

PAUL RUDOLPH HERITAGE FOUNDATION (/)

Paul Rudolph Interview - July 29, 1994

INTRODUCTION

On the morning of July 29, 1994, architect Zak Ghanim conducted an interview with Paul Rudolph. They met at Rudolph's famous "Quadruplex" residence on Beekman Place (where Rudolph had also relocated his office), and there Mr. Ghanim audio-taped their conversation.

We are most grateful to Zak Ghanim for giving us permission to include this interview as part of our documentary archive on the life and work of Paul Rudolph.



Paul Rudolph with Zak Ghanim during the interview at 23 Beekman Place on July 29, 1994.

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THE INTERVIEWER:

Zak Ghanim is an award-winning architect, urban planner, interior designer, illustrator, writer, lecturer, editor and journalist. He was born in Egypt and received his degree in Architecture from Alexandria University. His office is based in Toronto, Canada and he has produced over 1000 international projects—including in the domains of commercial, hospitality, religious, retail, and residential design, as well as community centers and factories. Globally, projects include a hotel in Morocco; a residence in Ghana; a housing complex in Cleveland, Community dwellings in the Caribbean and an office building in Egypt.

He has received distinguished awards from the Ontario Association of Architects, The Arab Canadian Professional Organization, Heritage Toronto, and numerous other organizations. His projects graced the cover of numerous publications, and were featured in over 60 international newspapers, periodicals and books—as well as having been in exhibitions and featured on television shows and primetime news.

Mr. Ghanim is in the process of publishing two books: ***New Visions on Architecture*** (which includes this interview with Paul Rudolph), and ***Travel Photography***: A collection of personal architectural and artistic images photographed by him in over 100 cities in 5 continents.

The full text of his books—as well as his comprehensive portfolio—can be seen on his website: www.zakghanim.com (about:blank)

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INTERVIEWER'S INTRODUCTION

by Zak Ghanim

[In his book of interviews, ***New Visions on Architecture***, Mr. Ghanim offers some general remarks on his interest in architecture and intentions for the interviews, and they are excerpted below.]

Since my early undergraduate years, I have been fascinated with the work of the masters of architecture. I have tried to comprehend how they evolved their ideas and opinions, where they drew all that creativity from, and how can an ambitious young designer be a part of that process.

Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe had all made their marks in the early 20th Century, but now their disciples must come forth and develop their own styles. It is time for the new generation to stand on a higher plateau. Our needs have altered and our understanding of nature's role in architecture has been redefined. As lifestyles, change so do values, both artistically and socially.

This engineered a vigorous controversy among many professional architects and the general public; a public that has become more aware that art and architecture walk hand in hand.

As we come to the dawn of a new century, I wanted to present the words of these leaders to everyone who is interested in art and architecture, so that they can understand where the future of architecture is taking us. It has become more evident that the ordinary person on the street is concerned and intrigued with the role of architects. I feel by committing their words to paper, many can gain an insight into their creativity and understand the discipline and aspiration that it takes to become a pioneer in a specific domain.

These interviews give us a sense of professional pride upheld by the commitment to innovation, cultural betterment and the preservation of nature. There is an energy that emanates from all these architects that is based on their desire to evolve to a level of achievement that can only be developed through intellect, understanding and love of work.

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Date of Interview: conducted on the morning of July 29, 1994

Location: Paul Rudolph's residence/office on Beekman Place in New York City.

Recording: The interview was audio-taped.

Images: Mr. Ghanim provided photographs, taken by himself, of several Rudolph projects which are referred to during their conversation, as well as a photo of himself and Rudolph from their interview session. All images are courtesy of Mr. Zak Ghanem



Exterior of Rudolph's penthouse at 23 Beekman Place. Photo by Zak Ghanim.



Interior of Rudolph's 3 story penthouse at 23 Beekman Place. Photo by Zak Ghanim.

ZAK GHANIM: YOUR FATHER WAS A METHODIST MINISTER, DID THIS HAVE AN EFFECT ON YOUR ARCHITECTURE AS BEING CONSERVATIVE, PRAGMATIC OR DISCIPLINED?

PAUL RUDOLPH: Most definitely. When I was six years old, my father built a church and of course an Architect was involved. When I saw his drawings and models, I knew instantly it was for me, and I have never changed my mind.

Z.G. SO, YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO BE AN ARCHITECT?

P.R. I had no choice, I was very lucky. If someone asked me should he/she be an architect, I would say, you cannot teach people to be talented, you cannot teach people to design by showing what others have done, you can only clarify principles, but you cannot really teach youth to be designers. I have always been able to draw easily, since I was a child, and still do.

Z.G. YOU STUDIED 5 YEARS IN ALABAMA POLYTECHNICAL INSTITUTE BEFORE HARVARD. WHAT KIND OF EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE DID YOU GAIN IN ALABAMA?

P.R. The first two years were a reasonable introduction to the beaux-arts, and the other three were a waste of time, quite frankly. It was not until I had the good fortune to have Walter Gropius as my instructor, that I began to understand what all the great architectural issues of the century were about. He was a great teacher, not so great as an architect, and that gave me a basis which I did not have.

Z.G. WHAT KIND OF EXPERIENCE DID YOU GAIN FROM THE BROOKLYN NAVY?

P.R. Apparently, you did some homework. They thought they could make a Naval Architect out of me, in four months, by sending me to M.I.T. for a ridiculous course. I found myself in charge of 300 people making repairs to destroyers in the Brooklyn Naval Yard. That was some fantastic experience. I saw how a very large organization went about dividing its work. Trying to utilize talents of a person was of the utmost importance, I could understand drawings while other people could not, and I began to understand the relationship between the administration and the people who were building, so I really had a fantastic job.

Z.G. BACK IN 1954, YOU WERE AWARDED THE TITLE OF "OUTSTANDING YOUNG ARCHITECT" AT THE INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION HELD IN SAO PAULO IN BRAZIL, THAT MUST HAVE BEEN A THRILL FOR YOU AT YOUR EARLY STAGE OF YOUR PROFESSION.

P.R. Not only was it a thrill, it helped me financially.

Z.G. WHAT WAS THE BASIS OF YOUR SELECTION?

P.R. I entered that competition with the design of the Walker guest house that was built in Sanibel Island, Florida back in 1953. It was a 24 by 24 foot wooden house. It had three 8 by 8 foot bays. One of glass, the other two clad with solid panels. There was an arcade around the outside of the house to support the panels. These panels changed the interior space from a cozy room, in terms of closure and light, to a wide-open pavilion.

Z.G. IN YOUR EARLY CAREER, YOU SPENT SOME TIME IN EUROPE, THROUGH A SCHOLARSHIP. WHAT KIND OF IMPACT DID THIS HAVE ON YOU?

P.R. The United States was built in the nineteenth century, and has never been strong in terms of Urbanism. The U.S. is essentially based on eclecticism, where Europe is the exact opposite. The strength of Urbanism in Europe to this day is fantastic. You could not believe the effect which European Cities had on me. I began to understand that architecture is about Urbanism, that the small must be related to the large and vice versa, that you cannot ignore the environment. I began to understand the importance of the relationship between the vehicular architecture and the so-called high style architecture, the importance of building types, the relationship of transportation of all kinds to the city. I understood that the chariot entrance to the Acropolis was formed absolutely beautifully in relationship to the pedestrian entrance. Until today, we have not learned how to relate our automobile, which is our chariot, to the vehicular system in this country. We build the ugliest cities in the world and this is so painful, because I do not think it has to be that way.

Z.G. HOW WAS YOUR PARTNERSHIP WITH ROB TWITCHEL?

P.R. Everyone has to find his way of doing his thing, there are many ways of making architecture. In my case, Rob Twitch employed me for three months, and then I went off to the Navy. Five years later he asked me to come back as a partner in a three man office, and I found out that having a partner did not work for me. I am essentially a loner, and to this good day I still am a loner. I have worked with many architects in many different ways. It must be understood clearly that I am responsible for the architectural design. Architecture is very complicated and it takes many different kinds of talents, especially if you are working on large projects. I do not say architectural design is the beginning and the end all, but I do say that it is a matter of understanding who you are, and what you can do. I am very proud of the fact that I have worked with many architects, but it is always clear who is responsible for the design, otherwise no go.

Z.G. BUT YOU STUDIED UNDER GROPIUS WHO BELIEVED IN COLLABORATION IN DESIGN.

P.R. I do not work with other designers, but I do believe in that concept, because for many people it may be the only way they can work. Gropius himself would be the first one to say there are many ways for teamwork; it's a question of what you mean by teamwork. If there is a team of architectural designers, goodbye, but if the architect teams up with a structural engineer, a mechanical engineer, an acoustical engineer, an electrical engineer, a geographer, an economist and so on, but not five architectural designers. You see, Gropius believed that through discussions, one could reach a clarification and a higher level of understanding, but then I say if that is true, I believe it depends on who you are discussing things with. It is a very complicated issue. I make no bones about what I do, I know what I do well and what I don't do well. I just want to be used in a good way, that's all.

Z.G. YOUR ORIGINAL DESIGN OF THE MARRIED STUDENTS' HOUSING PROJECT IN NEW HAVEN CONNECTICUT WAS DIFFERENT THAN THE BUILT STRUCTURE. WHAT WAS THE REASON BEHIND THAT?

P.R. It was essentially the budget. The design perhaps was better located in a warmer climate rather than the severe winters of New England; because of the great deal of exposed exterior walls?

Z.G. WHY DID YOU CHANGE THE EXTERIOR FROM CONCRETE BLOCKS TO BRICK?

P.R. The brick was used because there is an abundance of it in New Haven. Also, the surrounding houses were made of brick. So in retrospect I think I was wrong.

Z.G. I HAVE SEEN YOUR GOVERNMENT SERVICE CENTRE IN BOSTON. IT HAS BEEN VERY BADLY MAINTAINED, ALMOST TO THE POINT OF FALLING APART.

P.R. Well so I hear. You know the sequel to all of this is that another firm is now making a new state court house for the unbuilt portion of that building. The project was never finished. The lower portion was never completed also the tower was never built. The new building will take up the entire space, and so the character of the original building will be transformed. I cannot rationalize why the building is not treated well. I think the

explanation is that the health, welfare, and social services portion of the building was used and kept up for many years, but the mental health part was never fully occupied. Partially due to the changing policy. It was supposed to be centralized at one point, then it was decided that was not going to be done. The building was never used for its intended purpose.

Z.G. I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU WERE NOT HAPPY WITH THE FINAL LOOK OF THE MARY COOPER JEWETT ARTS CENTRE FOR WELLESLEY COLLEGE, WELLESLEY, MASSACHUSETTS BACK IN 1955. WHY IS THAT?

P.R. In the U.S. architects tend to think that the nineteenth century has spilled over into the twentieth century, and that one should build only twentieth century architecture. I am very proud that this building was part of the very beautiful campus, and one had to say it was built in this century. That was the basic notion. In other words, I am talking about urbanism, which I did not really learn in school. I am a great believer that education is based on many things. In any event the idea of adding a 20th century building to a Gothic campus created a form of space, kind of Acropolis, looking down south to the lake. If I were to have the same commission today, I would do it the same way, in principle. The thing I feel inferior about the building, has to do with the interior space, which was not developed exactly the way I wanted. Regardless, in my opinion, Wellesley College was one of the first buildings that tried to marry the new and the old United States.

Z.G. THE ELABORATE FACADE GRILLE OF THE MILAM HOUSE, IN JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA, WAS IT FUNCTIONAL OR DECORATIVE?

P.R. The master bedroom has a bit higher ceiling that goes up two-thirds of a flight to an outlook, and that has a canopy over it to provide shade from the sun. Everything has to have multiple meanings; you just cannot keep adding things arbitrarily.

Z.G. AT 4 AM, JUNE 14TH, 1969, A MYSTERIOUS FIRE BEGAN AT THE SECOND FLOOR OF ONE OF YOUR MASTERPIECES, YALE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, WHILE IT WAS UNDER THE DEANSHIP OF YOUR SUCCESSOR CHARLES MOORE. THAT BUILDING HAS BEEN CRITICIZED FOR BAD SPACE, BAD ACOUSTICS, AND TOO ROUGH OF TEXTURE. WHAT ARE YOUR COMMENTS?

P.R. I do not know. I can tell you, I wish I had never built the building. It never stopped me from doing other ones though.



Exterior of Rudolph's Yale School of Architecture under renovation. Photo by Zak Ghanim.

Z.G. THE ARTIST GRAPHIC CENTRE, IN NEW YORK, WAS CRITICISED FOR BEING TOO BUSY. WHAT IS YOUR REACTION TO THIS?

P.R. They were wrong. It has a scale. It is a multiple use structure. I could agree with them if it was an office building, but what you call busy, I think of it as a reduction of scale. Maybe I'm wrong but I think it has to be read from a distance, as well as very close up.

Z.G. HAVE YOU DONE ANY PROJECTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

P.R. An embassy in Amman, it was not built. A project in Lebanon, it was not built, and of course, the stadium in Saudi Arabia and that was not built, so I suppose they do not count.

Z.G. WHICH ONE OF THEM DO YOU REGRET NOT BEING BUILT?

P.R. Well, I regret that none of these projects were built for many reasons, but the one that I regret most was the stadium. It is just a beautiful way of hanging a structure, and I think about it to this good day. The government of Saudi Arabia was going to build it, and suddenly they decided not to do so, of course things like this happen, but as a work of architecture I truly regret it. No one has asked me to make a stadium again.

Z.G. HAVE YOU EVER CONSIDERED USING THE SAME CONCEPT FOR ANOTHER PROJECT SOMEWHERE ELSE?

P.R. I have been tempted to force that idea onto another client, but maybe not. I think it had unique qualities that suited only Saudi Arabia.

Z.G. HOW ABOUT THE HIGH RISE BUILDING IN BEIRUT AND THE U.S. EMBASSY IN AMMAN?

P.R. The high rise was intended for Lebanon and whether or not it was built, it would have been quite right, of course, it had to do with the environment. I am a great believer in that, what you build in Beirut; you don't build in New York. The U.S. Embassy in Jordan was the first project that I had worked on outside of the United States; it was for the state department of the United States Government.

Z.G. WAS IT A COMMISSION OR A COMPETITION?

P.R. It was a commission. I do not know why that was not built either. [Architect] Belluschi was the advisor to our state department, and he recommended that I do the project, and I was really happy to do it. It was the first building that I worked on with stone.

Z.G. HOW ABOUT OTHER COUNTRIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

P.R. I visited Cairo, Egypt, where I only went to the Valley of the Kings. I did not go to Alexandria.

Z.G. WHAT DID YOU CONTRIBUTE AS A CHAIRMAN OF YALE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE?

P.R. I do not know if I made any contribution. I patterned my eight years there very much after Gropius, not stylistically but in principle. What Gropius basically said, was that architecture, in the real sense of the word, is a means by which people express their aspiration. In that sense, we really are servants to society. I genuinely believe that things are constantly changing, and that is based on the series of principals that we started speaking of. I tried to teach that architectural space is what determines, any project whether religious, governmental or housing, and that scale is of the utmost importance, especially in terms of Urbanism.

Z.G. I WOULD LIKE TO HEAR YOUR OPINION ABOUT THE LATEST TRENDS IN ARCHITECTURE; POST- MODERNISM, DECONSTRUCTION....

P.R. The only thing I like about Post-Modernism is its light interest in urbanism, but it is far too nostalgic and stylish. If you had a bunch of Cape Cod cottages, according to Post-Modernism, the only thing to do is to build more cape cod cottage. I don't believe in this, I am totally against Post-Modernism, as conceptually seen, other than what little it has to say about urbanism. Modernism does not have all the answers, I do not think it does, but it tends to address this century's problems, and has within its concepts a great many possible solutions.

Z.G. WHAT DO YOU THINK OF GRAVE'S WORK?

P.R. I have never seen Graves' work.

Z.G. HAVE YOU SEEN ANY OF EISENMAN' S WORK?

P.R. I have seen only one of Eisenman's houses in Connecticut. It was very poorly constructed.

Z.G. HOW DO YOU LIKE THE AT&T BUILDING?

P.R. No comment.

Z.G. HAVE YOU BEEN IN CANADA, AND HOW DO YOU LIKE THE ARCHITECTURE THERE?

P.R. Yes, I have been there many times. I think the old part of Toronto is marvelous.

Z.G. FOR THE PAST EIGHTEEN YEARS YOU HAVE BEEN DEALING WITH DIFFERENT INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS. WHAT KIND OF EXPERIENCE DID YOU OBTAIN FROM SUCH INVOLVEMENT?

P.R. I have been working mostly in South East Asia, and I have found that very rewarding on many levels. The attitudes are very different from the United States. It is also the idea that the labor is still relatively very inexpensive, and what I want to do is very labor intensive. The Pacific Rim is in its most important stage economically, but artistically it is not very clearly defined yet. I think it will be soon.

Z.G. HOW DO YOU VISUALISE THE FUTURE OF CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE? ARE WE GOING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?

P.R. First of all, do you see that each new trend cancels out the other, and leaves you with nothing. I really, honestly believe in movements that add to urbanism or add some dimensions to human life. Then I am for it, but if I do not see that, then I am against it. I feel sad about things right now, but I also feel very hopeful. Many false paths have been perceived, and I believe the problems that one sees everywhere will not go away. Architects right now, as I see, tend to solve or address themselves to problems which are fine in terms of magazines, but have nothing to do with human needs or aspirations.

Z.G. YOU PRODUCED SOME OF THE MOST METICULOUS AND ORDERLY DETAILED BLACK AND WHITE COLLECTION OF PERSPECTIVES. HOW MUCH WERE YOU PERSONALLY INVOLVED IN THE PRODUCING OF THOSE RENDERINGS?

P.R. When I was very young, I personally drew every line. In many ways those are the only drawings which I like. Then I became very busy, and what I would do perspective and almost everything in pencil, then I had staff to fill in certain passages. But when it came a matter of gradation, I would always do that, and when it was a matter of hatching, someone else could do that. So I always had some assistance.

Z.G. HAVE YOU EVER DISPLAYED ANY OF THEM?

P.R. Some of my drawings were just at a small exhibition in New York City. That is the way of telling people about yourself. Presentation drawings that you talk about are to sell the building.

Z.G. WHAT IS ON THE DRAFTING BOARD NOW?

P.R. I am still working in South East Asia and Hong Kong. I don't know why, but I have a bunch of projects I'm working on, a total of six private homes and a small office building in Indonesia. An office building in Singapore, also I'm working on a town in Indonesia.

Z.G. HOW ABOUT THE US?

P.R. One house!

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PAUL RUDOLPH HERITAGE FOUNDATION, 246 EAST 58TH STREET, NEW YORK, NY, 10022, UNITED STATES (212) 371-0336 OFFICE@PAULRUDOLPHHERITAGEFOUNDATION.ORG (MAILTO:OFFICE@PAULRUDOLPHHERITAGEFOUNDATI

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