

A HALF-CENTURY'S PERSPECTIVE



The South Bay Estate, photo by Steven Brooke

Architect Carl Abbott FAIA has seen many changes in Architecture, but for him, it always starts with the land

By HAROLD BUBIL *[reformatted]*

Fifty years ago, when Sarasota was in the middle of the postwar boom, Carl Abbott got his architecture degree from the University of Florida, and his state license, and then headed to Yale Graduate School to study under the renowned architect Paul Rudolph. A few years later, in 1966, he opened his Sarasota office, and, as the youngest member of the so-called *Sarasota School of Modern Architecture*, started a career that would have a lasting impact on the way the city looks, and how it thinks about architecture.

Here is Carl Abbott, and some of his buildings, at a glance.

WHERE HE WORKS

Modernism is his signature, but a visit to Carl Abbott's office on Riverside Drive in north Sarasota gives little indication of it. His office building is a converted Spanish-style structure from the 1920s. And it is surrounded by dense, subtropical foliage, much of it planted by Abbott and his sons Cooper and Mark many years ago. His conference room has an enormous plate-glass window that looks out on the upper reach of Whitaker Bayou and a wild forest of sabal palms, oaks and understory plants. His staff has equally dramatic views of the bayou from their desks. It is a wonder any work gets done.

HIS ARCHITECTURAL ROOTS

At Yale, while studying under Paul Rudolph, he became lifelong friends with two classmates, Britons who would become superstars of Architecture. Lord Richard Rogers (famous for the Pompidou Center in Paris) and Lord Norman Foster (Hearst Building, New York; Millennium Bridge, London) have won Pritzker Prizes. Abbott's buildings work with humanistic qualities and are closely tied to the land.



The Women's Resource Center in Sarasota

HIS STAFF

His practice, like his work, is intimate in scale. Ten people is the largest staff he has had. He said he would never have a large firm, because he enjoys designing buildings and having direct contact with clients and contractors.

HIS PHILOSOPHY

Abbott is very much influenced by the immediate environments surrounding his buildings. That makes sense, considering the setting of his office. A recent interview with the Herald-Tribune was overseen by

four young peacocks who live on the Abbott studio property.

In fact, Abbott's work is "In / Formed by the Land"—the title of a book, in process, of his Architecture. He often gives talks with the same title. Architecture is 'in the land, and it is informed by the land, meaning told by it,' he says. 'there are many layers'

HIS "A-HA" MOMENT

Born in the Low Country of coastal Georgia, Abbott raised birds as a child, and also was interested in nature, the

landscape and art. 'As I learned more about landscaping, I learned about Architecture...they are all interrelated. I can tie them all together. I traveled and always wanted to know more. Not how am I going to make a living—it was never that. Still, when traveling, I get excited about looking at new and old buildings and the spaces the buildings form — as Churchill said ...*we shape our buildings, thereafter they shape us*'.

HOW HE LOOKS AT BUILDINGS

Buildings are always in view, but Abbott sees them differently—'most lay people might think... pretty building. When you are an Architect' he said, 'you look at buildings and cities in a different way. I can see what the men who put the building together were thinking—can see their whole process—where they failed and where they hit it right on the mark.'

'I break buildings down into two stages: one is the *Concept*. Is it a valid design that is functional and efficient and handsome? The second is, how well is this *Concept Carried Out*. Not the quality of the construction, but the quality of the Architecture.

‘I look at the way the building functions in the city with other buildings around it. And I like to look at them in different seasons and different times of day. It makes a huge difference—also you need to see a building in use.’

ON SARASOTA

Abbott has seen a lot of changes in five decades of working in Sarasota. ‘Sarasota is not a small town and not a big city—we are in the middle. Many knowledgeable people are available, yet ignored. However, Sarasota is a good city—one of the best of its size in the country with many great attributes and great potential.’

ON HIS FUTURE

‘I am always excited about architecture,’ he says. ‘I will always be an architect—it’s a great profession. We are doing some exciting projects—our best designs are yet to come.’

QUESTION AND ANSWER

Your favorite buildings by Carl Abbott?

The Deering House, the Putterman House, Ann Darling’s house is poetic and free... Recent studies we have for a series of towers is very exciting and will make a major positive impact.

Favorite Sarasota building not by Carl Abbott?

Sarasota High School ... no, no, no ... the Deering House by Paul Rudolph, then Sarasota High School.

The best year for Carl Abbott?

Next year.

The best decade for Sarasota Architecture?

It was not easy when Rudolph and those Architects were here. But the 1950s. It was a small community, with some amazing Architecture.

The most important man to Sarasota Architecture who was not an Architect?

Phil Hiss, no question. In fact, even of those who are Architects, Hiss is the one. As far as the best teacher, that’s Rudolph.

Your favorite Architect ever?

I can’t give you one. A group – Wright, Le Corbusier, Aalto, Barragan, Kahn, Jefferson.

Your favorite buildings in the world?

Unity Temple by Wright, no question. Ronchamps (Chapel of Notre Dame du



The Canal House on Siesta Key, photo by Steven Brooke



Your favorite building materials?

Natural materials—we have done a number of buildings in wood. I also love raw concrete and glass which together create a contrast of solid and open.

More of Abbott's work can be found at:
www.carlabott.com

Haut, Ronchamp, France, by Le Corbusier). Interesting, they are both churches. The Kimbell Gallery in Fort Worth by Louis Kahn is just amazing. The relationship between the building and the art ... I have never seen art so luminous as in that building. Fallingwater by Wright. Foster's tower in Barcelona is staggering — its engineering, its architecture, its technology. Also, the Parthenon, Temple of Edfu, Machu Picchu, Hagia Sophia...