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feature

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The Building That Won’t Go Away

First celebrated, then vilified, burned, and battered, the late Paul Rudolph’s Art & Architecture Building may see a renaissance as the School of Art prepares to escape at last.

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by Mark Alden Branch ’86

In an age when much of what we build seems frighteningly insubstantial, there’s something satisfying about a building that will undoubtedly make a good ruin: a latter-day Stonehenge or Colosseum. Yale’s Art & Architecture Building, which looms over the corner of Chapel and York Streets, is just such a building.

Even in the A&A’s relatively brief 35-year history, it has demonstrated an uncanny staying power, surviving both physical and critical assaults. The building’s reputation has circled over the years from near-unanimous praise to unvarnished loathing to a latter-day admiration that ranges from grudging to enthusiastic. It has suffered a disastrous fire and a series of renovations that have made it nearly unrecognizable (at least on the interior) to those who remember its beginnings, and careless students have long tested its seeming indestructibility. But the building endures, occasionally rewarding a watchful visitor with a glimpse of the spatial delights that were once present throughout the magnum opus of the architect and former chairman of Yale’s architecture department, Paul Rudolph.

Rudolph died last August at the age of 78, shortly after the University had announced plans to move the School of Art out of the A&A and into its own quarters across Chapel Street. The events created an eerie near-coincidence, since the School of Art had complained and long and loud about the facilities Rudolph had designed for it. But together they focused attention on both the A&A’s controversial history, and on plans to restore it to a semblance of its original self once the Art School has relocated.

Paul Rudolph designed dozens of buildings in a career that spanned 50 years. But it was the A&A, an intricate essay in flowing space and weighty mass on 36 levels, that was most closely associated with his career. Certainly no building better reflected his own dramatic rise and fall. Just as the A&A was soon rejected by students and faculty, Rudolph himself began to fall from grace a few years after the building’s completion. “I almost never talk about it,” Rudolph said about the building in a 1988 interview. “It’s a very painful subject for me. I talk quite freely about many of my buildings when asked, but I never talk about this building.”

> **President Griswold said, “I don’t need a master plan. I just need great**

Twenty-five years earlier, Rudolph—and the rest of the architecture world—could talk of little else. The A&A Building was shaping up to be the crown jewel of President A. Whitney Griswold’s

architects.”

remarkable program of architectural patronage, a program that included buildings by some of America’s leading architects: the Art Gallery by Louis Kahn, Morse and Stiles Colleges and Ingalls Rink by Eero Saarinen, the Beinecke Library by Gordon Bunshaft, the Kline science buildings and the epidemiology and public health building by Philip Johnson, and Rudolph’s Greeley Forestry Laboratory and Married Student Housing.

According to Johannes Knoops ’95MArch, an architectural intern and writer who is compiling an oral history of the A&A Building, Griswold said, “I don’t need a master plan. I just need great architects.” Knoops adds that Griswold gave those architects free rein. “Philip Johnson,” Knoops continues, “told us he never had a greater patron, because Griswold never asked how much anything cost.” During Griswold’s years as President (1950–1963), his indulgence earned Yale wide acclaim for its collection of important and inventive buildings.

The A&A Building was born of the desire to consolidate and expand the space available to the University’s art, architecture, graphic design and city planning programs, which in the late 1950s and early 1960s were housed in the Art Gallery, Weir Hall, and Street Hall. “It is the hope that the placing of these disciplines under one roof will help restore them to a sense of unity,” explained *Architectural Record* magazine.

The choice of Rudolph to design the building seems not to have been controversial, although many later opined that it was not a good idea for the architect and the client to be one and the same. Rudolph had been chairman of the architecture department—then a division of the School of Art & Architecture—since 1958, and had begun to restore its reputation after a period of disarray in which it had lost its accreditation.

He leaped into the project with enthusiasm, running through at least six schemes before settling on the one that would finally be built. The earliest versions of the building were rational and regular, in keeping with Rudolph’s functionalist training at Harvard. But as the design progressed, other influences began to come to the fore: the heavy concrete “brutalism” of Le Corbusier, the Swiss-born modernist who had abandoned the International Style for a more expressionistic approach; and the spatial complexity of the work of Frank Lloyd Wright.

What finally emerged from Rudolph’s drawing board was a truly original building, a tour de force of light, mass, and space, with great design attention lavished on every quirky corner. Rudolph originally wanted to have an atrium run the entire seven-story height of the building, but fire laws prevented it. Instead he created two large open spaces, one serving as a gallery and meeting room on the main floor, the other housing the architecture studios on the fourth and fifth floors. The rooms were arranged around these open spaces in a pinwheel-like pattern. To give the walls a distinctive texture, Rudolph invented a new technique: The concrete was poured into ribbed forms, then workers with hammers smashed the ribs, revealing the rough aggregate beneath.

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The design quickly became a sensation, appearing on magazine covers even before it was built. It captured the attention of a divided architectural community that didn't seem to know where to go next. "The building was an effort to synthesize the seemingly conflicting strains of modern architecture at the time," says architect Robert A. M. Stern '65MArch. "It had some Le Corbusier, some Wright, a little Mies van der Rohe, and it even addressed the Gothic of Yale."

Stern and others remember fondly watching the building under construction as students. Says Alec Purves '58, '65MArch, now a professor in the School of Architecture: "We loved it. It was thrilling to watch it being built."

The building opened to students at the beginning of the 1963–64 academic year, and the dedication was held on November 8. The people who visited that day found themselves marveling at the complex interlocking spaces and unexpected vistas and admiring the bright orange carpets and warm incandescent lighting. Scattered throughout the building were plaster casts of Classical artworks, a nod to history virtually unheard of in the architecture of the day. The dedicatory events included a party in the building itself, dinner for 2,000 guests at various locations around the campus (the crème de la crème dined in the A&A's penthouse guest suite), an original musical work by Yale composer Quincy Porter, and what was expected to be the high note, an address by the esteemed British architecture critic Nicholas Pevsner.

But Pevsner, an advocate of functionalism, didn't follow the script. "Much to everyone's surprise, Pevsner turned out to be a wet blanket," says John Morris Dixon, the former editor of *Progressive Architecture* magazine, who attended the opening. "His speech warned against the threat of form for its own sake, and reminded everyone that the purpose of a building was to function," remarks that were interpreted as criticism of Rudolph's extravagant essay in form.

Although Pevsner's speech can be seen today as a foreshadowing of the building's stormy future—or a "curse," as former School of Architecture dean Thomas Beeby '65MArch puts it—it was not allowed to dampen the general enthusiasm. The next morning, *New York Times* architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable reported that "in a field torn by polemics, architects at opposite esthetic poles are united in praise" and predicted that the building "will set trends nationally and internationally. It will surely be one of the most influential buildings of this decade." All the major architecture magazines in the U.S. and abroad featured the building prominently, and the American Institute of Architects gave it a First Honor Award.

One group from whom the building was not winning any awards was the artists, whose studio spaces were a far cry from the quarters the architects enjoyed. (In fact, a group of art students, including sculptor Richard Serra '64MFA and painter Chuck Close '64MFA, had planned to picket the opening ceremonies, but a last-minute meeting with Rudolph appeased them.) The painters occupied small studios on the south side of the seventh floor, and the sculpture studio was in a low-ceilinged sub-basement. Painters complained that the one area they would have found acceptable, a part of the fifth floor with desirable north light, was assigned to the city planning department.

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The art departments had been in on the planning of the building, but Rudolph had given them short shrift. It did not help that abstract expressionism—which had been held at bay by Josef Albers—finally arrived at Yale at about the time the building was completed. Suddenly painters wanted to work on canvases too big to fit in their studios—or the elevators. As the *New York Times Magazine* reported four years later: "One graduate school painter wrote that he had long wanted to learn the art of miniature painting and thanked the architect for providing the environment that compelled him to do so."

While architecture students were more kindly disposed toward the building, they were also beginning to notice its flaws. Rudolph had designed open studios for them, but the less sociable immediately began erecting their own partitions for a measure of privacy. (In fairness, this phenomenon is nearly universal in architecture schools.) The bright orange carpets barely survived one New Haven winter, and the heavy rope curtains (which were actually nets used to hoist ship cargo) over the windows proved ineffective at keeping out the sun. Students also quickly learned that the rough-textured concrete was a hazard to clothing and skin. Most important, it soon became apparent that Rudolph's design was hopelessly inflexible. "Everyone was perfectly packed from day-one," says Roberto De Alba '88MArch, who is editing a book about Rudolph. "There was no room to grow."

But the A&A's functional flaws were only part of the general outcry against the building that began after Rudolph left Yale in 1964 and moved his practice to New York. The new chairman of the architecture department, Charles Moore, was part of a group of "post-modern" architects and academics who were challenging some of the fundamental notions of modernism. To them, Rudolph's building epitomized all that was wrong with architecture—it was arrogant, aloof, divorced from history and from the buildings around it. Robert Venturi, who, ironically, began teaching at Yale under Rudolph, made a point in lectures and in print of condemning Rudolph's "heroic" works in comparison with his own humble, "contextual" buildings. "Everybody regarded it as a tour de force, but its spirit was overbearing," says Mark Simon '72MArch. "It was one man's vision of how you were going to occupy it, a temple to architecture at the cost of function. It ignored about two-thirds of its users."

There was also a political dimension to the new disdain for the building. Some argue that as the spirit of the protests over Vietnam and civil rights spread among college students, Rudolph's inflexible design came to stand for institutional rigidity and authoritarianism. This theory has often been put forth to explain the spectacular fire that spread through the building in the early morning of June 14, 1969. In fact, no evidence was found to indicate that arson was the cause of the fire, much less that students were involved. But the idea that students burned the building has been repeated so often over the years that when Rudolph died, many newspapers reported it as fact in their obituaries. (Some were especially creative, asserting that it was burned "during a demonstration.")

Whatever the cause of the fire, the results were disastrous. In the short term, many students lost hundreds of hours worth of work. But the greater loss came with the renovations that took place after the fire, when changes effectively destroyed the quality of continuous space Rudolph had created. New partitions went up at the behest of student committees who

> **Fire spread through the building in the early morning of June 14, 1969.**

were struggling to fit more and more into the overtaxed building. (The sculptors seized the opportunity to move out altogether, decamping to Hammond Hall on Mansfield Street.) When the building reopened, it had become a depressing rabbit warren of white-walled rooms. “The structure was not restored,” said Thomas Beeby. “Instead it was subverted at every level.” The building Rudolph had designed was buried, if not dead.

The A&A continued to be seen as a failure until the late 1980s, when the architectural community began to lose interest in post-modernism. It was a group of architecture students who led the effort to rehabilitate the building’s reputation—and the building itself. In 1987, several second-year students proposed a special elective course that would study a landmark building. What better building to start with, they argued, than their own, especially as it approached its 25th anniversary? “To us, the building was a playground; we were finding new spaces all the time,” says Roberto De Alba, who as a student helped create the course. “The goal was to bring the building back to people’s attention.”

The students studied Rudolph’s succession of designs and the finished product and built a detailed model of it, concluding the course with an exhibition of Rudolph’s drawings of the building at the A&A gallery. As part of the exhibition, the students temporarily removed a gallery wall that was not part of the original design, exposing a long-hidden view across the library below to York Street. The gesture provided just enough of a taste of the building’s former appeal to whet the appetite for more, and the seeds of a movement to restore the building were sown. “At that opening were many people who later gave money for the renovation,” says De Alba.

Under Fred Koetter, who is finishing a six-year term as dean of the School of Architecture this spring, the effort to renovate and restore the building has proceeded, albeit in fits and starts. The building’s windows were replaced in 1994 in a project that was plagued with problems, but the replacement made possible the removal of the rusting metal sunscreens that had marred the building’s exterior since the 1970s. In 1996, the building’s elevators and electrical systems were overhauled. Further work on the building, under the direction of architects Polshek & Partners of New York, is on hold until the School of Art moves into the former Jewish Community Center across the street. Architect Deborah Berke’s renovation of the JCC building is to be finished late next year.

Dean Richard Benson of the School of Art says he won’t miss the Rudolph building. “I’ve taught in this building for 18 years, and it’s an awful place to be,” he says. “It’s difficult to be in a building where if you stumble into a wall you may end up going to the hospital with skin abrasions. Spatially it’s very interesting, but that gets old fast. Who cares if it’s got 36 levels?”

But some architecture faculty and alumni are saddened by the end of the marriage—albeit rocky—of artists and architects. Says James Volney Righter ’70MArch, “Even though it was only an elevator love affair, it gave us the feeling we were in an art school. It was an important thing that distinguishes us from other schools.” Alec Purves, a painter as well as an architect, agrees. “I think it’s a pity in one sense,” he says. “I support the move, but I think symbolically it’s a shame the artists are moving out.”

Even though the smell of paint won’t permeate the drafting studios anymore, planners hope the A&A will still be the site of interaction among Yale’s arts programs. The schematic design for the renovation of the building by Polshek & Partners calls for the building's basement and sub-basement to be part of an expanded arts library that will include the School of Drama's collection. Further, the gallery on the second floor is seen as a space that the arts may share, perhaps as the home of a digital media center. Says Duncan Hazard '71, project architect at Polshek & Partners, "The second floor should not belong to one school, but to all the schools. We see it becoming the 'forum for the arts' at Yale."

While the probability of substantial restorations is still uncertain (the money has yet to be raised), the building has in its second quarter-century commanded a respect that eluded it for much of its first. Aware of its many failings, students and architects continue to admire Rudolph's monument. "The students consider it a source of inspiration," says Thomas Beeby. "The heroic nature of it still resonates for them."

Alec Purves has a slightly different view, having seen the building in its glory (as a student) and for 20 years as a teacher. "You can find fault with it, but it's like an eccentric member of the family you defend outside the family," he says. "I love working in the building. I'm still discovering spaces I never knew."

Paul Rudolph's Rise and Fall

Paul Rudolph was an architect in the uncompromising mode of Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Sullivan, or Ayn Rand's fictional Howard Roark. He stuck to his principles just as he stuck with his crewcut, even when both were seen as hopelessly out of date.

A preacher's son from Alabama, Rudolph studied architecture at Alabama Polytechnic Institute before going to graduate school at Harvard, where Walter Gropius had created an outpost of the International Style. After graduating in 1947, Rudolph entered private practice in Florida. By the time he was appointed chairman of Yale's architecture department in 1958, he was enjoying a meteoric rise in the architectural world.

At the age of 40—relatively young for an architect—Rudolph had already attracted attention for a series of light, elegant houses and a number of schools in Florida. One of his houses was included among the "50 most influential designs since 1900" by Architectural Record in 1956. By 1961, *Progressive Architecture* wrote, "Now that Frank Lloyd Wright no longer dominates the architecture scene, Paul Rudolph is probably the popular press's ideal choice for the role of American formgiver of the Space Age."

Rudolph also made a splash at Yale, turning the ailing program around and making the school a major force in architectural education. Recalls Vincent Scully: "Rudolph brought a wonderful optimism; here was the second generation of Gropius that was going to remake the world!"

Even though Rudolph had very clear ideas about architecture, he presided over a school where students were free to pursue their own aesthetic ideas, a trait on which the school still prides itself. As a result, many of his students went on to be leaders in the post- modern movement that rejected his work. "He unleashed the demons of historicism without endorsing them," says Thomas Beeby, a historicist himself.

Not long after Rudolph left Yale in 1964, his career began to run into trouble, and not only from the assaults of post-modernists. "He had some big commissions that ran into trouble in New York and Boston," remembers John Morris Dixon. "He began to develop a reputation for extravagance and delay.” Hurt and offended by criticism of his work, Rudolph began to withdraw from the spotlight. Until he died last year of cancer at the age of 78, he continued to work—most notably in Asia, where he was commissioned to do a number of skyscrapers—but he became increasingly isolated from the architectural establishment.

The cause of the fire that roared through the A&A Building on June 14, 1969, may never be known. The blaze spread quickly and became extraordinarily hot, leaving little evidence for fire investigators. While the New Haven fire chief initially said that he strongly suspected arson, the fire was in the end ruled an accident, since no convincing evidence of criminal activity was ever found.

Who Burned the A&A? And Why?

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Nevertheless, rumors that the fire had been set by students immediately began swirling around the campus, fueled by the atmosphere of political and social disruption across the land. The fire came on the heels of the closing of the city planning department, a division of the School of Art & Architecture that had become increasingly politicized. Says Johannes Knoops, who has interviewed numerous people about the fire, “I don’t know who did it, but I certainly believe it was in response to the closing of the city planning department.”

The story that has gained the most currency in the press holds that students burned the building because—as the *New York Times* wrote in Paul Rudolph’s obituary—they regarded it as “a symbol of the University’s antipathy toward creative life.” This hypothesis is rejected by people who were close to the school at the time. “It’s very wrong to say students lit the fire,” says Mark Simon ’72MArch, who remembers staying in the building with other students to defend it during times of unrest.

Others recall hearing that the perpetrators were identified but never punished. Architect Richard Nash Gould ’68,’72MArch says that architecture chairman Charles Moore (who died in 1993) told him that a pair of New Haven teenagers were caught at the scene, but that Yale administrators declined to press charges and hushed up the matter to avoid provoking an explosive town-gown conflict. But Henry Chauncey, who was an aide to President Brewster at the time, says he never heard such a story and denies that there was any coverup.

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