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NEWS

06.11.2008

Rudolph Revisited

In September, Yale's famed Art & Architecture Building -- Paul Rudolph's controversial tribute to a tougher, more creative modernism -- reopens following a complete renovation. Not only will the renamed Rudolph Building have air-conditioning, but its concrete corduroy towers will be accessorized with an addition by Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects.



THE RESTORED RUDOLPH BUILDING, ABOVE LEFT, INCLUDES IMPROVED MECHANICAL SYSTEMS AND NEW SUSTAINABLE FEATURES. GWATHMEY SIEGEL'S ADDITION, ABOVE RIGHT AND RENDERED BELOW, WILL HOUSE THE HISTORY OF ART DEPARTMENT. COURTESY GWATHMEY SIEGEL & ASSOCIATES



to be completed by mid-August.

Paul Rudolph designed the building, known on campus as the A&A Building, while he was chair of the Yale School of Architecture. An intricately conceived, grooved, bush-hammered concrete structure with 37 levels on 10 floors, it was hailed by critics as a marvel of space, light, and mass. But its fortress-like appearance, rigid plan, and indifference to its neighbors won few campus admirers. In that era of political uproar, students saw it as an emblem of establishment arrogance. In 1969, it was severely damaged in a fire, the cause of which was never determined.

To make matters worse, Rudolph's successor as chair of the architecture department was the postmodernist Charles Moore. He oversaw the building's reconstruction, including the removal of asbestos insulation throughout. To address students' needs, Moore permitted the ad hoc partitioning of the interior, significantly altering its spatial integrity. Over the years, other alterations further diluted Rudolph's vision, causing him to ultimately disavow what had once been considered his crowning achievement. "The building was a victim," said a rueful Gwathmey, who was a leading defender of modernism in the style wars of the late 1960s and early '70s. Ironically, one of his chief antagonists was

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the young turk postmodernist Stern. While Stern calls Rudolph "the most talented architect of his generation," his commitment to renovating his professor's landmark is as a historicist.

While there is a renewed critical interest in Paul Rudolph, Stern notes that getting Yale to restore the much-derided building was "a hard sell." The university only agreed because tearing it down would have been more expensive. While Gwathmey proudly recalls evenings in grad school "spent hunched over a drafting board with my rapidograph, working on the building's plans," he was not the original choice for the task. Stern first selected Richard Meier to design the addition and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's David Childs, class of '67, to undertake the renovation. But dividing the project between two architects proved unfeasible. Rumor has it that the collaboration between the teams was less than smooth, and that Meier's addition blocked the panoramic views from the building's upper-floor studios, one of its few cherished features, irritating the architecture faculty. Apparently in response to all this dysfunction, the renovation's patron, Yale alumnus Sid Bass, whose Fort Worth home is one of Rudolph's most celebrated residential designs, pulled his pledge of \$20 million. More evidence, it seemed, that the building was jinxed.

Gwathmey professes ignorance of what exactly prompted the earlier team's dismissal or Bass's displeasure, conceding only that "it's a challenging commission because the clients are all architects." He added that Meier graciously provided him with his model of the building when he took over the project in 2005. Happily, when Bass saw Gwathmey's new scheme he reinstated his gift, along with the stipulation that the renovated structure be known henceforth as the Rudolph Building.



EZRA STOLLER/ESTO

Gwathmey's firsthand knowledge of Rudolph's design was of little use during the renovation. Intimidated by building next door to Louis Kahn's Yale University Art Gallery, Rudolph not only designed numerous iterations of what he hoped would be the greatest modernist building of its day, but he also continued to tinker with his design even during the construction process. This was possible because the university had negotiated a time and materials contract with the builder. "The more complicated it got, the better he liked it," Gwathmey chuckled. "Almost every day we discovered conditions that were not in the plans." Unfortunately, Rudolph's ambition surpassed the construction technologies of the time, and by the time the university was ready to renovate, the building was in poor condition, with rebar poking through the concrete in some places.



EZRA STOLLER/ESTO

For Gwathmey, one of the worst indignities to Rudolph's building was the installation of insulated fenestration composed of small busy panes, which detracted from the building's spatial rhythms. He rectified matters by installing what are the largest panes of Viracon insulated panes ever fabricated. He has also restored Rudolph's clerestories, his dramatic open spaces on the main floor and between the fourth and fifth floors, and the internal bridge. Gwathmey's scrupulous attention to detail has extended to commissioning an orange carpet based on the exact specifications of a two-inch-wide swath of rug rescued from the original building, and to designing lighting fixtures fitted with energy-efficient metal halide bulbs that mimic the exposed incandescent ones in the suspended lighting system Rudolph conceived for the building.



COURTESY GWATHMEY SIEGEL & ASSOCIATES

One of the reasons students deemed the building arrogant was that while Rudolph fussed over architectural details like custom lighting, he neglected creature comforts like air conditioning, which made the building insufferable in summer. Remedying this situation posed a challenge because there was little tolerance in the ceiling for wiring and ducts. Gwathmey opted for an energy-efficient radiant ceiling panel system, which cut the ductwork by two thirds. (The project has a LEED Silver rating.)

Accessibility posed another contemporary challenge for designers. Few buildings could be more hostile to the disabled than the A&A. So that it would comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, Gwathmey placed additional elevators in the tower at the A&A's north end, which he transformed into the fulcrum between the building and its addition. The tower also houses a handicap-accessible lobby and entrance for the main lecture theater, Hastings Hall. While there are still multilevel passages that are not accessible by wheelchair, there are now alternative routes.

THE A&A BUILDING AS IT APPEARED IN 1963 (TOP), IN BOLD CONTRAST TO LOUIS KAHN'S YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY (CENTER) ACROSS THE STREET. THE ROBERT B. HAAS FAMILY ARTS LIBRARY (ABOVE) LINKS THE ORIGINAL STRUCTURE TO ITS ADDITION.

Gwathmey has sought to give the adjacent zinc-paneled Loria Center an identity of its own, while engaging the A&A in a visual dialogue, matching the glazed void of its facade with a protruding limestone solid that similarly has three rows of windows. His addition consists of a three-story base with a tower rising to the same height as the Rudolph building. Its outdoor terraces on the fourth and seventh floors offer views of the building never before seen. Linking the two on the ground floor is an expanded glass and aluminum library, which for the first time brings together the university's art, architecture, drama, and arts of the book collections under one roof. Gwathmey's use of zinc and limestone is an attempt to remedy Rudolph's supposed contextual indifference. Louis Kahn's nearby Center for British Art is also clad in zinc, and the limestone not only picks up the hue of Rudolph's concrete, but is also a material used throughout Yale's old campus.

Ornery but brilliant, much like the man himself, the Rudolph Building will doubtless provoke and inspire many generations of Yale students to come. However, once a statement of a defiant modernity, it is today an architectural relic, making it an instructive icon as well.

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