

# Alexander Kira

*May 31, 1928 — October 4, 2005*

Alexander Kira, Professor Emeritus of Architecture, died from cancer, on October 4, 2005, at a nursing facility in Ithaca, New York. Born in Estonia, his parents immigrated to the United States when Alexander was two years old. He was raised in New York City and began a long association with the College of Architecture, Art and Planning, beginning as a student in the Department of Architecture. He graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Architecture in 1953 and a Master's degree in City and Regional Planning in 1957.

He was appointed Assistant Professor in the Department of Architecture in 1957, promoted to Associate Professor in 1962, and promoted to full Professor in 1968. He was Secretary of the Faculty for Architecture in 1975; Associate Dean of the College of Architecture, Art and Planning from 1976-78; Associate Dean for Administration and Student Records from 1978-80, and served the Department as Chair's Associate for many years in charge of undergraduate admissions, student awards, enrollment, and thesis. He was named Professor Emeritus in July 1996.

As a design critic for almost forty years, Professor Kira taught various levels of design. To freshman students, Alex Kira was an intimidating persona. In the upper year studio, he was one of the first faculty members in the Department of Architecture to focus on interior architecture in his design studios. In a period prior to the utilization of computer-generated images, his students were required to develop large mechanically constructed color interior perspectives identifying all the materials proposed in their designs. At the time, presentations of this type were unique in the department. His juries were conducted to simulate professional presentations and students were required to be appropriately dressed for these reviews.

Professor Kira was attracted to the Miesian discipline of design (Architect Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe). This influence was evident in his teaching and in the two houses he designed for himself in Cayuga Heights. Those of us who had occasion to visit his homes recall that he and his wife, Marian, were always extremely gracious hosts and proud to show off the many special features of these houses. Storage compartments, in every area of the houses, were designed to accommodate specific items such as wine glasses, placemats, or socks. The interiors were always comfortable, clean, properly arranged and camera ready. One could also easily recognize Alex Kira's car in the Sibley parking lot. Porsche, Thunderbird or Mercedes, his car was always washed and polished.

Professor Kira was best known for his book, *The Bathroom*, first published in 1966. The book, a graphic study of the ergonomics of bathroom fixtures and how they should be redesigned, appeared in an expanded second edition in 1976. The book, translated into numerous foreign languages, was considered quite groundbreaking and controversial when first published. It stimulated an article about Professor Kira in *Time Magazine*. He was often invited to lecture abroad on the topic of his book, especially in Japan. Professor Richard Penner, School of Hotel Administration, a former student of Alex Kira, prepared some of the illustrations of the second edition. He recalls how his drawings were scrutinized, with a “reducing glass”—the opposite of a magnifying glass—to make sure the lines would read when the illustrations were reduced in the printed version. Penner considers this experience with Kira as the most formative part of his education at Cornell.

Years later, Professor Penner invited Alex Kira to give a guest lecture on “Luxury.” Kira, always well tailored and imposing, would be able to define this term to his hotel management undergraduates. Essentially, Kira’s definition was that luxury equaled choice. Luxury meant a choice of finishes, a choice of room locations, and a choice of dining options. Penner invited Professor Kira to lunch in the old Statler Main Dining Room. The waitress offered a soup and sandwich special. What is it? Tuna salad on rye or something like that. Kira requested tuna on whole wheat, but she replied that it didn’t come that way. Alex Kira, raised his eyebrows in the way all remembered, lowered his chin, and gave his typical “humph,”—Luxury!

Professor Kira is survived by his wife, Marian M. Kira, Cornell B.S. degree Human Ecology ‘38, M.S degree Human Ecology ‘60. He will long be remembered by his colleagues in the Department of Architecture and his many friends at Cornell. He will be missed by generations of students, many of who only gained an appreciation of his teaching philosophy later in their careers as architects.

*Mario L. Schack*