

The Modulightor Building at 246 East 58th Street and The Vision of Paul Rudolph

Paul Rudolph (1917-1997) was an architect who understood and spoke the language of Modernism with magic and brilliance. Space, light—especially light!—structure, materials, planting, furniture, ornament: he composed them like music and mastered them like a theater director. Visual & spatial richness, in harmony with carefully-considered function, were the hallmarks of his contributions, enriching our lives.

Background, Parallels, and Precedents:

Paul Rudolph and Ernst Wagner bought 246 East 58th Street in 1989. At the time of this venture, Rudolph and Wagner had already been friends for almost 20 years. Though Rudolph died in 1997, his spirit is still very much alive at the MODULIGHTOR building.

Originally a commercial, non-descript structure, Paul Rudolph wanted to create a special environment and, most importantly, a contribution to the urban landscape—an ongoing focus of his. The old construction was torn down and re-engineered as a steel structure. For the interior construction, Rudolph became his own contractor, meeting with the project manager and craftspeople on a daily basis.

The MODULIGHTOR building should be considered *en suite* with Rudolph's other NYC projects. Earlier he had undertaken, with Wagner's assistance, the development and redesign of 23 Beekman Place—his celebrated townhouse residence near the UN (and the final location of his office). He also designed another famous residence in New York: 101 East 63rd Street—a classic modernist design, beautifully and elegantly proportioned & detailed (whose most famous owner was the fashion design icon, Halston).

Starting in the 1970's - Paul Rudolph's famous Quadruplex Townhouse:

A spatially rich and very personal vision of the possibilities of architecture was constructed at 23 Beekman Place. It is both intimate and Piranesi-like, soaring and layered: an orchestration of interlocking spaces. It was Rudolph's design laboratory, where he would constantly change, try out, and experiment with new variations—a composition of rich textures and reflective materials that caught the light in magical ways. No less than 17 levels could be counted which, pinwheel-like, float harmoniously and lead from one to the next luminous experience.

23 Beekman Place was constantly moving: light plays, water falls, and canals on the terrace were built. There was a plexiglass jacuzzi on the top level through which you could see down over 30 feet, to dazzling spaces below—a 20th century version of the Sir John Soane's House Museum in London.

At one point, Wagner asked Rudolph; *“Is it not going to be too complicated?”* To which he replied, *“No, no, you don’t understand! Architecture is like music! Do you think that a Bach fugue is too complicated?”*

When they built 246 East 58th Street, Rudolph would (like at 23 Beekman Place) meet with the workers each morning and carefully—like a sculptor—arrange mock-ups with foam-core boards: shifting, adjusting, and balancing the forms with the voids until he was satisfied.

Influenced by the minimalism of Mies van der Rohe, the richness of Le Corbusier’s design vocabulary, and the harmonious and dynamic complexity of Wright, he created his own language of intricately interwoven spaces.

For Wagner, the experience of living in these spaces is like living in a sculpture, in a work of art: wherever you move—wherever your gaze alights—you see new, fresh, unexpected facets of the design.

Rudolph could be said to have a similar career trajectory as Wright’s: famous as a young architect; then a long valley in his middle years in America [though Rudolph built a rich body of work from the seventies through the nineties in the Far East, where he was greatly respected—a part of the world where Wright also built]; then a peak towards the end. In the early-90’s there was a surge of renewed interest in his work and Modernism, and he would receive design classes from all over the world—and in the mid-90’s commissions from his homeland started to come in again.

The Spatial Concept of the MODULIGHTOR building:

The living quarters are a spacious two-storey apartment—or more correctly: one floor and a mezzanine. Rudolph did not just do “duplex” apartments (with one floor just stacked over another). *Instead he thought in terms of spatial movement, psychology of space, proportion, and balance—and used his knowledge and artistry to create an intricate, multi-tiered spiral of spaces. As one transitions from one level to another—and the apartment has several levels—the width and the height of the space keep changing, adjusting in a series of movements of vertical & horizontal planes, creating a kinetic assemblage of spaces and multiple viewpoints. Yet it feels dynamic and serene at the same time.*

Stair Concept & Detailing:

The several stairs in the residence create some of the most powerful effects—both as sculptural compositions viewed from afar, and especially when traversed. Instead of the usual heavy diagonal structure supporting solid steps and risers, Rudolph created a delicate sequence of ‘floating’ planar steps, cantilevered and suspended, merging almost seamlessly into the composition of the apartment’s shelves. The stairs—floating, visually kinetic, and changing direction—are integral parts of the residence’s spatial concept, the view of which dynamically alters as one moves.

Furniture and Modular Systems:

Paul Rudolph thought that furniture should reflect the character of its architectural context, and resonate with the space’s other elements. Such design coherence has been the case in all centuries and stylistic periods—but in the seventies he could not find commercially available furniture that fit harmoniously with his architecture & interiors. So Rudolph created his own furniture. When we formed MODULIGHTOR in 1976, it was Le Corbusier’s *“Modulor”* theory that was inspiring to Rudolph, and the one can see this in the proportioning of Rudolph’s furniture.

Rudolph encountered a shelving system of components which could be flexibly combined, and he jumped at the possibilities that were inherent in that system. Rudolph saw that not only could it make shelving, but its modular “kit of parts” could be used to create other kinds of furniture. The components allow for quick assembly into many different arrangements and groupings—and that lent itself to both experimentation and to the fabrication of completed designs.

Rudolph was highly interested in modular systems, and welcomed economical approaches to solving design problems. He thought that architects should “speak the language of *modularity*”—whether it be at the scale of furniture or of whole housing developments—and that a skillful designer could make such a system do what he wanted it to do (rather than being limited by the system).

Today, the efficiency of modular approaches to design & manufacturing are part of the culture’s current discourse—but when Rudolph was investigating this, he was one of the pioneers. Indeed, we can cite other examples of his design foresight and inventiveness:

- his use of plexiglass for stairs and walkways in his Beekman Place home: this greatly predated the use of glass floors & staircases that one sees in today’s iconic Apple stores
- the use of ribbed concrete to enrich a building’s visual texture—and later, to economize: the translation of that material into prefabricated blocks
- the use of modular components in creating a whole lighting system
- and even in a more decorative vein: in the 70’s he innovatively brought the “camelback” shaped cushion into Modern settings

Testimonials:

A few comments about Rudolph from respected architects:

- Philip Johnson: *“Rudolph was the Frank Lloyd Wright of his time.”*
- Walter Gropius, the great architectural educator at Harvard, apparently commented when asked about his most talented students: *“Paul Rudolph and I.M. Pei, in that order.”*
- The American Postal Service issued five stamps of notable 20th Century architects: Wright, Pei, Kahn, Meier—and Paul Rudolph!
- Many of his Yale students that we’ve met say that Rudolph was one of their most influential teachers. Architects like Peter Eisenman, Norman Foster, Charles Gwathmey, Tony Monk, Richard Rogers, Der Scut, Robert Stern, Stanley Tigerman—just to name a few—were his students.
- Foster said; *“Paul Rudolph was the single most formative force in my life.”*
- Joanna Steichen, widow of Edward Steichen, and a long time friend of ours, said to me, *“Gifted people often are difficult - Paul was not.”*
- Former employees often comment: He was extremely focused, could become impatient and was therefore demanding and could get frustrated when they would not ‘get the gist’ of his instructions. However he was always fair and understanding in a fatherly way.

After he was gone I contemplated what I could say about him, and came up with a plethora of words about many of his qualities as a human being. I wrote these qualities down on the plaque at the entry of the apartment—and people who knew him speak of him in similar terms.

Scott Lauer from **Open House New York** asked Wagner if the building could become available for their events—a testimony that Rudolph’s oeuvre is being rediscovered and re-celebrated. Rudolph would be

pleased. In 2004, approx. 2000 people visited in one day. In 2005 the building saw over 1,200 visitors come during pouring rain. This is now an architectural destination for of groups, associations, and students interested in Modernism

Rudolph on Light:

"Reflected light coming from the wall is the most humane of all light. Since light travels in straight lines, the reflections from the walls come back to you as an individual, putting you in direct contact with the walls themselves. It is almost as if the walls are caressing you with their light. This explains the humanism of reflected light."

A few words on Light and Lighting—and the creation of a system that is “designed to be designed”

by Ernst Wagner

The effect of light and lighting as a fourth dimension was of intense interest to Rudolph. In the late 70's, I became aware of Rudolph's fascinating, imaginative experiments in this domain. There was his “Infinity Light Room”: he would create “light curtains”—vertical strings of Christmas bulbs, connected horizontally with frosted Plexiglas tubes, which were then placed in front of dual mirrored walls and a mirrored ceiling. When the room's lights were dimmed and this array of bulbs turned-on, an electrifying vision was to be seen: seemingly zillions of little stars would explode into infinity, and one felt as though you were floating in the Milky Way. “This—this magic of lighting—is for me!” I thought, and with Rudolph's support, Modulightor was born.

Le Corbusier influenced Rudolph greatly, both through Corbu's design work and his 1952 book, “The Modulor”. Rudolph thought that furniture design was integral to his building projects—and aspired to the same for lighting. While the lighting market offered numerous “off the shelf” fixtures, he thought that there was much more creative potential for light fixture design. So he envisioned “systems” that offered great flexibility—lighting which is “designed to be designed”: a standard set of components that can be combined in almost endless variety.

Paul thought that miniaturization of the fixtures was important—*allowing fixtures to be as elegantly slender as possible*, so that the effect was to “see the light, not the fixture.” But he also designed more “foreground” fixtures: sculptural chandelier-like configurations to be used when a focal point is necessary. Since lighting “unifies and ties” a space, he would coordinate fixture designs throughout his spaces: matching and contrasting materials, finishes, and light sources.

Collections:

Paul Rudolph was a collector of things of artistry: he would have liked to own a Giacometti or a Moore, but—not having the funds—he created his own art. Rudolph also thought that his dynamic-but-calm spaces needed decorative accents.

Like Giacometti's famous dog sculpture, he would constantly ‘sniff’ for intriguing objects. By grouping or assembling them into artful compositions, they would become true ‘objects d’art’. These were often seemingly mundane ‘things’ that visually appealed to him—but in his hands, and through his interesting arrangements, these assemblages became works of decorative art, fresh and original.

When traveling he constantly had his visual radar on. For example: In Mexico he would buy a box of *milagros* (religious folk charms traditionally used for healing purposes and as votive offerings) at the flea market. Back home he would place them on plexiglass panels to create an effect of veil-like delicacy. Or he would arrange old Moroccan textile combs, with the overall composition evoking two opposing armies.

In Mexico, he also discovered a group of inexpensive cast plastic “transformer” robots. This electrified him—and he summoned his employees to get all of them available in the city. He then patiently painted them on Sunday afternoons, then positioned them in a totem-like column of lit coves—and the marvels of a ‘Wunderkammer’ (“cabinet of curiosities”) emerged. It was as though an army—a rather colorful army!—from outer space had arrived.

At *Maison Drouot*, the Parisian auction house, he discovered a group of ancient Roman terracotta heads: we bought all of them. He grouped twenty of them on delicate plexiglass stems, creating a dance-like assemblage as his dining table centerpiece. The rest became a miniature “Antiquities Cabinet” on a shelf. Andy Warhol’s work and Marcel Duchamp’s compositions—using multiples and “readymades”—have similar approaches.

Oscar Wilde said, “*I have found that all ugly things are made by those who strive to make something beautiful and all beautiful things are made by those who strive to make something useful.*” One may not exactly agree with Mr. Wilde, but he has a point:

Often certain ordinary things—tools or other utilitarian objects—when mounted or placed in a new context, become a fresh visual experience. And having them in one’s own residence provides daily encounters with unexpected sources of beauty. Meeting them are like repeated happy encounters with people you love—or pets for that matter—they are always saying, “*Nice to see you again!*”

In Conclusion:

I feel that I was incredibly lucky to have gained the friendship and trust of this great man over a quarter-century span. One of Paul Rudolph’s legacies to me was his ongoing curiosity: a way of experiencing the world that encouraged discovery and viewing things freshly and with vividness. He taught me and many others *how to see*, and this has affected me deeply.

For More Information:

Colleagues and friends of Paul’s and myself have formed the

Paul Rudolph Heritage Foundation

whose purpose is:

- to preserve and protect Paul Rudolph’s work
- to educate the public about the legacy of his work and philosophy
- to provide a gathering space for discussion & camaraderie

You can find out more about the Rudolph and the foundation’s activities at:

www.paulrudolphheritagefoundation.org

We raise funds in a variety of ways: donations, rental of the MODULIGHTOR Building (for events, fashion shoots, etc.), sales of books about Rudolph, sales of limited editions (of sketches, drawings and renderings). Furniture and lighting which he designed may be made available in the future.

We welcome volunteers in various capacities, to help with organizing, research, website development, etc.— all to help us celebrate the oeuvre of [to quote Charles Jenks] “*One of the important late-modernist Architects*”

Please feel welcome to contact us at:

The Paul Rudolph Heritage Foundation

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For more information on MODULIGHTOR’s line of fixtures and lighting solutions, including designs by Paul Rudolph, please contact us at:

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...and feel welcome to come visit us in Rudolph’s MODULIGHTOR BUILDING !
