

# Colin Frederick Rowe

March 27, 1920 — November 5, 1999

So. What to say? (As he might have said.) In a eulogy for his great friend, James Stirling, Colin made this remark:

*Jim loathed, as I do, the sanctimonious soft voice, the agonizing verbal message, which is apt to be the predominant tone of obituary eulogia. ... [Stirling] had a Churchillian vehemence about pietistic evasiveness; and I share with him an impatience about the whole sentiment of grief, often a spurious and nearly always a self-indulgent emotion.*

*So someone has died—kinda tough because you had wanted to say something to them; and now all possibility of communication is forever extinguished. Simply they are no longer there; in other words, we are denied our pleasure.*

With Colin Rowe's death, on Friday, November 5, 1999, the world lost one of the century's greatest deducers on things architectural, and Cornell University lost the most significant fabricator of its sense of architecture. Among the complexity and chaos of an architectural education, two very simple principles made an education in Cornell Architecture unique and valuable. The first is that the individual building is part of a greater whole: it exists in a context. A building would then be designed in a manner that is not only affected by this physical context, but it simultaneously responds to that context and contributes to it. This building would not be a decorated object standing alone, but would be a part of the city, part of the landscape. The second principle is that history is important (not a particularly obvious concept in a modernist endeavor that considered itself to be founded on continuous invention): the student should be placed in a philosophical and historical context. The person responsible for making these two principles the foundation of Cornell's architectural pedagogy was Colin Rowe.

Colin Rowe saw the teaching of architecture differently from most. He taught students, colleagues and architectural scholars around the world that modern architecture in particular was not revolutionary, as it was supposed to be, but evolutionary and connected to history. In his first great essay, "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa" (first published by the *Architectural Review*, 1947) he brilliantly and conclusively demonstrated the influence of Palladio's Villa Foscari (the Malcontenta of c. 1550-60) on LeCorbusier's modernist manifesto, the Villa Stein (1927) at Garches, France. In this one essay, he reunited modern architecture with a past that, according to the polemic of the time, it was never supposed to have. Many years later in an introduction to a book, *Five Architects* (Wittenborn, 1972), Colin wrote:

*When, in the late nineteen-forties, modern architecture became established and institutionalized, it lost something of its original meaning. Meaning, of course, it had never been supposed to possess. Theory and official exegesis had insisted that*

*modern building was absolutely without iconographic content. That it was no more than the illustration of a program, a direct expression of social purpose. Modern architecture, it was pronounced, was simply a rational approach to building; it was a logical derivative from functional and technological facts; and at the last analysis it should be regarded in these terms, as no more than the inevitable result of twentieth century circumstances. There was very little recognition of meaning in all this. Indeed the need for symbolic content seemed finally to have been superseded; and it was thus that there emerged the spectacle of an architecture which claimed to be scientific but which—as we all know—was in reality profoundly sentimental. For very far from being as deeply involved as he supposed with the precise resolution of exacting facts, the architect was (as he always is) far more intimately concerned with the physical embodiment of even more exacting fantasies.*

With statements like this, many have credited (or blamed) Rowe for setting the stage for “Post-modernism” and the “New Architecture”. However, far from criticizing modern architecture’s inherent ideas, Rowe was pointing out its inevitable relationship to historical precedent. Many years after writing *Five Architects*, Colin wrote:

*While I am constantly moved by the magnificence of the original idea of modern architecture and while I can scarcely think except in terms of its repertory of forms, I cannot really believe in it any longer.*

This is, in many respects, more a critique of modern architecture’s execution than its inherent principles. Characteristically Rowian, it professes an enthusiasm that is both faithful and filled with doubt.

As a teacher and a muse, Colin Rowe constantly crossbred an extensive knowledge of architectural history with equally extensive erudition in the arts, as well as in political and cultural histories. All were combined with one of the most perceptive eyes to have ever been cast in the direction of a building or a drawing. More than retellings, more than reconstructions, Rowe’s writings and lectures were biographies of architecture: chronology and documentation can provide only skeletal information; the mind and the eye would provide the organs and flesh. He conveyed a conviction that speculation was the mind’s most intimate engagement with a work. And that designing was the flirtation of minds through eyes. With his brilliant insights he was able to enlighten students to the notion that many ideas in architecture are universal; that by studying the history of architecture, the arts, politics and culture, one could liberate their ideas, and through a process we call transformation, apply them to contemporary problems. Colin Rowe went on to write many more important essays and books. His most influential work, *Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal*, was written as two essays with Robert Slutzky; the first in 1955, published in 1963, and the second published in 1971. The essays related analytical cubist painting and Gestalt perception psychology to architecture. Alex Carragone, in *The Texas Rangers* (MIT Press 1995), wrote:

*Credit both of them for discerning a new perception and conception of architectural space, a reemphasis of the relationship of the plan to architectural space, and most importantly the recognition of phenomenal transparency as a means of conceptually organizing architectural space.*

Colin was best known by colleagues and students at Cornell for creating the graduate urban design studio, which drew students from around the world and produced more educators in the field of urban design than any other such program. Colin's lectures on the architecture of the Italian Renaissance drew not only students, but many faculty members from all corners of the campus.

For all of his intellectual contributions, Colin will be best remembered and loved by many of us for his conversations—amazing conversations—late into the night, and for his friendship. In his eulogy address, David Rowe, Colin's brother, put it this way:

*It is obvious that my brother inspired great affection, yet he was undeniably self-centered (although not selfish). He was certainly not given to showing emotion. I think the answer is that he liked his friends greatly, and he needed them for all sorts of reasons. Somehow and despite his apparent gruffness he made this known...elliptically, of course. I suppose this amounts to that indefinable quality—the gift of friendship.*

*We all retain our memories of this amazing, amusing, grumpy, sometimes infuriating, endearing, but above all, life-enhancing man. Memories make his loss so painful, but keep him among us in our hearts.*

After a brief stay during the 1957-58 academic year (while on leave from Cambridge University), Colin Rowe returned to Ithaca and Cornell University in 1962, where he remained until his appointment as A.D. White Professor Emeritus in 1994. Andrew Dickson White, a great expounder of architecture and humanism, would have been delighted with Colin's appointment to a professorship in his honor. At Cornell, Rowe inveigled students and faculty alike with ingenious projections of everything from cities—ones where, as T.S. Eliot would have it, "...the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo"—to rooms, like those of Edith Wharton's Mrs. Mingott, "which recalled scenes in French fiction, and architectural incentives to immorality such as the simple American had never dreamed of."

His presence at Cornell over more than three decades has directly inspired hundreds of architects, and through them, indirectly inspired thousands of other architects, and unaccountable numbers of individuals who have wandered, with eyes and minds, through the prodigious spaces engendered by Colin's scions. No one has built more for as many.

**Supplement:** Educated at Liverpool University, The Warburg Institute, Cambridge and Yale, Colin Rowe taught at the University of Texas at Austin and at Cambridge University before arriving permanently at Cornell. He was named Andrew Dickson White Professor of Architecture in 1985; in 1990, he was named Professor Emeritus. His contributions to architectural pedagogy were recognized by the AIA and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture in 1985 when he was awarded the Topaz Medallion, their highest prize for teaching excellence. He was named an honorary fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in 1983, and became only the third academic to be awarded the Royal Gold Medal for Architecture by RIBA in 1995; it is widely perceived as the most prestigious award for architecture in the world. Colin Rowe's books include *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (1976), *Collage City* (with Fred Koetter, 1978), *The Architecture of Good Intentions* (1994), and *As I was Saying: Recollections and Miscellaneous Essays* (1996). He was working on a book about Italian Renaissance architecture with Leon Satkowski (B.Arch. '70) when he died. (Elizabeth L. Kim, "The Reluctant Modernist: Colin Rowe at Cornell" in *College of Architecture, Art and Planning Newsletter*, Vol. 3:2.)

Professor Val Warke (B.Arch. 1977, Cornell; M.Arch. 1978, Harvard) was a student of Colin Rowe's both at Cornell and at Harvard, and a colleague of Rowe since joining the Cornell faculty in 1982. Professor Jerry Wells (B.Arch. 1959, University of Texas) was a student of Colin Rowe at the University of Texas and a colleague of Colin's at Cornell since 1965, and a life long friend. Both Professors Warke and Wells served as chairs of the Architecture Department during Colin's tenure at Cornell.