

THIS MONTH IN P/A

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Whither Paul Rudolph?

BY PETER COLLINS

One of the more famous mavericks of the modern movement is discussed in this article by McGill University's Associate Professor of Architecture. The author analyzes Rudolph's work and speculates on his possible future development. The original version of the article appeared in The Guardian (Manchester, England); it has since been somewhat modified by the author for presentation to P/A readers.

Now that Frank Lloyd Wright no longer dominates the architectural scene, Paul Rudolph is probably the popular press's ideal choice for the role of American Form-Giver of the Space Age, since he was actually born and educated in the United States, and in appearance has all that appeal which we now associate with candidates for the Presidency. His boyish smile, his Ivy League haircut, and his air of quiet determination all produce a confidence-inspiring idea of conformity and good citizenship, whilst his gift for impressive but noncommittal utterances might well be the envy of the most experienced senator. ("The important thing about Ronchamp," he recently remarked, "is that it speaks to many kinds of people, as a chapel should.")

Yet his air of conformity is deceptive, for he is a bohemian and a revolutionary at heart, and leaped to fame ten years ago by producing one of the most ingenious and original summer cottages ever to be constructed in a land positively infested with summer cottages: a single-story house measuring 22 ft by 36 ft, built on such extraordinarily Giedionesque principles of suspension that it was immediately published in the more sensational architectural magazines. He now publicly derides this structure for its illogicality, but continues to astound the bourgeoisie with the novelty of even more enterprising architectural shapes.

The variety of these shapes must have

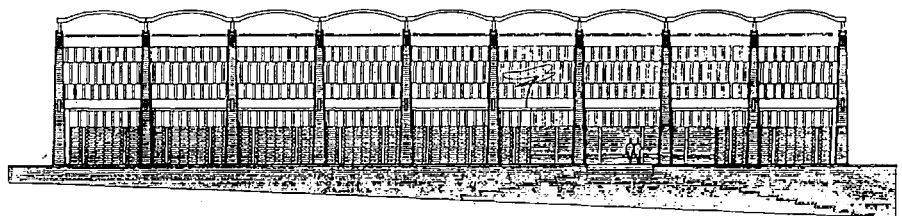
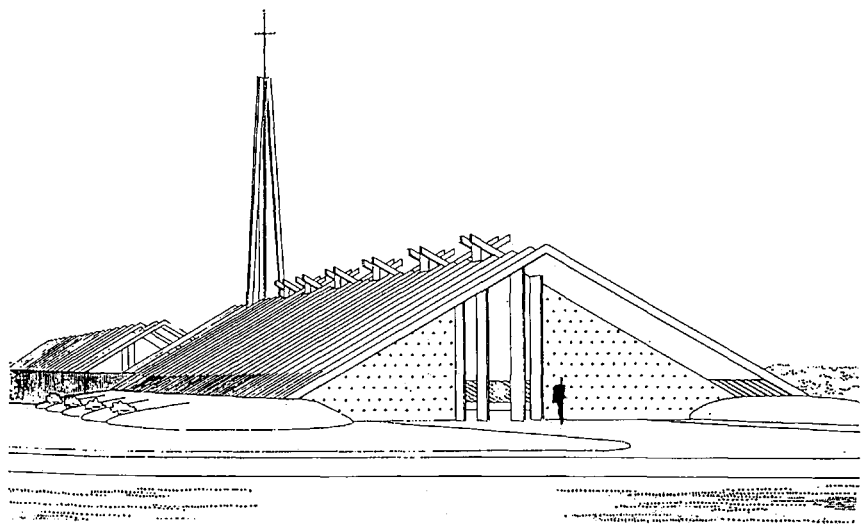
been particularly disconcerting to the art historian because they lack that one quality on which the latter's bread and butter depends—namely, classifiability. Not only have they the appearance of being unrelated to the work of other architects; they do not even seem related to one another in character, materials, or structural systems. On what principles, it is frequently rhetorically asked, are his designs based?

Paul Rudolph justifies the apparent inconsequence of his work by frankly explaining that he has as yet no fixed principles, and asserts that he is still searching for an architecture that will correspond to his own personality, and reflect with complete integrity his, as yet incoherent, sensibility as to what architecture should be. At first this may seem very modest, but it is tinged with an architectural arrogance peculiar to our age. "Avant moi le déluge," might be his motto. He designs as if no architectural vocabulary existed, and clearly intends to reject the 19th-Century idea that architectural forms develop by a co-operative evolutionary process. He does this, I am convinced, not because he really wishes to, but because of the inescapable pressure of publicity that has been built up around him. He is a classic product of those advertising techniques which, as J. K. Galbraith has pointed out, are now sapping the morale of North American society. On the strength of one or two modest, even though brilliant, little buildings, he has been fêted by the professional press, showered with important commissions (including a United States embassy), and ultimately raised to the chairmanship of one of the most influential schools of architecture on the continent. Every project that comes from his office is now widely publicized, minutely examined by architects and students, and prepared for inclusion in any histories of modern architecture that may be currently in the press. He can no longer afford to design anything

unsophisticated or subdued. His prestige will not suffer that his projects fail immediately to astound. However much he believes, as he professes to do, in a hierarchy of buildings according to their relative importance, in the need for the subordination of an artist's personality to the architectural character of a town, and in the assimilation of every new building to the existing environment, he is forced by the spirit of Madison Avenue to be a Form-Giver; to be a leader of fashion when he still confesses that he does not know the right direction to take.

His indecision is exacerbated by the fact that, though temperamentally a disciple of Le Corbusier, he received his graduate training at Harvard University under Walter Gropius, and is now reacting against the uncongenial discipline of the Bauhaus in the same way that Gropius himself reacted half a century earlier against the academic system where he himself was taught. The result has been a period of transition, similar to that which many painters have gone through, often quite late in life; but which is, I think, rare in the architectural profession, where most of the great innovators have had a coherent set of principles before reaching the age of forty-one.

To judge from his latest project, this painful metamorphosis from Bauhausian chrysalis to Le Corbusian butterfly is now drawing to a close, since this nondenominational chapel for the Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, is unashamedly inspired by Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp. Critics may dismiss this new project out of hand as a plagiarism, but if one admires Ronchamp sincerely, one presumably has good justification in regarding it as paradigm for ecclesiastical buildings in the present age. Architects, unlike painters and sculptors, are only really of significance when they adopt consistent forms of general validity for their generation, and it seems incredible that so much lip-



The 1951 "cocoon" summer cottage by Twitchell & Rudolph (below) is one of Rudolph's earliest designs; the U.S. Embassy in Jordan (above) and the Episcopal Church in Sarasota, Florida (top) were designed in 1956.

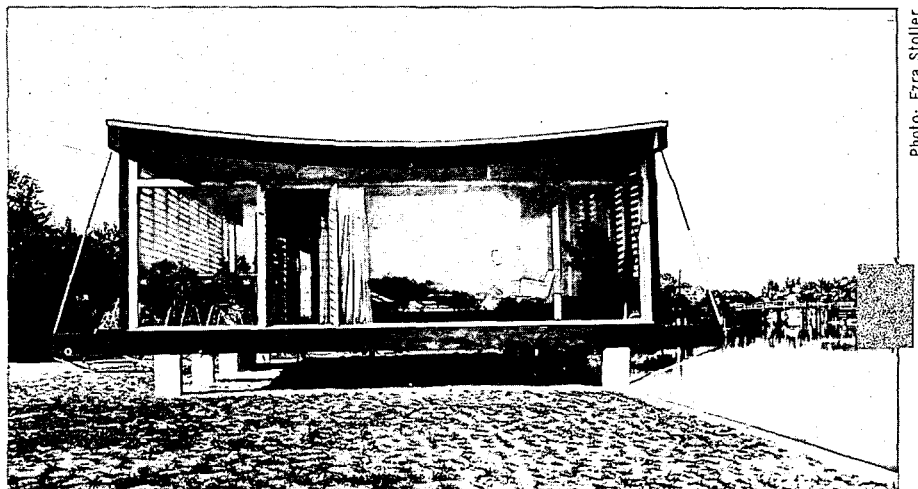
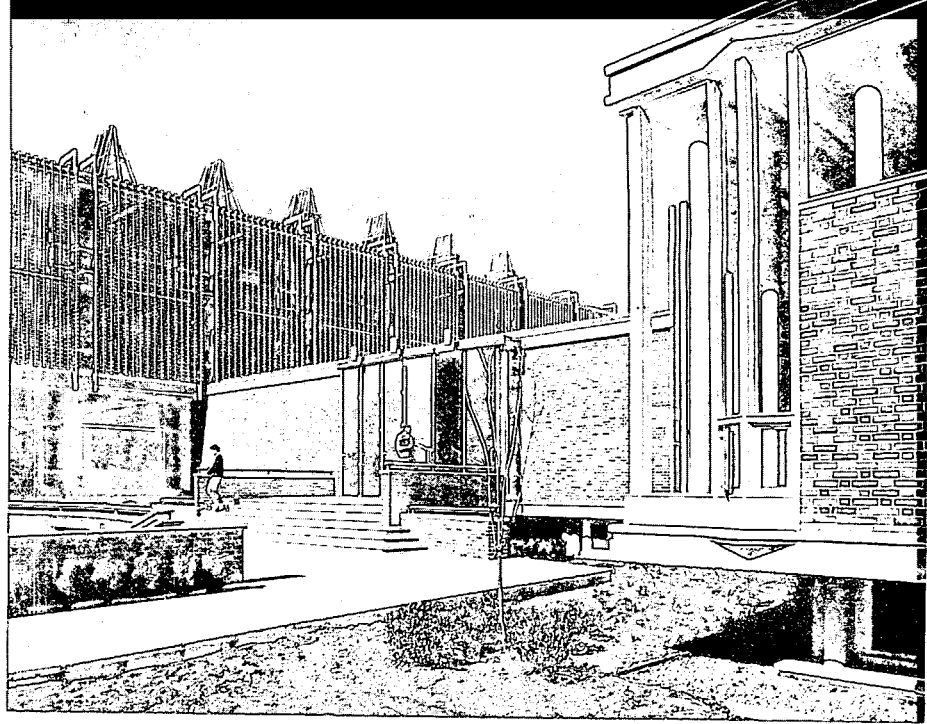
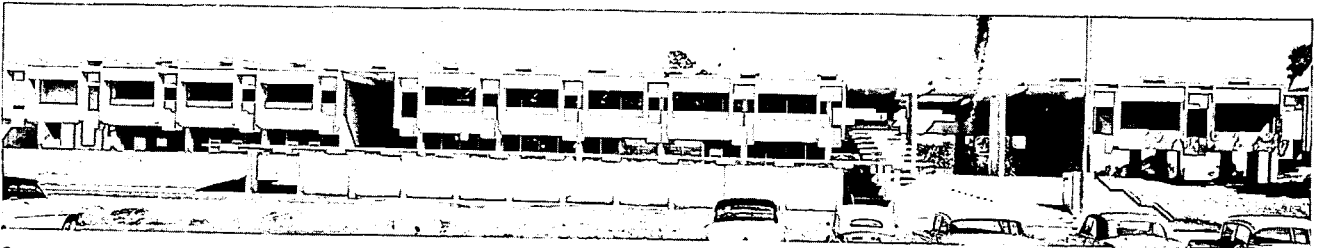


Photo: Ezra Stoller

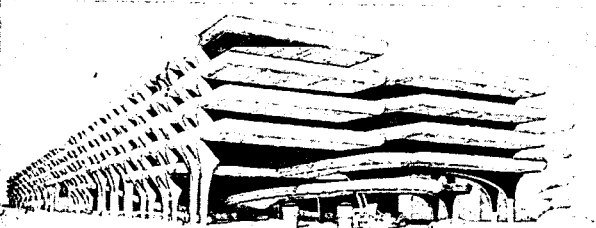
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Typical of Rudolph's recent work is the Wellesley Arts Center (1), addition to Sarasota High School (2), and designs for a garage in New Haven (3) and for a nondenominational chapel at the Tuskegee Institute (4).



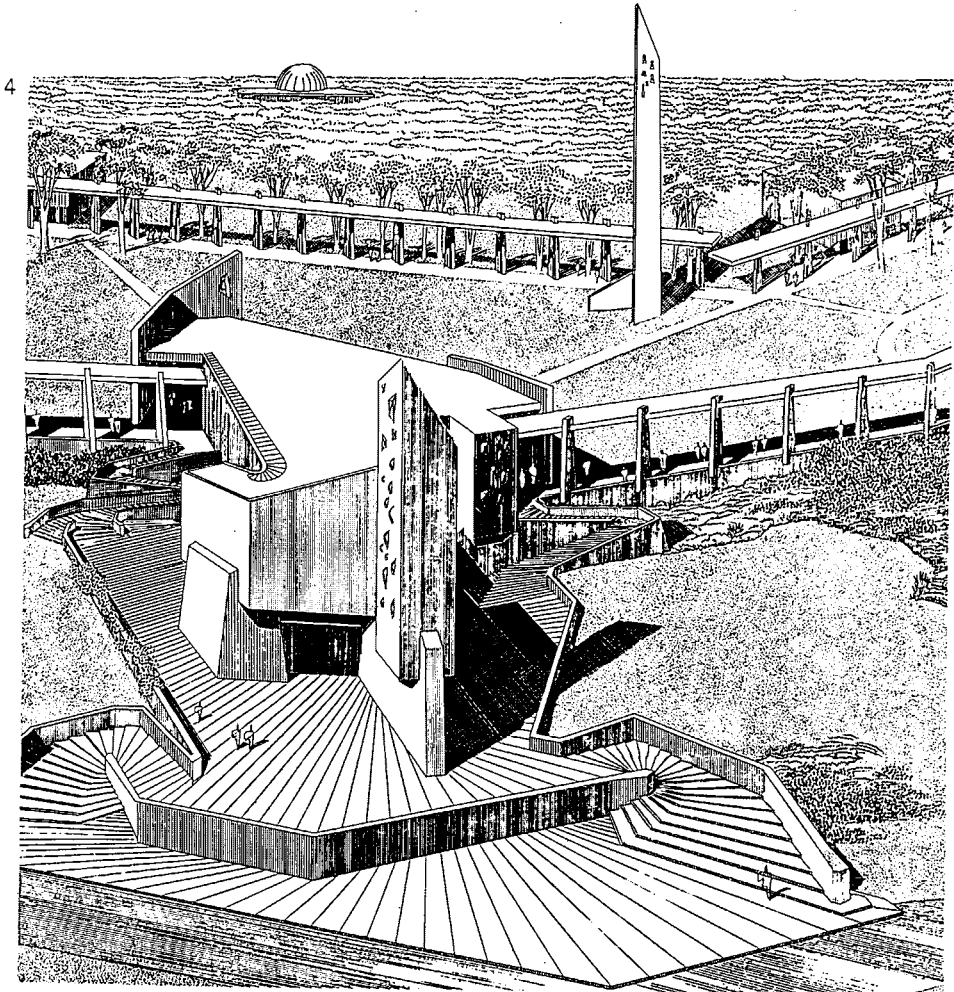
Photos: Joseph W. Molitor



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service should be paid to Le Corbusier, and so much adulation lavished on Ronchamp, without any of his admirers having so far had the perspicacity or humility to give practical expression to their flattery by imitating his most distinctive design. Paul Rudolph's fundamental artistic integrity is shown by his courage in carrying his admiration to its logical conclusion, just as his talent is shown by the many radical differences between Ronchamp and his own scheme; differences that distinguish one from the other as Canterbury Cathedral is distinguishable from the cathedral at Sens.

The design of a nondenominational chapel is now becoming one of the classic problems in modern American architecture, and might seem at first sight to be one of peculiar delicacy, since it presumably requires a vigorous expression of the ideals of true religious faith without at the same time favoring, by historical or liturgical allusions, any one faith in particular. It is, however, the perfect opportunity for an architect to design in any way he likes, since he can assume that the more bafflingly enigmatic his composition, the more likely will each observer interpret it in a way that will satisfy his religious beliefs. It is not likely, therefore, that Paul Rudolph was subjected to any cramping restrictions in establishing the scheme that he has now evolved.

The announcement which describes it claims that "like the Tuskegee Institute's first structures, the chapel will be a sanctuary in the original sense of the word—an inviolable asylum, surrounded by ramparts that recall a medieval fortification. And like Tuskegee's first structures, the new chapel will represent a shining achievement to an institute built by the contributions of men and women of very small means but of very great faith." These two sentences are clearly not very helpful guides to a critical architectural assessment, since the first merely reminds the reader that the history of architecture was never taught at Harvard in Gropius' heyday, whilst the second has apparently strayed from the fund-raising brochure. Yet the oblique reference to Tuskegee's first structures is included very deliberately as a cover for the fact that the new building is not designed to harmonize

with the other buildings on the campus, but that, on the contrary, it offends against the one principle by which Rudolph has formerly claimed to set particular store. When Tuskegee Institute was created in 1881, its founder insisted that every building was to be of brick, and that the bricks were to be hand-made by the students themselves. But so thoroughly has Paul Rudolph now absorbed the Le Corbusier aesthetic, that he has rejected all forms of brickwork (a material which was good enough for the new buildings he designed to harmonize with Wellesley College two or three years ago) in favor of rough-faced concrete, as used in all Le Corbusier's most recent European works. It seems doubtful if, even with this aid, the building will remind the inhabitants of Alabama of medieval fortifications; but the analogy is opportune in view of the fact that one of the articles on Le Corbusier's new Dominican priory was entitled "Fortress of Faith."

It is possible that Paul Rudolph really is so sure and important a designer that his projects merit publicity in the technical magazines even before the first bulldozer has bitten into the site. At any rate, he seems to have found the exact dosage of abstract sculpture and technical efficiency (the shape of the interior of the chapel was apparently "determined by acoustic considerations") that best corresponds to current American tastes. But one may wonder to what extent he is qualified to set the standards for the profession at large, or to fulfill the role of leadership that the technical periodicals are already forcing him to accept.

When asked, for example, whether he believed in encouraging his students to "explore" in the way he does it himself, or whether, on the contrary, he expected that in due course he would have worked out some coherent doctrine which he could then teach as authoritatively as Walter Gropius, he replied evasively that, as far as he was concerned, the two professions of teacher and architect were entirely distinct. Now clearly, a man of Paul Rudolph's caliber does not profess doctrines he does not practice, so his statement can only mean that at the present moment he professes no doctrine at all, that he is trying simply to be as

tolerant and as helpful as he can to those who come to him to learn the processes of architectural creation. Such a policy may well encourage the personal expression of individual geniuses like himself. But if a student is not a genius, it is not likely that he will learn to produce any architecture at all, and the most pressing architectural problem facing North America today, as Paul Rudolph freely admits, is the chaotic individualism that mediocrity imposes on the aspect of our streets. Walter Gropius used to assert that architectural mediocrity was due, at the beginning of the century, to the academy schools, which were obsessed by that "rare biological sport," the commanding genius; yet despite the much-advertised influence of the Bauhaus (where apparently "many of the most famous architects and designers of today were students," according to the inaugural address of the new professor of architecture at London University), it does not seem as if the schools are any nearer solution of this problem. It can only be solved if teachers set examples that others could use as models.

The fact is that the creative methods of Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius are irreconcilable, despite Sigfried Giedion's attempt to give them a superficial unity in his well-known book. Le Corbusier, who believes in the unfettered genius of the plastic artist, understood long ago that his architecture, like that of Frank Lloyd Wright, is something personal and cannot be taught by traditional academic systems; nor has he ever attempted to do so. Walter Gropius, on the other hand, has always insisted that architecture is simply the art of building, which can and must be systematically taught, because it is contingent on the co-ordinated teamwork of a band of collaborators, whose co-operation symbolizes the co-operative organism we call society. It may be that Paul Rudolph, with his varied background, will find a way of resolving the antagonism of these two philosophies as regards methods of training. But he is more likely, in pursuing the dictates of his Muse, to be forced into accepting Le Corbusier's and Wright's contempt for all academic systems as a means of training those followers who wish to be initiated into the secrets of his creative skill.