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NEWS HEADLINES

Gwathmey Helps Yale Architecture School Icon Re-emerge

Alum returns to New Haven and retraces to the steps of a mentor

by Zach Mortice
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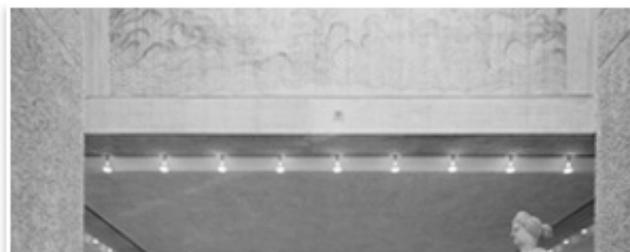


Summary: In renovating Paul Rudolph's iconic Yale Art and Architecture Building, Charles Gwathmey, FAIA, and his firm Gwathmey Siegel & Associates have been tasked with recovering a landmark from years of disuse, disdain, and disaster that arose from an intersection of changing architectural fashions and political climate. Gwathmey

(who worked on the building's design while he was a student at Yale) will present Rudolph's design as it was originally intended, and his additions to the building continue in its tradition of abstract Modernism.

Rudolph's Yale Art and Architecture Building has been called a lot of things: a failed icon, a Modernist masterpiece, a symbol of institutional antipathy to creative life, an example of Modernism at its most aloof and formally extravagant, and the most important building by one of the mid-20th century's most important architects. In a 1998 *Yale Alumni Magazine* article, Robert Stern, FAIA, who would later become the dean of Yale's architecture school, called the building an attempt to synthesize and reconcile the conflicting strains of Modernism patterned after the work of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright.

But initially, the Yale Art and Architecture Building did much more to illustrate the fractures within Modernism than to heal them, pitting Modernists vs. Postmodernists, formalists vs. functionalists. Those debates have mostly subsided, and the



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1. Yale University Art & Architecture Building from the southeast, 1963. Photograph © Ezra Stoller/Esto.
2. Architecture studios, Yale University Art & Architecture building, 1963. Photograph © Ezra Stoller/Esto.
3. Section of Yale arts complex looking north. Courtesy Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects.
4. Original parti diagrams of Yale arts complex. Courtesy Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects.
5. Original parti diagram of Yale arts complex. Courtesy Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects.
6. Model of Yale arts complex showing York Street elevation by Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects. Photograph: Photo © Jock Pottle.

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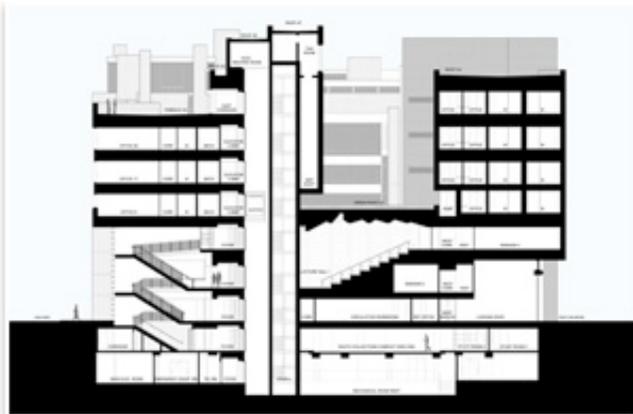
building's reputation has vastly improved. But what remains is a structure that has weathered seasons of resentment, adoration, and unfocused and insensitive renovations, leaving its power confused and diluted. Gwathmey has designed an addition and restoration plan that will bring the building back into focus. When it reopens in the summer of 2008, along with a new arts library and an art history building, the Art and Architecture Building will be renamed after Rudolph.



“The ultimate Modern building”

“It was a monumental pressure,” Gwathmey says of Rudolph’s struggle to design the structure. Gwathmey did design drawings of the Art and Architecture building for Rudolph before he received his MArch from Yale in 1962.

In the 1950s and ’60s, the university (now arguably the nation’s premiere architecture school) was amassing an impressive stock of world-class architecture. Examples include Eero Saarinen’s Ingalls Rink, the Beinecke Library by Gordon Bunshaft, and, of course, Louis Kahn’s Yale University Art Gallery, which sits across the street from Rudolph’s site. “Even as the building was under construction, Rudolph made so many little changes to make the ultimate Modern building that could co-exist equally with Kahn,” says Gwathmey.



When the Brutalist building (which Gwathmey likens to a “concrete cage”) opened in 1963, it drew mixed reviews. It was praised by the *New York Times*, and received a 1964 AIA Honor Award. However, it was also subversively panned by British Architecture critic Nicolas Pevsner at a dedicatory event. Pevsner, a strict functionalist, scolded architects for their interest in form for form’s sake, which was interpreted to be a

rejection of Rudolph’s formally daring building, according to the *Yale Alumni Magazine* article. Thick with parallel protruding and interlocking masses and voids, the concrete behemoth does seem dramatically to exaggerate the structural elements, meant to determine form in functional Miesian Modernism, into sculptural shapes.

Some objected to the building as being too heroic or overbearing. With Kahn’s art gallery across the street, Gwathmey says the two buildings establish their own context beyond historicism and neighborhood sensibilities. Day to day, the art students who shared the building complained of being ghettoized, according to *Yale Alumni Magazine*, because art classrooms and studios were placed in the least favorable spaces in the facility.

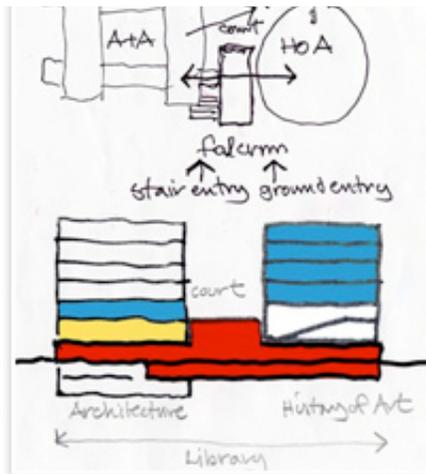
The building was also caught in a sharp shift in architectural tastes, away from abstract expressionist Modernist towards historicist Postmodernism. One particular Postmodernist was put in a position of great authority over the building in 1965, when Charles Moore became the dean of the architecture school.

The political tumult of the 1960s also ensnared the Art and Architecture Building. Some students saw it as a labyrinthian expression of impersonal, intuitional



arrogance, and this interpretation lumped it in with the forces of the status quo that were being vociferously faced down (occasionally with violence) on college campuses and urban riots across the nation.

Gwathmey uses the word “regime” when talking about Moore’s resentment of the building; an ironic choice that illustrates the polarization of the ‘60s, given that Moore, the playful Postmodernist, likely thought that Rudolph and his ilk were more aptly described as such. The rejection of the building, Gwathmey says, was both “philosophic” and a “change in the point of view about Modern architecture.”



A fire in 1969 and subsequent insensitive repairs further blurred the line between politics and architecture and the building’s original intent and condition. When the smoke cleared, rumors were reported in the media that the fire was set by architecture students angry about the building, though investigators could never find proof of this, and the fire was ruled an accident. To repair the damage, Moore allowed the building to be broken up, with ad-hoc partitions obscuring Rudolph’s design. By 1988, Rudolph had disavowed the building, refusing to talk about it. “The building became, in a sense, a victim,” says Gwathmey.

The turnaround

Gwathmey and his New York-based firm have previously renovated two similar pre-cast concrete libraries from the same era, in Akron, Ohio, and Fort Wayne, Ind. He calls Rudolph’s building a similar “serious moment in time” in the history of Modernism. The younger Yale graduates at Gwathmey’s firm all look favorably on the Art and Architecture Building. And architectural fashion may swing back into its favor as well. Contemporary Modernism appears much more amenable to the type of monumental abstraction seen in Rudolph’s building than has been the case since its original dedication.



Yale University Planner Laura Cruickshank, AIA, says the Art and Architecture Building would be important enough to renovate and expand even if its reputation hadn’t improved. The renovation and addition is part of an infrastructure update that rivals the building drive that birthed the project. Yale is spending \$400

million annually on its facilities, renovating 54 buildings and constructing 16 new ones, according to the *New York Times*.

Art and architecture

The restoration of the Art and Architecture Building will add air conditioning (which it has never had), install historically accurate windows and new lighting and furnishings, and restore the open spaces and vertical views compromised by the post-fire repairs. The project aims to be rated LEED® Silver. As Yale’s architecture program matured and formalized, it became its own school, and the art department decamped for separate spaces as well. The addition of the new Jeffrey Loria Center for the History of Art and the Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library (all currently under construction) will “keep all of these groups in that area for the synergies that emerge from the different artists working together,” says Cruickshank.

Gwathmey and his firm focused on creating a dynamic and



involved relationship between his building and Rudolph's. Though the multi-leveled plan of the Art and Architecture building (its seven stories are divided among 37 levels) is not emulated in the art history center, the tripartite vertical windows on the art



history building directly reference similar ones on Rudolph's design. The arts library sits behind the art history building and acts as a fulcrum between the other two structures. The complex's elevator core will be located in the History of Art addition, which will change circulation patterns and alter the sequence of visual events in the original building. The History of Art project is clad in dark gray zinc panels and lighter gray aluminum panels, which are an ordered and engaging contrast to the rough-hewn concrete of Rudolph's work. The History of Art center does match the Art and Architecture building in pure exterior volumetric complexity.

Gwathmey calls this project "an inventive restoration," and its intent is largely to clean away history and present the art and architecture school as it was originally intended.

"You may love [Rudolph's] work or you may hate his work, but it's significant architecture," says Cruickshank. If Gwathmey's restorations succeed, students and visitors will get to place themselves along this continuum after seeing the building on its own merits for the first time in decades.

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