

The Rudolph Years: Yale and the World

florida / caribbean ARCHITECT
Diane D. Greer* spring 2009

In the fall of 2008, Sarasota architect Carl Abbott, FAIA, was invited to take part in Yale University's "Paul Rudolph Celebration." The celebration focused on the restoration and rededication of one of Yale's most important modern structures, the Art & Architecture Building designed by Paul Rudolph in the early 1960s. The building has now been renamed Paul Rudolph Hall.

Carl Abbott was one of three members of a panel that included two of his classmates at Yale, Lord Norman Foster and Lord Richard Rogers, all of whom were students of Rudolph's in the Master's program. Both Foster and Rogers have offices in London and have designed buildings around the world and both are recipients of the Pritzker Prize. Only Abbott has remained stateside, working from an office in Sarasota where nearly everything he has designed has been recognized with a design award. In 1982, when Abbott's Casa del Ceilo was cited with an Award of Excellence in Architecture by AIA Florida, Paul Rudolph served on the design jury. Rudolph's comment about his former student's project was that "the balancing of solids to voids and the flow of space horizontally and vertically is handled in a remarkable way." Last year, the Casa was recognized with the 25-Year Test of Time Award by AIA Florida. Abbott's work, like Rudolph's, has been identified with the architecturally significant movement known as the Sarasota School.

Abbott, Foster and Rogers were not just classmates at Yale, they were great friends who studied and traveled together, experiencing the work



Above, L to R: Norman Foster, Richard Rogers and Carl Abbott at Yale in 1962. Photo courtesy of Carl Abbott. Below, In the Master's design studio at Yale, Paul Rudolph and Serge Chermayoff, seated and Carl Abbott standing during a 1961 jury. Photo courtesy of Carl Abbott.

of Frank Lloyd Wright during a semester break trip to Chicago, Taliesin and Falling Water. They now agree that Wright's buildings had a profound impact on their own work, just as it had on Rudolph who described Wright as the greatest architect of all time. Coming to Yale from England, Foster and Rogers only knew Wright's work from books. But, since Abbott had a car at the time, he was able to introduce them to Wright's buildings in person.



Paul Goldberger, architecture editor for the *New York Times*, served as panel moderator. In his opening remarks, he noted that it is difficult to separate the A&A, as it is known, from any discussion of Rudolph, as an architect or an educator. It was both one of the greatest successes and the greatest failures of his career. At the time he designed the building, he was Dean of Yale's Department of Architecture and it is hard to imagine that once the final design was approved, there was no discussion about it between the architect and his students. Since all three of the panel members graduated in 1962, they never actually studied in the A&A, but all three had seen it in later years and knew its history. As Carl Abbott noted, "the building was coming up out of the ground, the basements were being formed and the walls, it was discovered, had to be hand-hammered to

achieve the desired effect.” Although Rudolph declined to discuss the building years after it was completed, probably owing to the love-hate relationship that students, faculty and critics had with it, he did say in a 1988 interview published in *Architecture* that talking about the building was “a very painful subject” and that he didn’t think he could “look very objectively at it.”

Working with materials gener-



The newly renovated Art & Architecture Building at Yale. Designed by Paul Rudolph, the building opened in 1963 and has recently been remodeled and added to by Charles Gwathmey, FAIA. It was renamed Paul Rudolph Hall in 2008. Photo courtesy of Yale University.

ously provided to me by both Carl Abbott and Yale University, I have pieced together the sense of a building that I have never seen in person and a man I only met once. Most recently, the November 2008 issue of the *Yale Alumni Magazine* contained an expansive article entitled “Love It? Hate It? Or Both? Yale’s Most Controversial Masterpiece.” The author, Yale graduate Blair Kamin, is architecture critic for the *Chicago Tribune* and his article traces the history of the building from the glory days of its opening in 1963 when almost everyone appreciated

“Rudolph’s poured-in-place concrete castle” through a fire of suspicious origin in 1969 and finally into disrespect in the 1980s when postmodernism and its nostalgia for history were in vogue. It was during this period that both the building and its architect found their reputations suffering. Again quoting Kamin: “Rarely have soaring architectural ambition and the simple quotidian needs of users clashed as violently as they have at the corner of York and Chapel Streets.” This is a reference to a building that did not function well, was uncomfortable and difficult to maintain. It was not until the late 1980s when a reaction to postmodernism and its superficial decoration set in, that the building and Rudolph began to regain the respect that they both deserved.

Even as it was opening in 1963, Rudolph admitted that the building’s interior space was inadequate despite his packing 37 levels into its 10 floors. An addition had been planned from the beginning although Rudolph never participated in its design. That commission fell many years later to another Yale graduate, Charles Gwathmey, FAIA, who was an undergraduate when Abbott, Foster and Rogers were there in the early 60s. The difficult task of restoring and reserving a landmark, and adding to it, was formidable and probably made more so by the fact that Gwathmey worked for Rudolph when he was a student at Yale. The success or failure of Gwathmey’s addition is a subject for another discussion, but everyone seems to agree that his restoration/rehabilitation of the A&A is magnificent. Kamin describes it as: “Here, space flows in completely unexpected ways - up, down in, out, sideways. Light entering through skylights bathes the muscular concrete columns.”

And so it was on November 8, 2008 when Abbott, Foster and Rogers returned to New Haven to participate in a discussion about Yale’s Department of Architecture when Paul Rudolph was Dean and professor.

Paul Rudolph was born in 1918 and died in 1997. For seven years, from 1958 to 1965, he chaired Yale’s Department of Architecture. Having won a Winchester Fellowship and a Fulbright Grant, he was awarded the Brunner Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1970. In 1990, he was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award from the New York State Society of Architects. In 1989 Rudolph received the Florida AIA Gold Medal.

It begins in Florida....

It could be said that Rudolph’s career in architecture began in Florida when in the late 1940s after graduating from Harvard under Walter Gropius, he went to work in the Sarasota office of Ralph Twitchell, AIA. According to John Howey, FAIA, author of *The Sarasota School of Architecture, 1941-1966*, Rudolph was “enamored with Frank Lloyd Wright’s recent work, particularly Florida Southern College... and [he] was attracted to tropical Florida.”

Rudolph’s influence on architecture cannot be overstated. According to Howey, his “aesthetic development began with the Florida residential box he separated into structured roof planes and floating platforms subdivided by simple screen walls.” In five short months in Sarasota, “Twitchell’s own residence and three others were designed with Rudolph’s help.” Rudolph and Twitchell worked together for a while, but ultimately dissolved their partnership in 1951 to establish separate offices. Between 1952 and 1960, Rudolph designed many sig-

including a number of residences, Riverview High School and Sarasota High School.

It is extremely important to note that the Sarasota School of Architecture is not a regional style of architecture that is exclusive and unique to Sarasota County, as some might believe. It is an internationally important style that rose from the melding of two major architectural movements, Wright's organic architecture and Gropius' International Style. Rudolph arrived in Sarasota fresh from Harvard where Walter Gropius was his teacher and he came steeped in the traditions of the Bauhaus. Twitchell, who had come to Sarasota to work on the Ringling home, Ca d'Zan, was very interested in Wright's work in Florida, especially at Florida Southern College. Both men admired Wright's work and what sprang from their relationship was a melding of the two philosophies and a design aesthetic that Rudolph took with him when he left Florida for New Haven. It is interesting to see that in a building like Norman Foster's Commerzbank Tower in Frankfurt, Germany, completed in 2007, he placed a garden on every tenth floor of what is essentially an International Style building. Organic architecture meets the International Style, just as it did in Rudolph's work years earlier.

Abbott, Foster and Rogers on Rudolph

"To this day I think of myself as a very bad teacher, as opposed to a critic or a theoretician." This is how Paul Rudolph described himself in a 1988 interview with Michael Crosbie, printed in the series *Writings on Architecture: Paul Rudolph*. It's an unusual quote to use to begin a discussion of Paul Rudolph as an academic and teacher. But, clearly it was a sincere comment

and he went on to say: "It seemed to me that (as a teacher) I should never talk about myself as an architect, and indeed I didn't. I never talked about what I was doing. I tried to talk in terms of principle and to this day I think that's very important - the differentiation between an architect and a teacher or a theoretician or a critic is the difference between day and night.



The "Rudolph Years at Yale" panel, L to R: Lord Norman Foster, Carl Abbott FAIA, Lord Richard Rogers and Paul Goldberger. Photo courtesy of Yale University.

"As a teacher or critic, it seems very important to me to be as objective as possible and to talk only in terms of principle, never how I myself, as an architect, would try to carry something out. I really learned that from Gropius. All of us have our biases, and no matter how much we'd like to get rid of them, we can't totally. But it's the job of a teacher, I believe, to look objectively at something - not how we would do it, but to talk in terms of principles. Because I think principles don't really change. How you carry them out changes and the problems change, but not the principles."

Paul Goldberger began the discussion with Abbott, Foster and Rogers with this statement: "This picture

was painted of Rudolph as an incredibly powerful, forceful personality and yet, at the same time, not someone who tried to force his own style and work on anybody. He did not want the school to be churning out 'mini-Rudolphs.' He saw himself as bringing out the student's own voice. That particular combination of broad-mindedness does not always go with a

personality as forceful and uncompromising [as Rudolph's]." But, Rudolph was at the peak of his career at this point and was, in fact, a force to be reckoned with.

Abbott: "Rudolph used shock treatment with his students. We were getting a type of Gestalt Therapy that had to do with, 'Am I right? What am I really worth? Can I do this?' We went through all of this. But, if Rudolph felt a student was working hard, he was very encouraging and very supportive. He encouraged you to stretch. He could also be very militant, especially in juries. He was known to throw a student out of school for producing a bad design."

Rogers: “I personally came to Yale because of what Rudolph had done before [in Florida] - the small houses and the lightweight structures which influenced me more than his later buildings.”

Abbott: “There were 15 of us in the Master’s Class and many of us, I was fortunately one, had been offered the opportunity to go either to Penn [where Luis Kahn was] or Yale. We chose Yale because it appeared that Rudolph was going to push us to go in our own direction, and he did. At the time, Rudolph was going in many directions himself and an article that came out at the time raised the question, ‘can Rudolph possibly run a major architecture school when he is searching so much himself?’ In conclusion, the article said, “Maybe this makes an ideal teacher, if the students can take it.”

Foster: “We can all agree what Yale was. It was Rudolph in the beginning and then Serge Chermayeff came and we had two individuals running in parallel. Yale was Rudolph as an educator and that was totally different from Rudolph as an architect.”

Abbott: “In his studio, Rudolph would come to your board and ask you to talk about your project. He would say, ‘I am one of the most prejudiced architects in the world, however, I will try to look at your project as though I had no prejudices and see your project for its merit and guide you with that.’”

Goldberger: “In other words, judge your projects by your principles, not his.”

Abbott: “I will always remember how Rudolph talked about seeing a building as you fly over it, drive by it, walk up to it. These were all different layers and every layer had to be observed within its urban context. These were big, big issues to him.”

Foster: “Rudolph was very self-confident. For example, he knew he could bring into the school the best brains from anywhere in the world. There was Shadrach Woods, Serge Chermayeff, Ernesto Rogers, James Stirling and Philip Johnson for our juries. We were so lucky to be exposed to these extraordinary, talented and powerful influences.”

Abbott: “And those juries were not gentle juries. I referred to them as being in front of a firing squad.”

Foster: “The jurors that Rudolph brought in were as diverse as the buildings in New Haven, which was like an architectural laboratory. The jurors he invited would often disagree with him violently on philosophy. But, we were exposed to some brilliant minds, architects we respected.”

Rogers: “One important person who was not there physically, but was there in every other way was Louis Kahn. Our class met in the top floor of his Art Gallery building, so everything you saw around you was Luis Kahn. It is one of the best buildings. So, as students, there were all of these things coming together, creating us.”

Goldberger: “Rudolph the architect and Rudolph the educator were two different people. But, his architecture was a very powerful presence which makes me wonder if it was a struggle not to be more Rudolph like in your work?”

Foster: “No, because in his role as a teacher he would tell you the strengths and weaknesses of Mies, for example. If a student elected to pursue a Mesian approach, he had a very clear understanding of the criteria by which his project would be judged. You knew that the people who were going to judge your project were sharp as individual jurors and collectively, as a design jury.”

Question from the audience:

“Things are so much more complex today in a professional practice. What’s your advice for today’s students?”

Rogers: “I would interpret your question to be ‘how do you achieve quality in professional practice?’ That is the key. It is not about numbers, it is about individuals and history. Another interesting question is ‘why was architectural quality in the States so much richer when we were students than it is today?’ Why are there these periods in history - what made those moments? How can we as individuals and as a society create these conditions where the quality of architecture is better, the quality of the building environment is better? We know much more today in terms of technology, we know more sociology, we know more about climate change. The real question is, has architecture gotten better?”

I was provided a wealth of information with which to prepare this article. Sadly, space limitations necessitated editing the panel discussion to these few comments. Such a rich topic deserves much more attention. Special thanks to Carl Abbott, FAIA, Lord Norman Foster, Lord Richard Rogers, Paul Goldberger and Yale University for allowing me to use this material and reprint portions of it here.