

Claire T. Carney Library, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth  
North Dartmouth, MA

SUB ROSA

Interview with Paul Rudolph  
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by Lasse B. Antonsen

Q. What brought about that you were selected as architect for SMTI (Southeastern Massachusetts Technological Institute). You were at the time considered one of the most, if not the most, important young architects in America, an architect who embodied, or personified, Modernism in its International shift from Europe after World War II. It is quite extraordinary, in retrospect, that the visual formulation, if we can call it that, for the birth of a regional university should be given to, and accepted by, an architect who was in such demand at the time. Could you comment on what happened -- in practical terms -- and then reflect on what the times were like, and what made you decide to take on the challenge.

P. R... I was not commissioned directly by the state of Massachusetts to undertake the master planning and architectural design of that campus. I was commissioned by a Boston firm, Desmond and Lord, a distinguished architectural firm with direct connections to the government of the State of Massachusetts, and they, in their own wisdom, retained me to, well, perform some relatively limited duties at first. The contractual arrangements over the thirty odd years in which I found myself working on that campus changed, and my own role also changed, all the way from undertaking certain segments of the campus in a much more direct way, to working almost Sub Rosa when my own fortunes in relationship to the campus changed.

But the organizational chart of the owner/client in relationship to its consultants would be a complicated one, but like many things in life, organizational charts -- in my view anyway -- don't count for very much. It is a question of ideas, forcefulness of expressing ideas, and seeing who has the ball at any given time. These situations remain very fluid and are not subject, actually, to organizational charts.

Over the thirty year period there were many architects involved on the campus and I found myself working with architects other than Desmond and Lord. But my essential contribution to the campus -- my essential role as planner/architectural design consultant -

- remained unchanged, because I felt -- rightly or wrongly -- that that was the area in which I could make the most contribution that it would be a waste of time -- everybody's time including my own -- if I would not exercise those prerogatives. Of course, there were varying opinions about my contribution -- and still are -- but that is the nature of one's role, especially when extended over a long period of time.

That which is large -- which, of course, the campus is -- is very different from that which is small, in many aspects, and one has to not be deterred, or travel down in these paths which lead nowhere. One has to understand one's role in the larger endeavor. I make no bones about my efforts. I contributed less than 1% of the total effort involved in bringing that campus into being -- as you now see it -- but that less than 1% involvement permeated and changed, or modified, everything with regard to the campus. My role was a very small niche, but the power of ideas comes into play -- appropriate ideas -- and though my role was small in many ways, it also permeates the whole.

Q. I would like to focus on the time when you were first told about the campus. Looking back, this happened right after the success of the design of the Art and Architecture building at Yale, and at a time where you had become involved in the designing of the Government Center in Boston, where you in a sense entered into even more of an urban context. With the SMTI campus, it was as if all the spatial restrictions you had at the A & A building at Yale could now unfold on a much larger scale, and that space between buildings could now come into play. What were your thoughts when you first accepted the commission?

P.R. 1946-47 I had the great opportunity to spend in Europe. Harvard University had given me its Wheelwright Traveling fellowship, which was a large sum of money -- at least for me in those days -- and I saw firsthand the development of the European notions of urbanism. I understood instinctively that America's great lack was, and still is, its notions of urbanism. That's a complicated thing because everything has become much larger, the automobiles have taken over, there are many new building types and activities and we don't know how to handle these things very well in spite of much effort and talk.

The idea of working on a campus from scratch was most appealing to me, because it could deal with urbanism, which involves how you get there, and what's there once you arrive, how you park your car and get from car to building, the relationship of all kinds of transportation systems including walking, the different experience from vehicular motion and the pedestrian circulation.

The idea that it would take time to built such a large project -- I never dreamed that it would take as long as it did -- but time becomes a factor -- that you would deal with many different people with many different points of view and that whatever was proposed would have to be explainable in very simple terms so that people could grasp the intent. A large project is very different, not only from an administrative viewpoint, but from a pure design viewpoint.

The A&A building, which you referred to, is not a very large building, it is 100,000 sq. feet, it is a single contained building. It deals with urbanism in the sense that it pays very careful attention to its surroundings, i.e. the Yale campus and in part the commercial area of the city of New Haven. But this was starting from scratch, which was also appealing. I thought it would be easier, actually starting from scratch, but in some ways, that isn't so, because freedom of action, or constraints, has its own demands. In any event, from my viewpoint, the relationship of circulation of all kinds to buildings, and relationship of one building to another and the spaces which they make on a large scale, is something which I saw as an attempt to make a 20th Century -- a true 20th Century -- complex, dealing with unique 20th Century problems.

It never occurred to me that I could not contribute to such an organization. I had thought about such things a great deal, and the opportunity of trying to understand European notions of urbanism which are much more profound to this good day than American notions -- for reasons which I do not altogether understand, although American problems are very different from European problems -- America was built essentially in the 19th Century on borrowed European notions about urbanism, whenever there was a notion about urbanism -- but the idea of the free-standing building in a plane of space does not create a larger whole usually, although there are exceptions. So from the beginning I thought of the campus as a single expandable building, one which changed and adapted itself to many uses, but was connected -- and I mean physically connected one part to another -- in order to make more comprehensible the spaces in between. There were also other notions about the handling of materials, the scale, the spaces in between the various structures, hierarchies of building types, and so forth, but I felt really prepared for such an assignment.

Yes it was very ambitious, but 1963 was a marvelous time in the United States because we had come through the war and there was a kind of optimism about what could be done, what should be done, and I felt I was really part of it even though I was yet very young.

Q. That leads me into a question about that period of the early 1960's which was, perhaps, the last social utopian period in the US. And as an architect you have never abandoned a utopian vision. What were you given in terms of information at the time, in terms of what the first president, Joe Driscoll, or any of the local or state politicians envisioned. Was the collective educational vision simply "in the air"? The Kennedy/Johnson years' expectation that the country as a whole would benefit from a college liberal arts education and that the new times demanded more specialized knowledge beyond a high school diploma, especially for children of first generation immigrants?

P.R. The state of Massachusetts had commissioned a study of what the purpose of such a campus should be and what it should contain in terms of varying kinds of buildings and anticipated programs. It was a relatively detailed program and I saw no reason to challenge the programming because it had been done by professionals, and I believe, thoroughly. The timing, or sequence of what was to be built first, was determined really by the programming and by, I am sure, Joe Driscoll's input, and I am not aware of anybody else's. My own role, as I saw it, was not to challenge the programming aspects but to carry out in so far as possible what had been programmed.

Of course, when the day is done, there is much to challenge about results, always, and that isn't to say that one sometimes wishes that the thrust, the power, of others, would not be somewhat more flexible, but in spite of everything, I remain very proud of the essential results, and feel that, think that, under the existing circumstances, that a contribution was made.

Q. Your position as architect for the university has been rather tumultuous, and you were -- what now in retrospect appears to be for clearly political reasons -- forced to resign when bids for Group II came in, an event which resulted in an article in the *New York Times* in 1967, in which Ada Louise Huxtable -- I think quite rightly -- pointed something out which unfortunately is still with us, namely that your forced resignation "spotlights a prevailing philosophy in official circles that it is a kind of public virtue for buildings to be cheap and to look cheap" -- in other words, when taxpayers money is involved. Yet you in a sense stayed on after that -- unpaid I am sure -- and oversaw, with the help of Grattan Gill who was the project architect for Desmond and Lord, that your original concepts were adhered to and modified -- as all architecture is -- in an acceptable final form. Then in the early 1980's you were asked officially again to be the architect for the Dion building.

Looking now at the campus, your overall vision remained intact, yet compromises were continually made, indeed, buildings were put up that, although they look like the rest of the campus, you were never consulted about. As you said, you remain proud of the essential result, but perhaps you could expand on what you feel you were able to achieve and what you have the strongest misgivings about.

P.R. Well human nature does not allow thirty odd years of this kind of effort to go very smoothly. Yes, I was fired. But in a sense, my influence and efforts did not change that drastically -- not at first anyway -- because the other architects -- and I have to emphasize that there were many architects involved -- understood that there was a pervading idea, series of ideas, welding the campus into one, and that it needed to be an ongoing effort, so the other architects actually came to my rescue, otherwise it would not have worked.

The then Governor of Massachusetts felt very strongly that I should resign, so I had no alternative but to do so. This was essentially over questions of cost, but his staff, as I understand it, reported that our buildings were little, if any, more expensive than others the state of Massachusetts was erecting. But the good governor, as I understand it, retorted that it didn't matter really what they cost, they looked expensive, which I thought was a very nice compliment. In any event, too much was at stake, from my viewpoint anyway, and too much had already been planned or designed or considered. It is one thing to put on paper initial ideas, and it is another thing to see that those ideas are developed properly through the labyrinth of integrating the work of many different kinds of engineering, disciplines, modifications of program, considerations of costs, learning from earlier work on a large project -- both negative and positive --and correcting or modifying that experience.

And so I found myself in a Sub Rosa situation, but then I, of course, understood that it was not a black and white situation at all, because enough of the campus had already been built that people could see a little bit what it was like, and indeed there were positive elements with regard to continuing work on the campus, in spite of the fact that there were many other demands on my time and effort. One of the most encouraging things was the simple awarding of an honorary doctoral degree by SMTI, which was a kind of recognition that all effort on the campus had not gone down the drain and that it was appreciated by many.

In any event, I am back to the idea of the real thrust and counter thrust of human activity, which has little to do with organizational charts, but has to do with ideas, and relationship between people, and this, of course, is a very complicated affair, because there were many people who varied in their opinions about the campus. I have never been

interested in a popularity contest, and I have been fired before, and since, and it is all understandable, but we live only once, and it seems ridiculous to spend one's time working on something which you hate or don't believe in.

And I have some reason, anyway, to think that truly sound ideas ultimately prevail. That isn't to say that the campus is perfect, not without fault and so forth, but if the big considerations are ultimately true, then many people will understand that. It sometimes takes time for this to come about.

Q. I would like to follow up on the question of the urban vision. Much of your thinking in the 1960's centered around how the city and our collective and private space was determined by the automobile. Now the site for the campus, which is a commuter site, was already selected before you were chosen as architect, and you envisioned the campus in terms of both a resident student population and a commuting student body.

I would like to have you comment on that, but also on how you see the situation today. The two cities flanking the University, Fall River and New Bedford, are both situated some distance from the campus, and both are desperately struggling to remain cities and to reinvent themselves and attract people to their centers. Most of the human activity of the area takes place on the Route 6 strip with its malls and restaurants, an area which, interestingly enough, has grown quite close to the campus.

Urbanism is, as you mentioned earlier, an extraordinarily complex issue, and there is one additional issue I would like to bring into the picture. One reason the urban space is different in Europe is undoubtedly due to public transportation, especially trains. Some politicians, such as Senator Ted Kennedy, have realized this and been working on it and, indeed, if there were a train running from Providence to Fall River, continuing on to our campus, and from there to New Bedford, Boston and the Cape, then that could significantly alter the structure of the campus and its role. What are your thoughts on this?

P.R. You quite rightfully speak in terms of transportation systems. The isolation of SMTI is, to this good day unfortunate, based as it is on the automobile. But there are other forms of transportation including trains that continue to play a part and will probably, as time goes on, play a much larger part. There is one dimension, i.e. 1500 feet, which is an important one. It is not a very long distance, really, but it is after many years of study indicated that people will simply not walk much further than that, especially not in inclement weather, and during the main school period, of course, the weather is not perfect in that part of the world. I think that 1500 feet is a kind of dimension based on

human behavior which is not going to change, and it explains why the automobile, in that part of the world anyway, or the world over, is of the utmost importance. I wish that what you suggest, that there were other forms of transportation that one could get to that campus more easily.

The idea of the mall, or the strip development, which is coming closer and closer and closer, is inevitable. The idea that a university should be put in the middle, or tangential with, a mall, is ultimately limited, I believe. Because everything should not be the same. The psychology of a campus, which is its reason for being, is to learn, which means a certain quietness, a certain repose, a certain invitation to think, is the exact opposite of the mall. The mall has its own meaning, and I think malls are wonderful in their own way, they are so crash and vulgar, and exciting and excitable in many ways, but the two things should be emphasized, their differences are profound.

But can they be mixed? Successfully? There are those who would say yes. I am not so sure. It is the idea that in order for people to remain human, they need to be exposed to many different points of view, and the educational world can certainly be related to the so-called real world, and that works for some people but it doesn't work for all, and it is that diversity of human activity and the psychology which is appropriate for each which I believe to be important, but that doesn't mean that the ability to get from the mall to the campus should not be much more direct and much more interrelated.

It's partially that the nature of the mall is a very different kind of human development than we have ever had before. It has to do with the automobile and our actions in connection with that. And also it has to do with the number of people involved, and certainly distances. The United States will never be like Europe and shouldn't be, can't be. But to recognize the potential of the university campus in relationship to the mall doesn't mean that they have to be absolutely one surrounded by another.

It is comparable to Times Square which is a honky-tonk entertainment area of New York City, juxtaposed to the New York City Ecole des Beaux Arts library and park which is the exact opposite. Both are being enriched by being next to each other because one understands psychologically the difference of the library -- a place of learning, a place of great repose to this good day, it's quietness, etc. -- next to a honky-tonk good time place, in a huge city. Both are reinforced by the presence of the other, the idea of one, and its integrity, is made more clear because of the presence of the other.

And so it is with SMTI in relationship to the mall. They depend on each other, but I would submit the thesis that they are better closely related, and ideally within walking distance -- which is actually a very short distance -- but one devours the other if there is not a clarification of the real meaning and use of each.

Q. Related to this -- and what I am certainly very happy about -- is the, by now, extensive use of the campus grounds by the community. At almost any time during the day, but especially during morning, lunch and early evening hours, people are using the ring road for walking, jogging, or in-line skating, and during the week-end, youth soccer leagues practice or play games on several of the open fields. Occasionally, groups of people fly kites, and one often sees golfers practicing on the field leading down to the lake, and so on.

More directly related to the topic of the interface between the Campus and the Route 6 commercial strip, I can mentioned that Chancellor Cressy has talked about how he envisions how the zone between the ring road and Old Westport Road, and possibly the zone between Old Westport Road and Route 6 -- I guess we could refer to them as the buffer zones -- could be places where the general public would feel welcome, and where they could get information about programs, about summer and evening courses, enrichment programs, etc., that it could hold a kind of storefront place where it would be easy to park. He has also mentioned the need for things such as a cafe, a bookstore and a Portuguese restaurant, and I believe his thinking is, that if people come to that area, they will become more directly encouraged to enter the campus and its programs.

Another issue I would like to mention is that I know you envisioned, and saw, a more comforting environment within the buildings themselves, in the way you planned seating areas, and in the common areas used a vocabulary of caves and glass bowls. Some of this has been lost, perhaps because that type of space is difficult to read and because people today sit on hard concrete benches rather than the soft inviting seating you originally planned, and the lighting effects are now often obscured or not maintained, and the rich atrium plantings are likewise not maintained, etc., not to mention the Group I fireplaces which were never used.

The last point I would like to bring to your attention concerns the grounds themselves which were never realized to the extent, I believe, you had envisioned. And finally, in regard to both the buildings and the grounds, students have expressed a need to find places where they can find their own inner peace, or inner self, especially if they come early for class or find themselves between classes. They might not want to go to the library or to the cafeteria where they might enter into conversation, but rather wish to find a place where they can sit quietly and read or pause for a moment.

P.R. Of course, those are all very real considerations and need much further development on the campus. I would be the first one to agree. It is no news that most

campuses have developments tangential to them, which are small towns really, which have places to eat, and a book shop, and travel agents, and so forth. That is one of the great lacks of this campus. Where it should be? As I see it, it should be directly opposite the main entrance but at the other side of the street and ultimately related to the mall.

The variety of human activities, the accommodation of the variety of human activities -- which does change -- has in many cases not been fully developed at SMTI but I would like to think that the skeleton, the broad overall disposition of open spaces and enclosed spaces in relationship to car, to building, indeed the circulation, allows for much further development. You see, one of the things which we don't somehow know how to do very well is to, I guess, remodel, or add, or augment, or find ways to utilize what we have got, in a more intense way.

The European square is a fascinating thing. It is no news that the European square often is a highly and beautifully and well defined exterior space, and it is augmented -- even though the buildings are never intended to be used that way -- by all sorts of very human activity, and they grow and adapt themselves to other uses. I would like to think the space at SMTI is essentially there -- the exterior space, but also the interior space -- but it is not always utilized in the best possible sense. There is any number of correctives, but I would insist that the broad overall organization allows for great augmentation both inside and outside and that it is a matter of the imagination finally. These things need to be taken into account.

You are suggesting that life on the campus should be, of course, fulfilling in many aspects, and that people not only learn in the classrooms, hopefully, but that they learn from each other and that that is perhaps an even more important aspect and that this is not provided for, or augmented, well enough in its very diverse ways. I would agree with that. The luxury of the academic environment is to a degree curtailed by some very, well, very real problems, especially for the commuter student. The campus is not finished, it is an ongoing thing. Purely a matter of human spirit and imagination.

Q. I could add to this that in your original vision for the campus you saw the view onto the campus as one enter it, as the important one, this at the place where one can either drive to the right or to the left on the ring road when in a car, but more importantly, can walk straight ahead and proceed with groups of buildings placed to the left and to the right, and enter into a spatial setting of a rather dramatic beauty, and then slowly -- in a wonderfully sweeping movement where the campanile and library turns the corner -- one becomes directed to the right, down toward the large pond which is situated in a view line some distance across the ring road. You envisioned in your original plan that resident

student housing be located on each side of that open view toward the lake, which would, of course, have facilitated a very different way for the resident student to interact with the campus itself.

Now what happened instead, at a time that you were not involved, was that a redirection of traffic, or thinking about the campus, resulted in a placement of the resident housing -- which you did not design -- in the woods, on the other side of the ring road, across from the student center and the resident dining hall. Out of sight in a way. Clearly your vision was different.

P.R. Well that is a rally interesting point for me. From the beginning people described this campus, programmatically and in other ways, as a commuter campus, implying that little or no housing would ever be built. Of course, time has corrected that, and yes, the satellite residential areas -- which I suppose are essentially two -- are there.

Where is the ideal for student housing on a commuter campus? Or a regular campus? I am wondering if Thomas Jefferson doesn't have it more nearly right when he puts faculty, student housing and academic buildings together cheek-by-jaw. I am not sure of this because Thomas Jefferson's campus remains the most beautiful and well thought out campus -- the central part of it at the University of Virginia -- in this country, but you are dealing here with very small numbers, and that which is small does not necessarily work with that which is much, much larger.

If I had anything to do with it -- and I don't any more -- I would investigate the possibility of academic and residential buildings intermixed -- and don't ask me exactly how, because I don't know -- as a corrective to some of the original notions of what a commuter campus should be. I think the numbers are predominantly commuter still, and the residential aspects relatively minor, but that doesn't mean that won't change, and change profoundly, over the next thirty years. There are others who have much more insight into such matters but it is a very real question to me.

When I say residential, I mean all the things that go with it -- a full-time life on campus. These things don't happen all at once. You must think of the campus as a clear backbone -- or skeleton if you wish -- which needs to be augmented by any number of activities not originally conceived of, including the idea of whether or not it is really a commuter campus predominantly, forever. It is not written in stone. It is only a point in time and space.

Like all architectural projects, the campus will change. Does it accommodate change? I would like to think that it does. Is the mall, the central mall, too big? Are the buildings too far apart? On a windy day, surely you must think so. You see, it is both a

damnation and a compliment that people, I think now, are to a degree frightened of tampering with the campus, as exhibited by hiding the residential groups. On one level I am happy that that is the way it is done. On another level I question whether or not that was really the best way to do it because of the use of the campus at night, and during holidays and weekends, and so forth.

The greatest European example of what, in a sense, I am talking about is the Piazza San Marco. The Piazza San Marco was enlarged three times. Programmatically it always had a religious building, a center of government -- the Doge's Palace -- and some housing and shops. In other words, it was multiple use. We have a thing in this country that things need to be separated, which maybe sounds like a contradiction of what I have said about the strip and the campus. It is a matter of degree, really. Is it conceivable that the campus becomes, at some point, not predominantly a commuter campus, but a campus where more people live on it? It is very possible. And then, how do you adapt that? Do you use the roof of the existing building? Do you literally impinge on the central space, somewhat, at certain points? Both on the mall part and the approach side, the automobile approach side?

From my viewpoint the idea of the campus is that the spines are there and that they might be fleshed out in many different ways, but that the principle of it being one building, i.e. connected, and that the spaces in between are thereby formed on a relatively large scale. You see, I am back to the Piazza San Marco which doesn't have a tree in sight, and all buildings are literally connected with all other buildings, and there are many different uses, and there is focus, a tremendous sense of space, and scale. It remains the greatest outdoor living room in Europe, I believe. Its vitality is there, it has little to do with style, it has little to do with materials, it has to do with the psychology of architectural space.

I do not think it is generally recognized how different conceptually the SMTI campus is. That the whole of America, almost the whole of America, is based on the freestanding building in a plane of space, and that the space in between is simply there. It has no use, no real meaning. And that is a tragedy because the European example is the exact opposite. It took many buildings, built over great length of time, and by placement formed a greater whole, a social whole if you will. And we haven't got the hang of it. But I would insist that the basic thinking at SMTI it is the exact opposite. I don't mean stylistically, which it may or may not be but -- well, it is different of course, but that is not the real point. The real point is that the buildings are connected to form a greater whole, and that whole is a social entity, and that entity is not yet fully developed.

Q. Related to the issue of multi-use, and where the campus functions quite wonderfully, is in the Fall during the Eisteddfod Folk Festival -- our 25th season is actually this year -- where folk musicians and dancers, and Morris Dancers, and so on, come for several days of ongoing events, which attracts quite a lot of people, and there are workshops inside and outside and it brings a whole new level of life and celebration to the campus, quite like the European spaces, the European square, which accommodates many kinds of activities.

I would also like to mention one thing that I was happy to discover -- more connected to everyday life -- which is that your original design for the Student Union included both a chapel and a second floor outdoor eating area or terrace, and both were scratched. I don't know why or when, but it is things which you correctly saw as important. Certainly, there is a need for an interdenominational chapel.

P.R. Of course, this has to do with who is calling the tune, i.e. what the state legislature thinks they should spend their limited funds. It is interesting to me that a chapel has not yet been built, but it hasn't. Maybe it is a sign of the times. But it is also interesting what has been built. The library, for instance, is actually a relatively elaborate library for a campus that size, and I suppose you could say the auditorium also. I sometimes think we expect too much in too short a time. You have to think of the existing campus as a, well, kind of first stage, which will become modified as time goes on, because it will be expanded, and the expansion down to the mall is very clear, and I would like to think that it will be expanded in that direction, and then the existing spaces will not seem quite as large as they do. They are as large as they are because I had really envisioned that the perimeter -- at least at the center where the obelisk is, the turning point -- might be further developed with the more social, if you will, additional bay, relatively low, maybe even one story high, but it also is a release finally for the development down to the lake. In other words, the final story isn't there. I wish I knew how it would be 125 years from now.