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Ray Leigh, influential furniture designer inspired by his work on the 1951 Festival of Britain

He helped fit out the Lion and Unicorn Building and became a key figure in linking the Arts and Crafts Movement to postwar modernist design



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Ray Leigh, who has died aged 96, was among the last of the group of designers involved with the 1951 Festival of Britain, and a key figure linking the British Arts and Crafts Movement to postwar modernist design.

As an architect, artist, designer, manufacturer, co-ordinator of the disparate threads of the UK furniture industry, and latterly founder of the Gordon Russell Museum, Leigh was a hugely influential figure in the UK's furniture industry. One colleague said "he had a smile like Puck and a sense of mischief to match."

Raymond Hugh Leigh was born in Streatham, south London, on June 6 1928. He was initially educated initially at Whitgift School in Croydon, then when his father's civil service department was evacuated in 1939 to Morecambe in Lancashire, he went to the local grammar school.

His father's office was billeted in the recently completed Midland Hotel, designed in an Art Deco style by Oliver Hill, who had stipulated how every detail of the building should relate to the architecture, down to the door handles. With its futurist appearance, sculptures by Eric Gill, a mural by Eric Ravilious, and rugs and textiles by Marian Dorn, the building played a major part in Ray's early creative education, inspiring him to become an architect.

In 1945, aged 17, he was accepted at the Architectural Association when Frederick Gibberd – known for his work in Harlow – was principal and three-quarters of the students were ex-servicemen. "They were rather in a hurry, building a new Britain," Leigh later wrote, "and that gave the place a real buzz." Among his contemporaries there were Philip Dowson, Richard Burton, Ted Cullinan and Colin St John Wilson.



Inside the Lion and Unicorn building at the Festival of Britain Credit: Historic England/Heritage Images via Getty Images

His studies were interrupted by National Service in the Royal Engineers. On his return in 1949, he was offered a holiday job by Dick Russell, an architect and tutor at the Royal College of Art (and brother of the furniture designer and manufacturer Gordon Russell) to work with RCA students to fit out the Lion and Unicorn Building at the forthcoming 1951 Festival of Britain.

The project transformed Leigh's life, bringing him into contact with some of the most creative artists, designers and architects of the postwar era. His colleagues and friends included Philip Powell and "Jacko" Moya, John Piper, James Stirling, Mary Shand, Terence Conran and Robin Wade.

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Crowds inside the Lion and Unicorn building Credit: Warburton/Topical Press Agency/Getty Images

He was later taken on full-time by Russell, becoming a partner in the firm Russell, Hodgson & Leigh (1957-67). Projects included the fit-out of the cruise-liner, SS Oriana, and work at British Museum, the Tower of London, Grosvenor House Hotel and the London offices of Time-Life.

One seminal project involved the furniture for the new Coventry Cathedral, which had been designed by Basil Spence and was dedicated in April 1962. Spence pulled together a team of varied creative talents, with stained glass by John Piper and Geoffrey Clark, a monumental tapestry by Graham Sutherland, lettering by Ralph Beyer and sculptures by Elisabeth Frink.



Interior of Sir Basil Spence's new Coventry Cathedral, for which Leigh was involved in designing the congregation's chairs Credit: The Image Bank/ Getty Images

Dick Russell's practice designed the congregation chairs, 2,000 of which were made by Gordon Russell's eponymous firm; the design became a mid-century classic across the UK and the US.

In 1967, Leigh was appointed design director at Gordon Russell, later becoming managing director and then chairman. His empathy for architecture, interiors and furnishings connected seamlessly to the philosophies of the Chipping Campden Movement and the original Arts and Crafts designers and makers, Ernest Gimson, CR Ashbee and the Barnsleys, Sidney, Ernest and Edward.

Although there was always a tension between high-quality hand work and industrial production, sentimentality was not allowed to eclipse economics. At its peak, the firm employed more than 200 cabinet-makers, all apprentice-trained, making pieces for schools, colleges, banks and hotels. The firm benefited from the roll-out of UK universities in the 1960s and strategic design-led sales in Japan, the US and the Middle East.

Before and after the sale of the firm in 1986, Leigh gave encouragement and time to a number of professional organisations, as president of the Guild of Gloucestershire Craftsmen, Mayor of Chipping Campden, Master of Furniture Makers Company 1994, a founding trustee of the Crafts Council, chairman of the Furniture Industry Research Association and chairman of the Edward Barnsley Educational Trust. He remained cynical about ever being able to pull together the UK's fragmented furniture industry but never stopped trying. He was also unstinting in his encouragement to young designers.

Among Leigh's later achievements was converting of the former factory's machine-shop at Broadway in the Cotswolds into the Gordon Russell Museum, which was opened in 2008 by Sir Terence Conran.

Leigh also commissioned, contributed to and wrote several books and pamphlets about the Gordon Russell legacy, the best of which is by Jeremy Myerson, with an introduction by Leigh, *Gordon Russell: Designer of Furniture*.

Leigh was appointed MBE in 2001. He maintained a lifelong interest in classic cars, fell-walking in the Lake District and finely printed books.

Ray Leigh is survived by his wife Jean, to whom he was married for 72 years, and by a son. Two elder children predeceased him.

Ray Leigh, born June 6 1928, died March 13 2025