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'Bilbao of Its Day' Gets an Overhaul, and an Addition



The Yale U. Art & Architecture Building, at left, is being renovated and an addition is being built, at right (Gwathmey Siegel image)

New York — At a lunch on Wednesday that was part news conference, part architecture-history lecture, and part class reunion, two of the country's most prominent architects described the challenges involved in renovating and adding to an icon of the Brutalist era, Yale University's 1963 Art & Architecture Building. The eight-story concrete-and-glass building is the best-known work of Paul Rudolph, who was chairman of Yale's architecture department from 1958 to 1965.

The renovation and expansion, due to be completed next summer at a cost of somewhere between \$125- and \$130-million, is the work of Charles Gwathmey, an alumnus of Yale's School of



Architecture who was a student of Rudolph's and became a close friend — and who contributed to the building's original design. Mr. Gwathmey, a founder of [Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects](#), has worked on the project with a classmate from the architecture school, Robert A.M. Stern, who is now the school's dean. The lunch was held in the offices of Mr. Stern's firm, [Robert A.M. Stern Architects](#), which has been much in the news since Mr. Stern was chosen to design President Bush's library, expected to be built at Southern Methodist University.

Mr. Stern praised Rudolph, who died in 1997, as "the most talented architect in America of his generation." Likening the Art & Architecture Building to Frank Gehry's famous museum in Spain, Mr. Stern said the

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Rudolph structure was “the Bilbao of its day,” pictured on the cover of every important design publication and visited by architects from around the world. (Mr. Stern should know — while he was a student, his job at the university was giving tours, he said.)

But he also said that the building “was not beloved by anyone who was not an architecture student or faculty member,” and that it was “a hard sell” to persuade the university to restore it. “Frankly, it’s only standing because it would be too expensive to tear down,” he said.

Mr. Gwathmey said the renovation will restore many of the building’s interior spaces, which had been cut up and otherwise altered over the years, and will replace the current windows with fenestration closer to what Rudolph originally designed. It will also bring all-new mechanical systems. The 87,000-square-foot addition, north of the original structure, will house the university’s art-history department. The addition will fulfill Rudolph’s expectation that his building would someday be expanded, and will take advantage of connections he designed into it for just that purpose.

Like Rudolph’s building, Mr. Gwathmey’s will have a strong vertical emphasis, but unlike the concrete original, the addition will be largely clad in zinc. A large limestone rectangle the same color as Rudolph’s concrete will project from the addition’s front and serve as a counterpoint to a similarly sized recess in the Rudolph structure. The addition will consist of a three-story base above two basement levels, plus two towers rising to the same height as the Rudolph building. A skylight above the third story will provide a focal point for an expanded art-and-architecture library, while other parts of the base will be covered by a green roof and by a terrace intended for rooftop parties.

“Our building represents a work in its own right when you’re in it,” said Mr. Gwathmey. But it is also “in a dialog” with Rudolph’s work, he said, and it will include “peekaboo windows” that will offer views of the original building that were never possible before. In keeping with the university’s sustainability goals, the project is designed to achieve a LEED silver rating, said Barbara A. Shailor, Yale’s deputy provost for the arts.

At the request of the investor Sid R. Bass, a Yale alumnus who has donated \$20-million toward the renovation, the Art & Architecture Building will be renamed the Rudolph Building. Mr. Bass, who became a lifelong architecture fan after taking Vincent Scully’s famous architecture-history class, commissioned a house from Rudolph in Fort Worth, Tex., in 1970.

The Art & Architecture Building has had a checkered history, to say the least. Rudolph — who had himself been a student of the great Modernist Walter Gropius — was given the commission for the building soon after arriving at Yale, Mr. Stern said. The new structure was to house galleries, studios, and offices for both the art and architecture programs. Architecture students at the time occupied the fourth floor of Louis Kahn’s 1953 [Yale University Art Gallery](#) — a landmark of Modernism that is directly across York Street from the site selected for the Art & Architecture Building.

The proximity of such a masterpiece proved daunting to Rudolph, whose design for the new building went through innumerable iterations. "He drove everybody pretty much to the end of madness," Mr. Stern said.

Not even the beginning of construction brought a halt to Rudolph's changes, Mr. Gwathmey said. While working on the renovation, he said, "we discovered something almost every day" that had clearly been changed at the last minute. Mr. Stern added that the university had signed "an open-ended contract" with the original builder, who was paid for time and materials, rather than for following agreed-upon plans.

"This was a pure manifestation of his desire to make the great Modernist, Brutalist building," Mr. Gwathmey said — and the more complex the building became, the better Rudolph liked it, he added. In the end, the building had 10 floors — two of them below grade — but a total of 37 levels, plus more than 40 flights of stairs. (Making the building completely accessible has proven impossible, Mr. Stern said, so the school has had to settle for making sure there are accessible alternatives to spaces that cannot be reached in a wheelchair.)

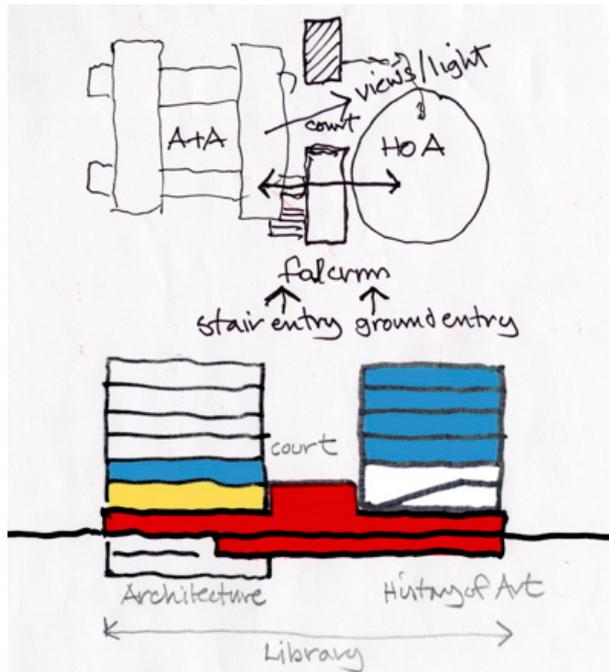
And however warm the building's initial welcome, it did not last. Critics of Brutalism's blocky aesthetic so vilified the structure that an embittered Rudolph eventually stopped discussing it, according to a 1998 article in the [Yale Alumni Magazine](#).

A 1969 fire closed the building for more than a year, although what caused the fire is still unknown. Equally serious was Rudolph's choice of sprayed asbestos for the building's ceilings, which later had to be later torn out and replaced. Rudolph himself eventually died of asbestosis, Mr. Stern said.

The renovation of the Art & Architecture Building comes on the heels of the Kahn gallery's \$44-million renovation by Polshek Partnership Architects. Plans are also in the works for renovations of Eero Saarinen's two Yale residential colleges, Morse and Ezra Stiles, as well as of the 1963 [Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library](#), by Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.

"Yale was a leader in the 1950s in building Modernist buildings," Mr. Stern said, "and now it's a leader in restoring them." But each, he said, "presents gargantuan problems to its owners."

So far, though, the problems almost all appear to have been resolvable. Mr. Stern pointed out with glee that the Art & Architecture Building's notorious orange carpet is being replaced with new carpet especially woven for the project. "It's coming back," he grinned, "in its full orangeneity." —*Lawrence Biemiller*



A sketch shows how the functions of the two buildings fit together. Red denotes the much-expanded library (Gwathmey Siegel image).



Lawrence Biemiller | Wednesday November 14, 2007 | [Permalink](#) | [Contact us](#)