

Paul Rudolph



Paul M. Rudolph (1918-1997) was born a minister's son in Elkton, Kentucky. Inspired by architecture from an early age, Rudolph studied architecture as an undergraduate at Alabama Polytechnic (now Auburn University), and—after a brief period in the Navy during WWII—successfully completed graduate studies at Harvard under Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius. Rudolph was, early on, a pioneering Modernist architect in Florida—a major figure of the “Sarasota School of Architecture.”

He was Dean of the Yale School of Architecture from 1958-1965, and during & after his tenure created unique and powerful architecture for nearly half-a-century, designing prominent civic, religious, business, residential and educational buildings and campuses. Among his most renown designs—indicative of his broad artistry and grasp of functional criteria—are: the Yale Art & Architecture Building (now known as Rudolph Hall), Burroughs Wellcome Headquarters, Endo Labs, Dartmouth's Main Campus, the Tuskegee Institute Chapel, the Jewett Arts Center at Wellesley College, the Boston Government Services Center, the Milam Residence, the Healy house, the Lippo Center in Hong Kong, and the Concourse in Singapore.

Despite the waning of Rudolph's reputation during the ascendance of Post-Modernism in the 70's, his work and formal & educational legacy continues to have a profound impact on the architecture of our era. Rudolph is considered one of America's greatest Late-Modernist architects, and was an inspirational mentor to all he taught. His former students include some of contemporary architecture's most internationally respected architects, including Lord Norman Foster, Lord Richard Rogers, and Robert A.M. Stern, and many others distinguished in the field.

A Backgrounder

A few words on 'Paul Rudolph the Man' and Testimonials by other architects and how he influenced Modulightor and how the Collections Gallery evolved and led to he beginning of the Paul Rudolph Foundation. (Ernst Wagner)

The wide interest in the building - 6 publications in 6 months emerged - are probably rooted in three elements inseparable:

- The Late Modernism is now a historical style.
Paul Rudolph as an architect understood and spoke that language magically and brilliantly from a formal, architectural viewpoint. But Rudolph saw and created also...
- The way lighting should be and...
- The way the collections are grouped and contextualized within the space.

We bought 246 East 58 Street in 1989. Originally a commercial non-descript structure, Paul wanted to create his own environment. 246 was designed and built by him. The building - a wood structure- was dismantled and replaced with a steel structure. For the interior construction he became his own contractor.

This apartment is officially a two-floor apartment or - more correctly: one floor and a mezzanine. But Paul Rudolph did not just do two-floor apartments-instead he thought in terms of spatial movement, psychology of space proportions and balance. He created an intricate, multi tiered spiral of spaces. Both the width and the height of the space keep changing, adjusting in a series of movements of rectilinear and horizontal planes, creating a kinetic assemblage of spaces of multiple dimensions.

The Detailing

Instead of the usual heavy diagonal structure supporting solid steps and risers- Rudolph created a delicate sequence of 'floating' steps cantilevered and suspended, dissolving almost invisibly into the fabric of the shelves of the apartment. Steps floating, moving, changing direction- are all integral parts of the spatial concept, which constantly changes as one moves. He designed the furniture using a standard modular shelving system and Plexiglas.

Rudolph undertook -with me as the 'small sail' the developments of 23 Beekman Place and 246 East 58 Street which are 'offsprings' of

close friendship that evolved over 25 years. He designed and built an other townhouses in New York, the Halston House on East 63rd. Street: a classic modernist design, beautifully and elegantly proportioned.

In the seventies: 23 Beekman Place - his famous Quadruplex.

An incredibly rich, very personal vision of the possibilities that architecture offers: like at 246 both intimate and Piranesi-like soaring. An orchestration of interlocking spaces.

It became a design laboratory where he constantly would change, try out and experiment new versions:

A composition of rich textures, reflective materials that caught the light in magical ways. We counted 17 levels that, pinwheel-like, floated harmoniously, leading elegantly proportioned from one to the next level. Unfortunately the new owner stripped the richness of this masterpiece to the basic space where Paul started. Paul, in his last will, expressed Paul and in strong words that the apartment be preserved and made available to the architectural community as a place for meetings, gatherings, colloquia, etc.

23 Beekman Place was constantly evolving: light plays, water falls, canals on the terrace were built. There was a Plexiglas Jacuzzi on the top level of the building where you could see at one point over 30 feet of dazzling spaces underneath; a 20th century version of the Sir John Sloane House in London.

At one point, I asked Paul: "Is it not going to be too complicated?"- He replied: "No, no, you don't understand: architecture is like music! Do you think that a Bach fugue is too complicated?"

When we built 246 East 58th Street, Paul would, like at 23 Beekman Place, meet with the workers in the morning and carefully, --like a sculptor-- make mock-ups with foam boards and would 'merge' the built forms with the 'voids' until he was satisfied.

Influenced by the minimalism of Mies, the richness of Corbu's forms and spaces and the harmonious and dynamic complexity of Wright he created his own vocabulary of intricately interwoven spaces.

For me, the experience of living in these spaces became an experience of Living in a sculpture, in a work of art: wherever you move you see other new, fresh, energizing and exciting visual aspects.

Paul may have had a similar career like Frank Lloyd Wright: Famous as a young architect- then a long valley in his middle years in America (though Paul realized a rich body of work in the seventies through the nineties in the Far East where he was greatly respected), then a peak towards the end. In the early 90's the interest in his work and modernism started to soar - he would receive design classes on Saturdays from all over- and in the mid nineties commissions from his homeland started to come in.

Testimonials by other architects:

Philip Johnson stated after Paul's death: " Rudolph is the Frank Lloyd Wright of his generation".

Many of his students at Yale that one meets tell me that he was One of the most prolific, influential and formative architectural teachers of the 20th Century.

He was a brilliant master draftsman and renderer who were able to jut down an incredible wealth of imaginations with the speed of light. People would lament or make it known in speeches that he also was the most under-recognized important architects or the 20th Century.

Architects like Peter Eisenman, Norman Foster, Charles Gwathmey, Richard Rogers, Der Scut, Robert Stern, Stanley Tigerman, -just to name a few -were his students. Foster said: "Paul Rudolph was the single most formative force in my life".

Somebody asked Gropius about his most talented students "Paul Rudolph and I.M. Pei", in that order. Joanna Steichen, widow of Edward Steichen, and a long time friend of ours said to me:" Gifted people often are difficult - Paul was not ".

Former employees would comment: He was extremely focused, could become impatient and was therefore demanding and could get frustrated when they would not 'get the gist'. But he was always fair and understanding in a fatherly way.

After he was gone I contemplated what I could say about him and came up with a 'veil' of words of testimonials - in alphabetical order- about many of his qualities as a human being. I wrote these qualities down on the plaque at the entry of the apartment.

“ Open House New York” asked me if I would make the building available for their events: In ten hours towards 2000 people visited! A testimonial that his oeuvre is being rediscovered and celebrated. Paul would be pleased. He knew who he was.

A few words Light and Lighting

The effect of light and lighting as a fourth dimension was of intense interest to Rudolph.

In the late 70's, I was at awe by Rudolph's fascinating, imaginative experiments with lighting. There was the infinity light room: He would drape 'light curtains' (vertical Christmas tree light strings, connected horizontally with frosted Plexiglas tubes) in front of two mirrored walls and a mirrored ceiling. Dimming the lights down was an electrifying experience: Zillions of little stars would explode into infinity and one felt like floating in the 'milky way'. "This is for me!", I thought and Modulightor was born, supported by Paul Rudolph.

Corbusier influenced Rudolph greatly and what Corbu's "*Modulor*" taught was translated and engineered over numerous years into lighting products that allow the designer to specify lighting solutions that follow situation specific requirements, leaving the optimal freedom of lighting design.

As he did integrate his furniture design he thought lighting should do the same. While the fixture market offered plenty of good 'off the shelf' fixtures, he thought that there was much more creative potent solutions for lighting. Short of available lighting product he envisioned 'systems' that offered maximal design flexibility. He would define what 'his' lighting ought to be:

Lighting systems which are designed to be designed: standard parts that can mate with wire ways giving the designer the freedom to come up with a lighting fixture design configuration that follows situation specific requirements in form and function.

Over the centuries lighting fixture design echoed the style of the times . Architects and Designers have always used lighting as an integral part and focal point of architecture: the 18th Century Chandeliers of the Baroque, the Colonial fixtures, the Tiffanies , Art Deco, etc..

Rudolph thought that lighting ought to accomplish what the Lego or Erector system taught : standard luminaries or bulbs that can be grouped and combined or be specified (externally or internally) into standard extrusions or wireways. Today we have them available in up to 9 finishes, the tenth the designer can specify: they can be painted!

The new bulb technologies that came out in the seventies lent themselves to compact, miniaturized linear systems. He thought that miniaturization of the fixtures was important but also chandelier-like configurations as a focal point were necessary. Since lighting 'unifies and ties' a space together he would correlate and synchronize the fixture design in spaces: same

material, finishes and luminaries as chandeliers, linear pendants, linear brackets, wallwashers, accent fixtures, task lighting, bedside lighting, stellae etc. Modulightor is trying to manipulate light what 'it' wants to do.

Our compact Wallwashers and miniaturized Art Lights evolved first and are still some of our bestsellers. (And we make them from less than two inches and have made Artlight over 40 ft Art Lights.)

Rudolph on Light

"Reflected light coming from the wall is the most humane of all light. Since light travels in straight lines, the reflections from the walls come back to you as an individual, putting you indirect contact with the walls themselves. It is almost as if the walls are caressing you with their light. This explains the humanism of reflected light."

Designers and Architects would express what the light should or wants to do - a simple basic requirement for good design - and we developed a wide range of systems and engineered compatible extrusions of various sizes that can solve situation specific lighting problems as well as a formal ones in a wide range of customized configurations without the 'outer space cost' of true custom fixtures.

With Modulightor the designer can create their own design - within the Modulightor parts nomenclature- or choose Modulightor's designs or adapt it. What is shown in our showroom and our website is a small selection of project we have actually built: many variations were done. Good lighting specifications are probably one of the more difficult ones: They need more input from the designer, the sales person and the fabricator.

Paul was a formative force in the concept but he also designed actual fixtures that still sell today (www.modulightor.com). We are since last year occupying 4 levels in the building (2 basements and the first 2 floor above ground).

We are currently looking for another sales person for our team: We you know someone who might be interested and enthused about our concept, please let me know.

Collections Gallery

Paul was a collector: He would have liked to have a Giacometti or a Moore, but not having the funds, he created his own art. Rudolph thought that his spaces needed decorative accents that top the dynamic but calm spaces.

Like Giacometti's famous dog he would constantly 'sniff' for objects and by grouping or mounting them in certain ways they would become 'objects d'art'. These were often mundane 'things' that he visually liked; like 'bricks', he would group and arrange them in such a way so that these assemblages became a unique piece of decorative art: fresh and original. When traveling he constantly had his visual radar turned up, e.g? He would buy a box of Mexican milagros he found at the flea market and create a series of Plexiglas panels of a veil-like delicacy. Or he would mount old Moroccan textile combs mimicking two opposing armies.

In Mexico City he discovered at Sanborn's white robots. He was electrified and would summon the employees to 'get all of them available in the city'. He then patiently painted them on Sunday afternoons, positioned them in a lit, totem-like column of coves and the marvels of a 'Wunderkammer' emerged: like an army from outer space had arrived.

At *Maison Drouot* in Paris, he discovered Roman terracotta heads: We bought all of them. He then grouped twenty of them on delicate plexi stems and an archaic, dance-like assemblage was created as the dining table centerpiece. The rest of them became a miniature 'Antiquities Cabinet' on a shelf. Of course Andy Warhol work and Marcel Duchamp's compositions have made similar approaches.

Oscar Wilde quoted, "I have found that all ugly things are made by those who strive to make something beautiful and all beautiful things are made by those who strive to make something useful."

One may not quite agree with Mr. Wilde, but he has a point: Often, certain ordinary things, mounted in a certain context or space become daily happy encounters. It's like happy encounters with people you met - or pets for that matter-, except they stay with you and say daily : "Nice to see you again !"

Over the years, these collections have grown and developed into a gallery-like assemblage of over 100 categories. Amiss of space we just 'sprinkled' these things with our fixtures. Architects and Designers started to discover the charm of these collections and acquire them now for their client's delights.

Especially when they are well lit, they become alive, sparkling, exciting, unique focal points - for some other eyes an alternative to somewhat mundane decorative elements and a still relatively economic alternative to "Gallery art". Although finding good material is becoming increasingly more time consuming - simply because the 'good stuff' starts to become rarer. (www.collectionsgallery.us in development).

I feel that I was incredibly lucky to have gained the friendship and trust of this great man over a 25-year span. One of the great legacies of his to me was his continuing curiosity towards discovering and seeing things-and the world- with a new, fresh, vivid and intense eye - it affected me deeply. He taught me and many others to learn to see.

Colleagues, friends, and admirers of Paul's have formed a ***Paul Rudolph Heritage Foundation*** with the purpose to making his work more well-known, appreciated, and available on the web (www.paulrudolphheritagefoundation.org).

We need to and are dependent, as a charitable foundation, to raise funds. We do this via premises rentals, sale of books about Rudolph, sale of limited editions of sketches, drawings and renderings. Furniture and lighting he designed will be made available. We welcome volunteers in various capacities – e.g. organizing and website work -to help us in our activities towards celebrating the oeuvre of "*One of the important late modernist Architects*" to quote Charles Jenks.