

**Richard Buckminster Fuller**

If I were to write a book about my experience of Bucky I would divide it into chapters, starting with the first about how we both met and the final one telling about our last meeting together.

It was James Meller who introduced me to Bucky in 1971. We met at the ICA, which at that time had an elegant wood-panelled dining room overlooking the Mall. In this civilised setting Bucky, James and myself met to talk through a long lunch. Bucky explained that he had been asked to design a theatre under the quadrangle of St Peters College in Oxford. The prime mover at the college was a professor called Francis Warner and the project was to be backed by such luminaries as Richard Burton. Bucky wanted to find an architect to work with him on the project and James was helping by making some introductions. I had brought examples of our work to show to Bucky and the office was on stand-by in the hope that he would visit us.

It is only now, many years later, that I realise to what extent Bucky was able to draw me out through that lunchtime conversation without my even knowing it at the time. He got me to reveal attitudes to issues such as design, materials, cost, research and other subjects which ranged far and wide. As it was getting near the time that Bucky had to leave I ventured the thought that he might like to look at the work that I had brought or perhaps to visit our office. Bucky dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand, explaining that he had already decided half way through lunch that I was the person he wanted to collaborate with and that he did not need to talk to anyone else about the project.

In the twelve years that elapsed between that first and last meeting there are many chapters that could be written on the extraordinary insights that Bucky was to offer. He was one of those rare individuals who fundamentally influenced the way that you were afterwards to look and to think.

But to move on to the final chapter. Bucky had very kindly agreed to talk on the occasion of my receipt of the Royal Gold Medal for Architecture at the Royal Institute of British Architects in June 1983. I was not to know that it would be the last time that I was to see him alive.

In his speech Bucky addressed issues of survival: messages that today are even more relevant, as his worst predictions are gradually being seen to be accurate. Even now, in the climate of an ecologically more aware culture, his propositions are still far ahead of their time.

Earlier that day he came into the office, which at that time was a block away from the RIBA in Great Portland Street, having arrived from some far off corner of the world. His almost perpetual travel schedule was to take him on to the White House in Washington for a major address and then back to his home in Los Angeles and to the hospital where his wife Anne lay seriously ill. We talked a great deal - jumping from one subject to another and finally focusing on the house project which was based on two interconnected domes, one within the other. Our office had developed this much further since the last time that we were together.

The following day Bucky came back to the office for a last meeting. James Meller as almost always was present - caring, sensitive and attendant on Bucky's needs, worrying about his getting too tired - perhaps he needed a quick cat-nap or may be another hot tea? Also on hand was his secretary Shirley with whom he had recently started to travel.

Looking back it strikes me for the first time that it was nothing short of a miracle that not so many weeks earlier Bucky had managed to trot around the globe on his own from one destination to another - some of them in the most unlikely and remote corners of the world. I think it had a great deal to do with his presence - everybody would go out of their way to help him and to look after him. In many cases this could be explained as respect by those who knew his eminence. Or perhaps in the hotels that he revisited it might be because he treated the staff so well. He was very sensitive in the way that he did this - I recall him handing envelopes to the concierge before his departure - each bearing the name of the individual to whom the enclosed tip and a note of thanks was directed. But I know that it was nothing to do with his generosity - it was everything to do with the kind of person that he was - you simply wanted to go out of your way for him because he was so very special - and it was also nothing to do with age.

Our last meeting started with the same dome house project and the assumption that Wendy and I, would have one on a country site in Wiltshire and that Bucky and his wife would have another in Los Angeles - both of which would be working prototypes. When Bucky started to be articulate about his own dwelling Shirley interrupted him, touching his arm gently and delicately suggesting to Bucky that Anne was now so ill that perhaps it might be better to forget the home in Los Angeles. Bucky stopped in his tracks, slightly flustered and said that of course she was right - calling her darling which he often did. It sounds affected when you write it down but when he used it it conveyed a warmth and respect far removed from its intimate use.

We carried on with more talk about the technical aspects of the project. As it got towards Bucky's departure time we had somehow moved on to a favourite topic - how on earth Bucky at the age of eighty-seven had such energy and drive - running a punishing schedule that would have grounded any one of us not half his age. Bucky on this occasion unlike in the past, explained that it was all in the mind and that it was his mental attitude to life that enabled him to set such impossible goals and to realise them. He then added that he could at any time decide to pull the plug and then life would all be over.

Bucky finally departed. As planned he stopped the night in Washington and arrived the following day in Los Angeles to be at his wife's bedside. Bucky died at her side a few days later, on 1 July. Anne followed him within 36 hours. As we said afterwards he decided to pull the plug. The expression has an unfortunate scientific ring to it - entirely appropriate to the public image of Bucky as a cold technocrat. Nothing could be so far removed from the truth. What was never talked about was his poetic, sentimental and deeply spiritual dimension. That, in the end, was what for me his life and inevitably his final act was really about.

### **Norman Foster**

1983