



Retreat Centre in Ffald-y-Brenin, built from converted cowsheds © Christopher Day / Routledge Press

Soul building

Victoria Manthorpe meets eco-architect Christopher Day

Christopher Day has just finished writing his autobiography: not bad for a man who was given just twelve months to live – 18 years ago. Day was diagnosed with motor neuron disease in 2000 when he was at the height of his powers as a designer, architect and educator. This seeming death sentence both accelerated his immediate writing output, so that he finished *Spirit & Place*, his classic study on sustainable environment, and diverted his problem-solving skills into new channels. His book (*my Dying is Fun: A Comedy of Disabled Misadventures*, first published in 2007 and reprinted three years later (as *Dying: or learning to live*) offers a range of observations, both wry and slapstick, on everyday struggles with disability.

Day has continued to consult, publish and lecture, adapting to his frailties as

they increased. Matthew Hardy, a senior lecturer at The Prince's Foundation, recalls that in 2013 Day gave a lecture to MA students on sustainable urbanism with “sparkling intellect”. Unable to speak, he used words and drawings on a whiteboard that were projected onto a screen. The students loved it.

In 2016, Day produced *The Eco-Home Design Guide*, a highly accessible illustrated workbook for all those people who are just longing (if only they knew how) to build their own eco-home – or to adapt their current home to the new ecological demands.

From which you will gather that Christopher Day is no slouch and that disability has not dented his sense of humour – as I was to discover when I interviewed him at home in suburban Cardiff. His house has solar panels on the roof, but it is not a home he has designed himself, although he and his wife, Aleksandra, have added a

conservatory at the rear, where we convened. In this case *interview* is exactly the right word, since Day communicates by writing on a stack of paper on a clipboard. He may no longer be able to talk, but he can certainly chuckle, and his mind is raring to go.

In the 1970s Day was one of the earliest architects to consider the detrimental environmental impact of buildings – becoming one of the first of a dozen or so eco-architects working in the UK. From necessity he started doing his own building work with volunteers – who provided what he came to call “gift-work”. Gradually he developed a consensual approach to creating buildings, which he formulated into an eight-stage consensus design process that develops each decision from the one preceding and is naturally inclusive – unlike community architecture, which tends to be selective. In the 1990s Day went even