



Ralph Rapson Rules

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One of the advantages of a long and successful working life is that you get to see yourself rediscovered. That is certainly true of Ralph Rapson, who at 90 still has his own office, which he runs with his son Toby in Minneapolis. A peer of legendary figures — Alvar Aalto, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Eero Saarinen, Charles Eames, Kevin Lynch — Rapson has become a legend in his own right. The last of the Case Study House architects still practicing, he has designed some of the iconic modern buildings and furniture of the twentieth century, ranging from U.S. embassies in Sweden and Denmark (both 1954) to major buildings in Minnesota, such as the Tyrone Guthrie Theater and the Pillsbury House, and innovative furniture for Knoll, all the while heading up the architecture school at the University of Minnesota, where he was dean for 30 years.

Despite this remarkable career, the Michigan-born Rapson retains his Midwest modesty. He has an office on the second floor of an old brick storefront at the edge of the university campus. Sitting at a small conference table there with me and Dan Avchen, a former Rapson student and a partner at local firm Hammel, Green and Abrahamson, the architect reviewed some of his work and reflected on its meaning for a younger generation of designers who have shown a revived interest in many of the things — low-cost housing, lightweight structures, socially responsible design — that he himself, in his ninth decade, still pursues.

A Case Study Continued

For example, Rapson recently updated the Case Study house that he originally designed for John Entenza, the editor of *Arts & Architecture* magazine, in 1944. "I told John I wanted to do an urban house," Rapson recalls. "He had mixed feelings, but said go ahead. I wanted to wall in the site and have the house look inward. It became two pavilions, living and a sleeping pavilion, connected by a glassed-in area. John wasn't able to find anyone interested in putting up money for an urban house, so the house didn't get built." The "Greenbelt" house, known as Case Study No. 4, was constructed 45 years later inside the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles as part of an exhibition on the Case Study program. "As I was doing the working drawings for the exhibit house, I didn't see one single thing I wanted to change," he says. "There were things that I wished had happened. Entenza's dream was that mass production and prefabrication would take over residential housing. It didn't happen."

But the Greenbelt has finally become a reality through a prefab-house competition sponsored by a San Francisco-based consumer magazine. "Dwell picked up [on] the idea of the Case Study program, with an emphasis on prefabrication. I saw the notice in the magazine and I dropped the editor a note telling her that it was a great idea, and she wrote back and said that since I was a part of the original case study program, would I like to enter. So we did. I went through hundreds of studies, but I kept coming back to the Greenbelt as an idea, so we modified it, with a two-story version and a one-story

version, each with four or five different exterior expressions." Although that design didn't win, North Carolina developer-client Nathan Wieler, for whom the magazine built the winning project, decided to put Rapson's proposal into production. "Nathan put the design on the web and got calls from all over the country from people wanting to build it," he notes.

Rapson's focus on affordable housing predates the Greenbelt project. "In the late 1930s, David Runnells and I designed an earth-sheltered house we called the Cave House," he explains. "We also entered another competition with a fabric house, where I made the ill-advised comment that no longer would the architect be necessary because people could simply go to the hardware store, buy their fabric, and roll out their house. Charlie Eames was on that jury, and said that we were thrown out of the competition for that particular comment." To this day, however, Rapson's interest in affordable housing continues. "I enjoy low-income housing almost more than anything else, partly because it is so vitally important. There is a mistaken notion that low-income housing should be low-cost housing. It takes a lot of beating, so using the cheapest materials possible is a problem."

Social commitment also drove much of Rapson's work, most clearly in the large, federally funded Cedar-Riverside housing complex (1962) across the street from his office. "The basic concept of Cedar-Riverside was to have an integrated and diverse population, economically, socially, and ethnically. We were never able to convince [the Department of Housing and Urban Development] that we could put low income and high income in the same building. We had hoped to mix groups on the same floor, but the federal government wouldn't buy it. So we had students in one building, elderly in another, higher income in one and lower in another. Originally it had 30 percent subsidized housing [units], but it's now around 55 percent. The government helps pay the rent and gives the building owners 10 percent above that for providing the housing, so it makes sense. Slowly the higher-income tenants have moved out. There are still a lot of students and younger people living there, but it doesn't have quite the diversity we had hoped for."

Drawing on the Past

Of course, for an architect, having a long life can mean seeing some of your work demolished, as has happened with Rapson's Pillsbury House (1963) in Wayzata, Minnesota, which was razed in 1997. The same fate may be imminent for his Guthrie Theater, completed that same year and soon to be replaced by a Jean Nouvel design (see page 58). A preservation campaign has arisen to save the Guthrie, a testament to public sentiment for Rapson's work. "I grew up with the idea that the unity of a building was basic, rather than using every material you could think of," he explains. "While I find much of the architecture of today to be very exciting, the computer has made it almost too easy to push and distort forms. Rem Koolhaas' library in Seattle, for example, seems to strive too hard to be unusual and different. I still like to look at a plan and see my way through it immediately. The clarity of the plan and structure are important. It makes me think of Aalto's question: 'What the hell is wrong with the post and beam?'"

Rapson might ask the same question about drawing in our computerized era. "You don't have to draw well to be a good architect, but it certainly doesn't hurt. There is something between the mind, the fingers, and the heart that doesn't quite come off when using the computer. That isn't to deny the benefits of the computer; it is a tremendous tool. But watching it in my own office, I'm bothered by the fact that there is no record of a design's development, unless you print out every step of the way. It used to be that we could bring out thousands of sketches of evolutionary steps, and you lose that with the

computer."

Drawing, indeed, distinguished Rapson's legacy at the University of Minnesota. "We had a great exchange with MIT and Harvard, and word always came back that the Minnesota students could draw circles around everyone else," he says. "There wasn't a Minnesota dogma about design, so much as about drawing and the rigor of the work, some of which I attribute to the School of Architecture building itself. All the drawings were put up around the courtyard where everyone could see them. At most schools, you didn't know what was happening in other studios, but the openness of our building allowed everyone to see what each other was doing."

The way architecture is taught and practiced has certainly changed since Rapson designed his first house in 1935, but he continues to produce a remarkable array of buildings: a house in Costa Rica, an embassy in Moscow, a hotel in northern China. "A lot of people must think I'm either dead or not practicing," he has said, although nothing could be farther from the truth.