates.

He was a man of strong opinions and could have an acerbic tongue if challenged, though this rarely broke through his usually equable personality.

He maintained a close association with his place of birth as secretary of the Jersey Society of London; he was the secretary of the West London Architectural Society and a member of the Franco-British Union of Architects, leading a large group of French and British architects on a visit to Jersey in his presidential year.

He was also a church warden of Christ Church, Chelsea, and a life member and former council member of the Chelsea Arts Club.

In 2000 he ran a successful appeal to commemorate the artist James McNeill Whistler, a founder member of the club, and a bronze sculpture of Whistler, by Nicholas Dimbleby, was unveiled on Cheyne Walk in 2005. In 2012 he founded the Whistler Society and remained its chairman until his death. He also arranged for a plaque to be installed on Whistler's house on Rue du Bac, Paris.

He was an enthusiastic member of the London Sketch Club, hosting regular designers' and architects' evenings, though perhaps his most important involvement was with the Chelsea Society (which he chaired for 22 years); it began when he was asked to put forward an idea for a partly fenced-off space on the King's Road known as the Old Burial Ground to celebrate the Queen's Silver Jubilee and the society's Golden Jubilee.

The result was Dovehouse Green, an attractive public garden. His drawing for the development was exhibited at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.

Le Lay also played a major role in helping the society to fight inappropriate development at two public enquiries – against Montevetro, a 20 storey block of flats next to the Grade I listed Battersea Church and against a tower development at Lots Road Power Station.

Both campaigns were lost when inspectors' decisions were overturned by the Secretary of State, but as he observed, "if you look downriver to Wandsworth, it is now totally dominated by tall buildings and as a consequence the Thames seems very narrow."

In 2010 he was presented with the Mayor's Award for services to the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and the Chelsea Society.

Latterly Le Lay founded, with the composer Dan Gillingwater, the annual Chamber Music in Chelsea, which features young graduates from London music schools. Somewhat incongruously he developed an interest in amateur boxing, becoming a member of a club on Canvey Island. On his infrequent visits he was greeted with a chorus of "Dave, you're back" and dragged to the bar by a pack of muscular lads.

He died of lung cancer triggered by asbestos and is survived by John Thacker, his partner for 52 years, with whom he had entered into a civil partnership.

David Le Lay, born January 10 1945, died January 17 2017