

## ARTS COMMENTARY

## This is not my beautiful house (but I wish it were)

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The building is white.  
Crisp, starched, clean-shirt white.  
Blindingly white, like sunlight on an avalanche.

White like a blank page full of possibility.

It's a Saturday afternoon, and I'm standing in front of Sarasota High School, filled with wonder at the structure in front of me. I'm struck dumb by its beauty, its creative lines, by the sheer audacity of its existence.

I'm standing with a group of other people, all equally in awe of what's in front of us.

It's an incredible moment.

The white of the building cuts a jagged pattern out of the blue Florida sky. Up at the top of the stairs, in the school's open courtyard entrance, a rectangle cut out of the roof reveals more sky. (It makes me think of James Turrell's skyspace piece at the nearby Ringling museum.)

Up close, I'm surprised to discover the front of the school is actually a façade of pre-cast concrete sunscreens placed many feet in front of the building so as to shade the school from direct sunlight. Looking at it from a distance, you think it's the actual front of the building, not realizing it's detached.

Architect Carl Abbott spoke at a symposium organized by the Sarasota Architectural Foundation back in 2012. He said that while the high school was being built, architects came from all over the world to see it, because it was breaking new architectural ground.

A few years ago, the city of Sarasota had plans to tear it down, but Mr. Abbott, and others advocated its preservation as an important work of architecture.

The group of us standing in the front of the school is on the last leg of a day-long bus tour hosted by the Edison & Ford Estates. We've been riding around Sarasota, looking at prime examples of mid-century modern architecture — homes and public structures built in between 1941 and 1966. In particular, we've been looking at buildings of The Sarasota School of Architecture, a style internationally known and admired.

During that era, architects were coming up with creative solutions for living in this sub-tropical climate. Their build-

ings are characterized by minimalism and open floor plans, which helps aid air circulation. (Homes did not have air conditioning then.) Sunscreens made of wood or pre-cast concrete helped protect buildings from the sun, yet allowed diffuse light in.

"The architects were learning how to live in this climate and translate it into a vocabulary that was very Southwest Florida, to build more energy-efficient homes," says Fort Myers architect Joyce Owens, who helped organize the tour.

We began the day in the Lido Shores neighborhood, which has a high concentration of mid-century modern homes. Our first stop was the Umbrella House, designed by Paul Rudolph in 1953 and declared by *Architectural Digest* as one of the five most remarkable homes of the mid-20th century. It was also featured on the cover of the Summer 2001 issue of *Florida History & the Arts: A Magazine of Florida's Heritage*.

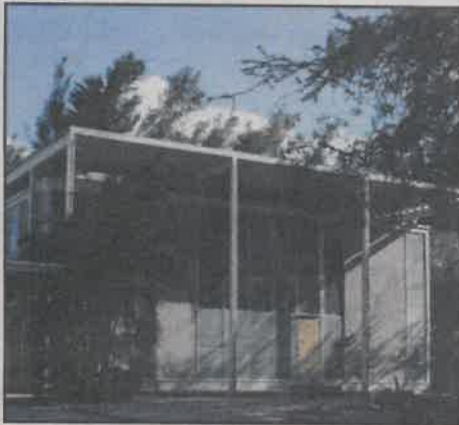
It's called the Umbrella House because of the freestanding trellis-like overhanging structure above it, with thin strips of wood that help block the sun and also create interesting shadows on the house. It's only 2,000 square feet, but this cube of a house possesses multiple levels. The upstairs bedrooms, one on either side of the house, are joined by a wood bridge or narrow loft. The walls of one bedroom are in panels on tracks; they can be opened to allow for greater circulation of the air.

Downstairs, the front of a built-in dresser is flush with the bedroom wall. On the other side of the wall, in the living room, the rectangular protrusion works as a mantel or a display shelf, to hold books, vases or photographs.

The front of the house, with its two stories of jalousie windows, is an intriguing grid of horizontal and vertical lines in different textures, primarily wood and glass. It's almost like a Mondrian painting — except the architect used natural materials, not primary colors.

The only color on the building is the yellow front and side doors and the narrow strip of an aqua pool in the backyard. (The doorknob, lock and eye-hole are the only circular things on this building of rectangles.)

Mr. Rudolph also designed Sarasota High School and other gems, including the Walker Guest House on Sanibel Island. The man was a genius; his buildings won numerous awards and are pointed to as the epitome of the Sarasota School of Architecture. (The Sarasota Architectural Foundation even has little pins that say, simply: Rudolph.)



The day included a bus tour of other mid-century structures throughout Sarasota, including a quick stop at the Van Wezel Performing Art Hall. I admit, I'd never seen the building during the day, having only attended shows in the evening. The bright light made it easier to see the architectural details near the roof (though I'm still not sure I like that Barney-dinosaur purple).

One surprising visit was a stop at New College of Florida, which is close to the Ringling, to see a set of dormitories and a student union designed by I.M. Pei 50 years ago. (He since went on to design the John F. Kennedy Library in Massachusetts and the glass and steel pyramid for the Louvre in Paris, among other notable buildings.)

You might not think a college campus could be that exciting, but the more you looked around New College, the more details you saw: the grove of palm trees set in diagonally placed squares of dirt, the shallow set of brick steps in the student union that seem to stretch on for a city block.

And then we stopped at Sarasota High School before returning home, house-happy and drunk on the beauty of creative architecture and design. ■

— The bus trip to Sarasota was part of a series of Director Tours hosted by the Edison & Ford Winter Estates. For more information, call 334-7419 or go to [edisonfordwinterestates.org](http://edisonfordwinterestates.org).