



August 28, 2008

Architecture Review | Yale School of Art and Architecture

Yale Revelation: Renewal for a Building and Its Original Designer

By [NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF](#)

NEW HAVEN — It's hard to think of a building that has suffered through more indignities than the Yale School of Art and Architecture. On the day of its dedication in 1963, the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner condemned the oppressive monumentality of its concrete forms. Two years later the school's dean brutally cut up many of the interiors, which he claimed were dysfunctional. A few years after that a fire gutted what was left. By then the reputation of the building's architect, [Paul Rudolph](#), was in ruins.

Under the circumstances it's a miracle that Yale didn't tear the building down. But several years ago the university started down the road to atonement, investing \$126 million in a major restoration and addition designed by the New York firm Gwathmey Siegel & Associates.

The result should stun those who have continued to deny Rudolph's talent. Now seen in its full glory, his building turns out to be a masterpiece of late Modernism, one that will force many to reappraise an entire period of Modernist history and put Rudolph back on the pedestal where he belongs.

Only Gwathmey Siegel's addition prevents this from being a total triumph. The firm's principal designer, [Charles Gwathmey](#), went to great pains to ensure that the addition didn't disturb Rudolph's masterwork. Yet the challenge Mr. Gwathmey faced was not only to be a good neighbor, it was also to rise to the high standards set by his predecessor. By that measure his design is a major letdown.

Rudolph had his own generational battles to fight. His building, which will be renamed Paul Rudolph Hall at a dedication ceremony in November, stands directly across the street from [Louis Kahn](#)'s 1953 Yale Art Gallery, one of the most brilliant and revered structures of the postwar Modernist period. But many of the attacks against the Rudolph building had more to do with polemics than architecture. To classical Modernists the art and architecture school's Brutalist aesthetic betrayed the taut glass-enclosed structures of Kahn's museum. To postmodernists it represented the indifference to history and context that they saw as the Modernist movement's greatest sin.

These arguments were reinforced by the heartless renovations after the fire. Windows and skylights were boarded over; additional levels were stuffed between existing floors; large open studios were

cut up into a warren of cramped, airless work spaces. The effect was suffocating, and it reflected an attitude of disrespect toward Rudolph that persisted until his death in 1997.

In reopening these spaces Mr. Gwathmey shows us that the building was more sympathetic to its surroundings than once thought. The recessed windows of the front facade are an obvious echo of Kahn's sunken courtyard across the street; so is the masterly play of opaque and transparent surfaces.

Just as important, the subtlety of the design can now be seen. The rough corduroy surfaces of the concrete towers that anchor the structure's corners are now offset by the smooth finish of the horizontal concrete beams, softening the overall appearance. A long narrow planter that runs along the building's front just above street level is used to break down its scale.

But the great revelation is the way the muscularity of the exterior is used to disguise the lightness of the interiors. Like [Frank Lloyd Wright](#) in his 1904 Larkin Building, Rudolph sets his entry staircase off center, near a corner marked by a soaring concrete tower. A slender pillar rises out of the staircase's edge. The pillar forces you to enter the space at a slight angle, and then slip between two towering concrete forms before climbing up to the lobby, as if you were passing through a prehistoric gorge.

The sense of spatial compression contributes to the shock you feel once you step inside. Light spills down through skylights. As you step deeper into the space, exterior views open up, including a loving view of Kahn's glass facade. The effect is breathtaking, and it only intensifies as you reach the upper floors.

From the third-floor administrative offices you can gaze down into the main exhibition hall, and farther below, into a periodical reading room. On each floor shallow steps are used to fine-tune the shift in levels and create intimate corners without interfering with the spirit of openness. All of this is reinforced by the dramatic play of light washing down the concrete surfaces.

It is a dazzling display of how to create intricate multidimensional space. But the complexity of the architecture is also driven by a powerful social vision. The relationship between the various floors is meant to foster a sense of solidarity among the students, to engender a big, embracing community of vibrant souls.

Mr. Gwathmey, a student of Rudolph's at Yale in the 1960s, is one of the few to have experienced that vision in its original incarnation. And he is as reverential of the old master in his addition as he was in the restoration work. The new structure, which will house the school's art history department, required a separate entry, but it has a straightforward informality in order not to compete with Rudolph's design. Inside, windows on several floors allow you to catch glimpses of the older building, so that you are always aware of its presence — an apparition hovering in the background.

Not surprisingly, the addition's most powerful innovation is the way in which the two buildings interlock. A staircase leads down into the library. The room, once an outdoor courtyard, is enclosed under a grid of domed skylights. The back of the old art and architecture building is now an interior wall, further blurring the distinction between inside and out. A single skylight extends into Rudolph's

second-floor lobby, gracefully tying the two together.

Yet the project demanded more than a competent design. The Rudolph and Kahn buildings are not only masterpieces, they are also powerful statements about the values that shaped American architecture at a critical moment. Together they represent an enthralling conversation between two great minds across time.

The addition was a rare opportunity to broaden that conversation by extending it into the present. It should have answered the questions: “Who should speak for our era? Where are the great voices of today?”

Mr. Gwathmey doesn’t make a strong case for himself. His addition, a series of stacked slabs, lacks the intriguing complexity of Rudolph’s vision. He offers an abundance of light-filled spaces, but they lack the precisely framed views and the careful manipulation of light and shadow that are some of an architect’s most valuable devices. Nor does he demonstrate the level of artistry that not only reinforces a building’s central ideas but also gives you a feel for the architect’s hand — the love of craft and obsessive attention to detail that can elevate a structure to greatness.

Everything here, in short, feels sadly conventional. And unlike Rudolph’s masterpiece this is something that no amount of restoration work can repair.

[Home](#)

- [World](#)
- [U.S.](#)
- [N.Y. / Region](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [Science](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Arts](#)
- [Style](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Automobiles](#)
- [Back to Top](#)

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

- [Privacy Policy](#)
 - [Search](#)
- [Corrections](#)
 - [RSS](#)
- [First Look](#)
 - [Help](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Work for Us](#)
- [Site Map](#)