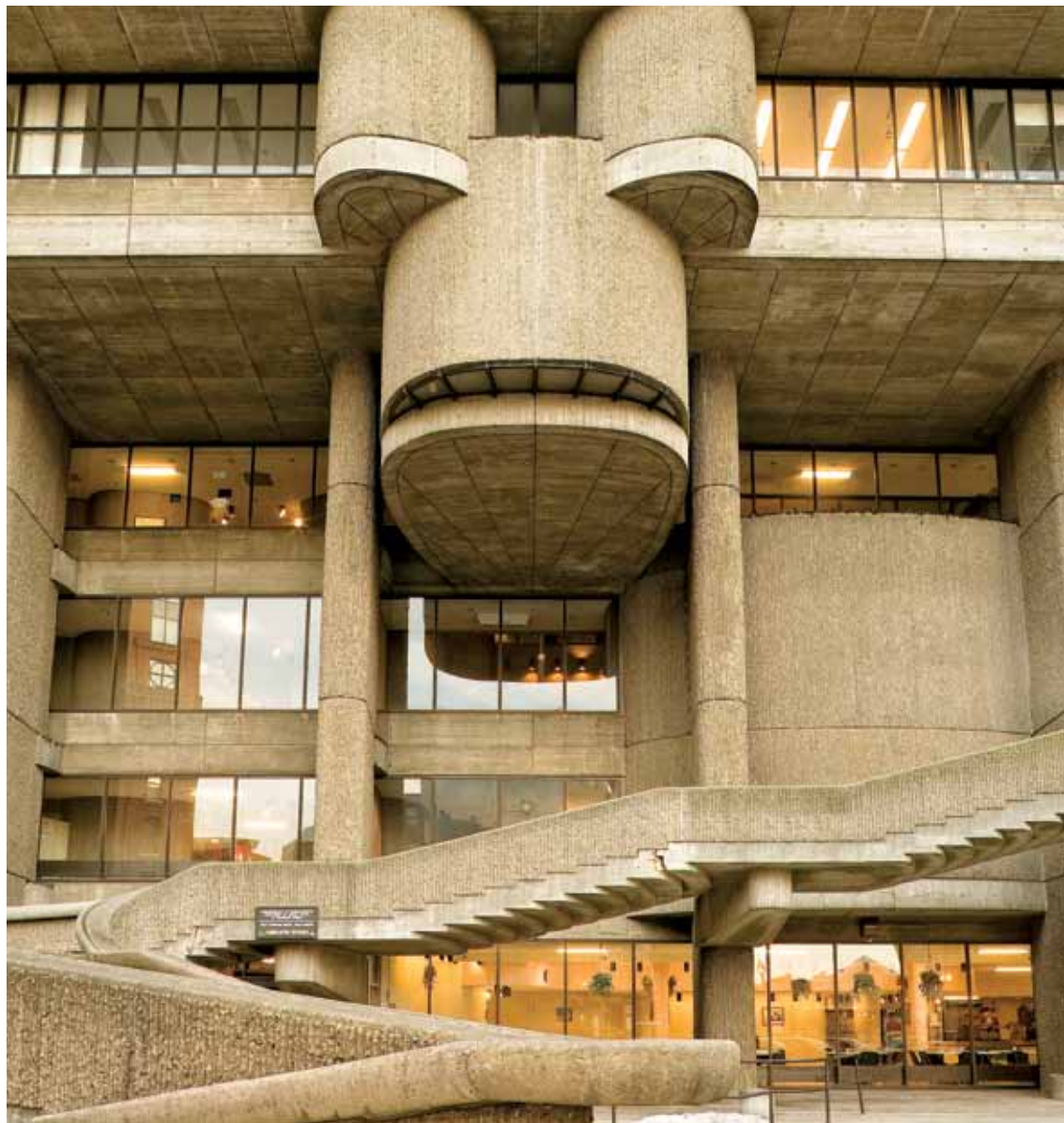


South Street Seaport, New York City, 1979–81. Architect: Benjamin Thompson & Associates with Beyer Blinder Belle. The “festival marketplace” comes to New York, with a combination of renovated structures (Fulton Fish Market pictured here) and new construction designed to look like renovated old buildings to emphasize the creation of something new in a historic context. Photo © 1983 Steve Rosenthal.



Government Services Center (Lindemann and Hurley buildings), Boston, 1962–71. Architect: Paul Rudolph with M. A. Dyer; Desmond and Lord; and Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson & Abbott. In a virtuoso but ultimately bewildering application of *architecture parlante*, in which buildings suggest their functions, Rudolph goes for Baroque, with a stair worthy of Borromini and a leering, menacing anthropomorphism (or, for those who insist on seeing frog imagery, amphibiomorphism). Photo © www.bruce martin.com.



# Ben & Paul

**Two architects,  
two views of  
Modernism:  
Ben Thompson  
and Paul Rudolph**

by David N. Fixler FAIA, LEED AP

**Modern architecture has been characterized** by a quest to reconcile its social, experiential, technical, and aesthetic aspirations with its formal vocabulary. This struggle is probably most apparent in its preoccupation with finding the most appropriate expression for the dynamic aspects of modern life, a pursuit that, over time, manifested itself in two fundamental ways. The first has given us sculpture — buildings that embody movement and newness through the use of innovative formal language. The second has given us theater — buildings that serve as a stage, an armature upon which the variety and excitement of modern life can unfold.

As Modernism matured in the postwar era, critical debate began to throw these positions into high relief, and by the early 1960s, Paul Rudolph and Ben Thompson began to emerge as leading proponents of each school of thought. Tracing their careers and how these sensibilities evolved resembles the intertwining strands of a DNA molecule — each informing the other while remaining utterly distinct. Thompson was a Northerner, a Yale graduate who embraced teamwork, went on to work with Walter Gropius and The Architects Collaborative (TAC), became chair of the architecture department at Harvard, and finally formed his own office around a like-minded group of architects to take the team approach still further. Rudolph was of the South, attended Harvard under Gropius, but very early rejected the collaborative design ethos in favor of the Howard Roark/Frank Lloyd Wright model of the architect as the solitary genius guiding a team of acolytes. He struck out early on his own, and later, as the leader of Yale's School of Architecture (overlapping for one year with Thompson's tenure at Harvard), used this model to shape the sensibilities of some of the most personal, "starchitect"-centered practices of the late-20th century.

These approaches yield very different architectural and urban experiences. While Thompson's buildings are rarely individually memorable as architecture, they are unrivaled as places in which to absorb the color and variety of modern life. It may in fact be argued that Thompson's genius was really in defining, interpreting, and designing the "lifestyle experience," as suggested in the 1990 issue of *Process Architecture* that was devoted to Benjamin Thompson & Associates (BTA): "Today, more than ever before, BTA's architectural reticence can be astonishing. It is a measure of how deeply the firm believes architecture per se should not be a distraction from the important things in life."

Rudolph's buildings, on the other hand, are insistent and instantly memorable as architecture — the experience of them is about them, the use and understanding of their spaces dictated by their formal power. This sensibility is evident at every scale and in every period of his work, from the smallest of his early Florida houses, through his public and institutional buildings, up through the urban-scale projects of his later career.

Thompson and Rudolph were active participants in the debate that percolated through the 1950s on the shortcomings of functionalism and the need to find appropriate ways in which to invigorate a Modern architecture that was becoming somewhat moribund in the wake of the first great wave of postwar development. Citing a renewed concern with humanism, each in his own way also turned to Europe for inspiration. In addition to Thompson's forays to Scandinavia, Italy was an important influence for both architects. Rudolph's insights into the structure of traditional Mediterranean urban form enabled the development of his unique formal sensibility. What is less acknowledged is the parallel between Thompson and architects such as Luigi Moretti and particularly Carlo Scarpa in imagining how to juxtapose a Modern work with a traditional structure. Moretti's Casa Girasole in Rome (which coincidentally has a main façade eerily evocative of Design Research) and Scarpa's work at the Accademia and Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice and the Castelvecchio in Verona demonstrate ways in which contemporary architecture can co-exist in dynamic tension with history in much the same way that Thompson did in his groundbreaking work with TAC on the radical renovation of Boylston Hall at Harvard and the later renovations to Boston's Faneuil Hall Marketplace.

Their differences in attitude toward form and experience are in evidence even at the most rudimentary architectural level. Rudolph's Hiss (Umbrella) House of 1953 and Thompson's Burke Pool House of 1961 are two very different takes on the creation of a similar basic residential unit. Thompson's self-proclaimed "re-interpretation in timber of the archetypal Miesian glass pavilion" reveals a spatially static, structural weightiness (the timber frame is exposed inside) that is characteristic of much of his architecture — at any scale. Thompson's space itself is utterly unencumbered; nothing intrudes on the users' ability to arrange it however they choose. Rudolph goes to the other extreme: While concealing the overhead structure and minimizing the verticals to their slimmest dimension, he strongly suggests ways in which the space can and should be used through changes in level, articulation of the interior space, and changes in material and

color — all persuasively done with a touch that is both light and architecturally electric.

At the institutional scale, a similar comparison can be made between the tectonic system that Thompson developed for numerous academic commissions, beginning with his work on Brandeis University's Academic Quadrangle in the mid-1950s and Rudolph's Jewett Arts Center at Wellesley College of 1955–58. In both instances, the architects were seeking a Modern expression appropriate for the campus setting of a traditional New England educational institution. Each uses concrete in place of granite or limestone to articulate structure, with both traditional water-struck brick and large areas of glass as the primary materials of the exterior enclosure. Thompson's system is just that: a universal, multipurpose concrete waffle-slab floor and roof construction that is applied indiscriminately over a grid of concrete piers. Infill panels of brick and steel-framed glass are clearly articulated as non-load-bearing elements. It is a system of quiet elegance and great functional flexibility that at its most refined — as in the work at Phillips Academy in Andover and the Chase Manhattan prototype branch bank in Great Neck, New York — takes on a Miesian quality in its sense of calm and balance. Learning from his experience with contemporary Scandinavian Modernism, Thompson developed a complementary palette of materials — quarry tile and slate floors, brick walls in public areas, oak and laminated birch millwork — that gave the buildings scale and texture.

Rudolph was more overtly aggressive in engaging Wellesley's Collegiate Gothic context. The structure itself is mannered through the use of deep sculptural flutes that create quatrefoil column shapes evoking Gothic colonnettes, a waffle slab with an articulated edge, and waffle pans shaped and proportioned to recall the strong, prow-like horizontal thrust that is a theme throughout this work. These moves together lighten and animate the structure, with the addition of aluminum screens recalling Gothic tracery; full-height windows; and tall, pointed skylights that evoke Gothic spires. The result, given essentially the same tectonic system and material palette as the Thompson buildings, is instead a unique and thoroughly customized response to this particular context.

The next leap is to the scale of the city, where the contrast of their respective philosophies is most starkly revealed. Here the idea of the "festival marketplace" — and the city as theater — becomes most evident in Thompson's work. His buildings are backdrops, armatures that enable the unfolding of a colorful, flavorful, and (most important) desirable urban experience. As these expand into the realm of the unbuilt or partially realized megaproject — such as the Custom House Development in Dublin, or Harumi 1 Chome in Japan — the architecture remains unassertive and almost self-deprecating relative to the splendor of the experience.

In contrast, Rudolph asserts a utopian ideal about the ability of architecture to mold one's experience of both the institution and the city. Nowhere is this more evident than in the 1962–71 Boston Government Services Center (Lindemann and Hurley) buildings — which stand, imperfectly realized, quasi-ruinous, but exalting in their formal glory, less than 1,000 yards from



Burke Pool House, Oyster Bay, New York, 1961–62. Architect: Benjamin Thompson & Associates. Thompson's version of "Miesian" universal space features heavy exposed-timber framing in opposition to the weightless, but perfectly proportioned, Platonic clarity demonstrated most famously in Mies van der Rohe's 1951 Farnsworth House. Despite claims to universality and therefore flexibility, Mies was in fact very prescriptive about the placement of furniture and objects. In the Burke Pool House, Thompson clearly leaves those decisions entirely up to the users. Photo © Louis Reens, courtesy Frances Loeb Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Design.



Umbrella House, Sarasota, Florida, 1953. Architect: Paul Rudolph. Rudolph's primary concern here is creating an architectural space to be perceived and experienced on his terms. The muscularity so evident in the concrete structures of his later career is foreshadowed here in the articulation of the tectonic and space-defining elements, including the tension generated between the dynamism of the space and the delicacy of the slender structure and railing supports. Photo by Lionel Freedman, courtesy Library of Congress.



the Faneuil Hall Marketplace. It is easy to point to this complex as an act of architectural hubris — formally virtuosic but utterly dystopian from the perspective of the pedestrian either experiencing the complex at street level or trying to navigate its labyrinthine plan — but it is nonetheless heroic, if seriously flawed. At the larger urban scale, analogous with Thompson’s revitalization of the urban waterfront, one need look no further than Rudolph’s 1967 proposal for the New York Graphic Arts Center, a megastructure that builds on the modular principle of Safdie’s Habitat ’67 with the scale, utopian vigor, and structural pyrotechnics of the Japanese Metabolists.

There is a final lesson in comparing the models prepared for this project and those that Thompson’s office built for its large urban projects. Rudolph’s is monochromatic, minimally populated, mysteriously lit from within and relentlessly focused on the architecture as spectacular, theatrical sculpture that backs a hard edge up to the city while opening out to the Manhattan waterfront and the infinite beyond. Thompson’s, by contrast, are bright, colored, heavily populated, bannered, and snugly embedded within their urban context. With Rudolph, we are impressed but perhaps more than a little intimidated — the architectural equivalent of “shock and awe” — while Ben is inviting us all to come on down and have a good time. In the end, great architecture needs and can accommodate both. ■



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**Harumi 1 Chome masterplan, Tokyo, 1988–91. Architect: Benjamin Thompson & Associates with Shun Kanda and Nikken Sekkei.** A vibrant, colorful, polyvalent work of urban design with an eclectic blend of architectural styles to mirror and showcase the rich variety of human activity. Photo © 1989 Steve Rosenthal.

**Graphic Arts Center, New York City, 1967 (unrealized). Architect: Paul Rudolph.** In a project perhaps better named “Habitat on Steroids,” Rudolph brings his muscular sensibility to the cause of prefabrication at a gargantuan urban scale. The emphasis is on sculptural form — stacked rather than modeled as in the Boston Government Services Center project — and the monochromatic use of color here is strictly an architectural accent. Photo by Ezra Stoller © Esto.