

Exhibitions

PAUL RUDOLPH: SELECTED DRAWINGS

The Architectural League of New York
19 September 1997–15 October 1997

AN ARCHITECTURE OF INDEPENDENCE: THE MAKING OF MODERN SOUTH ASIA

Arthur Ross Gallery, University of Pennsylvania

15 August 1997–5 October 1997

The Architectural League of New York
23 October 1997–3 December 1997

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

28 March 1998–19 July 1998

Department of Architecture,

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

September–October 1998

The galleries of Manhattan's Urban Center are but one of a handful of public spaces dedicated primarily to exhibitions on architecture and urbanism, not only in New York City but in the country as a whole. Used on a rotating basis by the professional and advocacy organizations housed in this wing of McKim, Mead and White's Villard Houses, the Urban Center is home to the Architectural League of New York, an organization established by Cass Gilbert in 1881 as a professional group but now serving all of those interested in both current architectural practice and historical aspects of architecture. In recent years this small but highly visible organization has staged a series of ambitious exhibitions, ranging from surveys of the work of both young and established practitioners to thematic presentations of historical and urban themes, and most of these shows have served as the centerpiece of the Architectural League's weekly public programs.

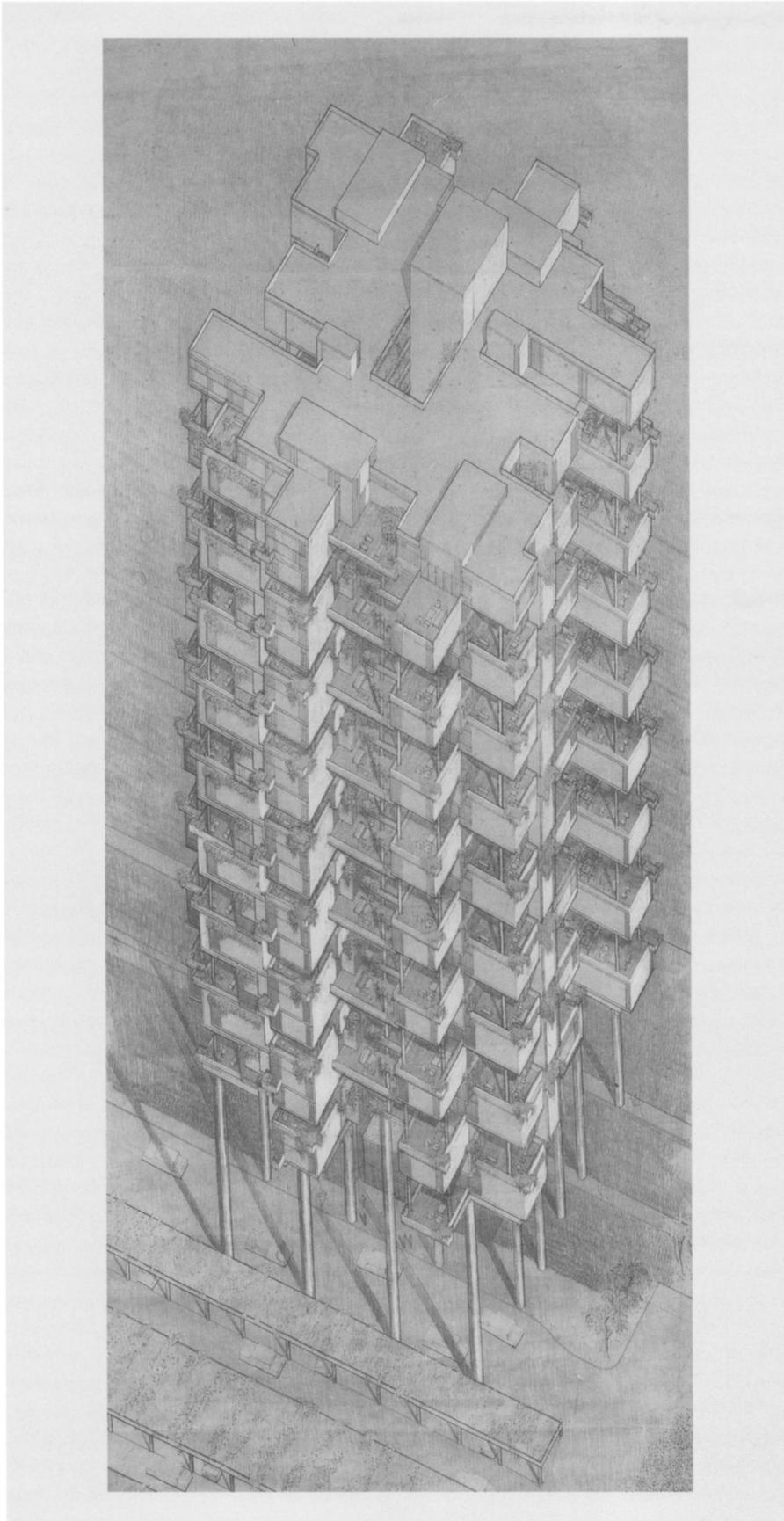
Located at 50th Street and Madison Avenue, the League is just a few blocks away from the Museum of Modern Art; the contrast in their exhibition philosophies and audiences is illuminating. The League's shows are perforce modest and

often of brief duration. Its not-for-profit status permits greater freedom to function outside of the increasingly market-driven culture of exhibitions and to assume greater risk in selecting topics to explore. In addition, flexibility of scheduling allows for spontaneous additions to the exhibition roster at a moment's notice. Rather than relying on the hype of large-scale blockbuster shows, such liberties permit serendipitous and fortuitous juxtapositions to be manifested. The autumn 1997 season featured two exhibitions back to back—one long in the making and the other hastily organized—which provided just such a thought-provoking examination of one of the most widely debated themes of recent architectural discourse: "critical regionalism," a concept first expounded by and most frequently associated with Kenneth Frampton (himself a member of the League's Board of Directors). By first presenting the work of an American, Paul Rudolph—whose late commissions took him to Singapore and Hong Kong—and then a few days later opening a show of the recent work of four prominent South Asian architects, the two exhibitions made possible a more nuanced discussion of the reciprocal relations between East and West in a postcolonial world. Recognition of the value inherent in local traditions is thus seen as a crucial parallel to the discovery of structural conditions that exist outside of culture and place. These two exhibitions provided an opportunity to play these trajectories against one another, uncovering hidden links in the unfolding histories of postwar modernism.

Hastily organized following the architect's death, the exhibition of Rudolph's work offered the opportunity to view a wide range of his drawings on the eve of their being donated to the Library of Congress, where the Rudolph archive is now being inventoried and will eventually be made available to scholars. In addition to several theoretical sketches, the exhibition

included works that spanned the architect's career, from the 1950s through the early 1990s, ranging from his early buildings at Yale to the projects in South Asia that preoccupied him in the last fifteen years of his life. Conceived not as a traditional monograph, in contrast to MoMA's retrospectives of such twentieth-century masters as Frank Lloyd Wright and Alvar Aalto, this more modest installation revealed the extent to which drawing itself can become the focus of an architectural exhibition. Drawings were displayed not merely as records of the design process, for Rudolph's use of ink on vellum added a rare immediacy and tactile quality to them, drawing the viewer into a relationship with the actual object. A defining characteristic of Rudolph's drafting style is the almost obsessive attention to line and detail, especially in relation to the rendering of material surface. For most architects, the drawing is both a field for experimentation and a contractual obligation to a client, but for Rudolph the graphic work existed as an end in itself, a place for expanding the discipline and capacities of architecture as much as for solving the demands of a specific project.

"Some construction materials are easier to depict through rendering than others. This probably accounts for some of my interest in concrete and highly textured surfaces in general, [and why] brick has always seemed to me to be an alien material in the 20th century, but perhaps this attitude lies in the fact that it is relatively difficult to draw." This quotation from Rudolph's essay "From Conception to Sketch to Building" (in *Paul Rudolph: Drawings* [Tokyo, 1972]) was chosen by the organizers as the theme of the show and signifies the important role of drawing in Rudolph's architecture. Clearly, other design decisions that determine the external fabric of a building follow from the choice of materials, and one is awed by the stripping away of artifice and mystery in the draw-



Paul Rudolph, *The Colonnade Condominiums*, Singapore, 1980, isometric elevation. Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution/Art Resource, New York

ings, which results in the textured envelope of Rudolph's structures. Other drawings bear witness to Rudolph's experiments with indigenous materials, such as bamboo, used for the shingles of the Wee Ee Chao residence in Singapore (1990). Indeed, Rudolph's assimilation of local building materials and traditions in his Asian work shows not only his interest in a wide range of building textures but also the inadequacy of critical efforts to understand his practice as constrained by the tenets of international modernism.

In the exhibition the trajectory from conception to built form was suggested by the inclusion of theoretical and exploratory sketches that provided valuable insight into the architect's mind as he worked on various problems, including spatial flow through interior volumes—a particularly interesting analysis of the Art and Architecture Building at Yale University and the Roman Pantheon was offered in one drawing—and various methods of providing shade, as in the brise-soleil of the Burroughs Wellcome and Company corporate headquarters of 1969–1972 and in the “Theoretical Flap House” of 1952. These graphic explorations were skillfully juxtaposed with actual products realized from Rudolph's design experiments and incorporated into the installation at the League: Plexiglas chairs on casters—clearly inspired by Marcel Breuer—were provided for visitors to sit on while watching a 1983 video by Bob Eisenstadt of Rudolph at work, and one gallery was lit by a Rudolph-designed chandelier manufactured by (and for) the Modulightor Company (1996). Conspicuously absent, however, were representative projects from the earliest period of Rudolph's career, notably the series of houses he designed in Sarasota, Florida, from the late 1940s to the early 1950s.

Despite the rapidity with which the exhibition was assembled and the limited means available for installation, the designers grappled admirably with the rather inflexible neo-Georgian interiors of the Urban Center's galleries. The muted gray tones of the architect's drawings were echoed in a series of double-sided aluminum cross-braced dividers on which the drawings were hung. This functionalist touch contrasted with the staid interiors to emphasize the show's focus on the bridge between technology and aesthetics and the re-creation

of a sense of the novelty and bravura that accompanied Rudolph's appearance on the scene in the 1950s and 1960s.

An Architecture of Independence: The Making of Modern South Asia, curated by Kazi Khaleed Ashraf and James Belluando, provided an opportunity to discover a rich architectural heritage of relatively recent vintage, one that is largely unknown to Western audiences. Forsaking the large-scale corporate projects by Western architects that predominate in much of the region, this show focused on the work of four architects in India and Bangladesh—Charles Correa, Achyut Kanvinde, Balkrishna Doshi, and Muzharul Islam—each of whom has been concerned with forging links between high-style modernism, the vernacular traditions of building, and the quotidian dimensions of modern life on the subcontinent. The exhibition was intended to be the centerpiece of an extensive series of events in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence, providing an occasion for exploring the newly independent state's uses of architecture to establish a reified image of itself after so many years of colonial rule. Lectures by Doshi and Correa, as well as a symposium at New York's Asia Society, expanded the scope of the exhibition through scholarly accounts of the political, architectural, and artistic contexts of these four practices.

Prior to India's independence, the prevailing colonial architectural project throughout South Asia had been the adaptation of disparate local traditions to an imported British colonial style. After 1947, the young democratic state likewise strove to synthesize diverse secular and religious traditions into a harmonious aesthetic, in this case representative of a unified nation. The result is exemplified by such works as Correa's Jawahar Kala Kendra Center for the Arts (1986–1993) in Jaipur, the square mandala plan and torana (entry gate) of which refer to the spiritual tradition of Buddhism as well as to the original master plan (1727) for the city of Jaipur. The religious or spiritual allusions evident in most of the works exhibited were highlighted by the installation design, which sought by means of earthy red, orange, and brown wall panels and model stands to emphasize the physical properties—especially the rich textures and colors character-

istic of traditional South Asian architecture—fundamental to the work of each of the participating architects.

An essay (in a small catalogue available only at the Philadelphia venue and extracted from a larger, forthcoming work) by co-curator Ashraf emphasizes Jawaharlal Nehru's attempt to break with Indian tradition and, through the coded language of architecture, to forge a new symbolism for the Indian state. The featured architects, all of whom began to practice either around or shortly after 1947, are shown to have assimilated Indian or Bangladeshi secular and religious symbolism to received forms of international modernism as these had been imported to the Indian subcontinent by such European and American architects as Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, and Paul Rudolph, among many others. By focusing on the complex cultural context of South Asia itself rather than on the subcontinent's inchoate participation in a global economy, the exhibition was able to show how local examples by Western architects were absorbed into a new architectural vernacular, one that functioned both symbolically and practically for the emergent independent state.

Despite the curators' strong claims for the appearance of a critical regionalism, visitors to *An Architecture of Independence* might well have left with a sense of confusion regarding the use of the word "modernism." The curators failed to examine and articulate the very particular meaning of the term for South Asia, especially in relation to the Western training received by all four of the architects represented. Object labels made explicit reference to the interpretation of traditional elements but largely glossed over Western modernist examples, leaving visitors on their own to find the links between East and West. It is to be hoped that the forthcoming catalogue will address this issue in greater depth.

For regular visitors to the Urban Center galleries, these two exhibitions offered a quiet invitation to consider how modernism in South Asia functioned, as it did in the West, as an intelligent response to the needs of a society grappling with the exigencies of a rapidly changing world.

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Publications related to the exhibition:

An Architecture of Independence: The Making of Modern South Asia, edited and with essays by Kazi Khaleed Ashraf and James Belluando and an introduction by Kenneth Frampton. New York: The Architectural League, 1998, 80 pp. \$19.95 (paper). Distributed by Urban Center Books. ISBN 0-9663856-0-8.

PIETRO DA CORTONA 1597–1669

Palazzo Venezia, Rome

31 October 1997–10 February 1998

PIETRO DA CORTONA E IL DISEGNO

**Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica and the
Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, Rome**

31 October 1997–10 February 1998

Pietro Berrettini da Cortona turned fifty believing that he would never be a success in architecture: "I see clearly that in these matters [of architecture] I have always had bad luck. . . . Architecture has served me only for my diversion" (quoted by Karl Noehles on p. 133 in the Palazzo Venezia catalogue). Indeed when he wrote these lines in 1646 he had reasons to be gloomy. His scheme for the Barberini palace had been rejected as too grandiose even for Rome's most ambitious client. His great lifelong project, the church of the Roman Academy, SS. Martina e Luca, had been stalled for a decade, and the patron, Cardinal Francesco Barberini, had just fled Rome. Cortona's most splendid chapel, the Cappella Falconieri in S. Giovanni dei Fiorentini, had gotten no further than a full-scale wooden model. He had just taken a year to design a magnificent church for the Oratorian community in Florence, but its very scale was an obstacle to its completion. Cortona had no way of knowing just how fruitful the coming two decades would be for his career as an architect, when he and Gianlorenzo Bernini, the painter and sculptor, would outstrip all the professional architects of Rome put together in sheer brilliance and quantity of production.

Archival research has recently moved Cortona's birthdate from 1596 to 1597, and so 1997 provided the occasion for a major exhibition of his easel paintings in the Palazzo Venezia in Rome, with a parallel exhibition of figurative drawings in the