

The Magazine of Boca Grande

GASPARILLA MAGAZINE

*Classic Florida Kitsch
Witnessing History in Cuba
Paddling for a Purpose*



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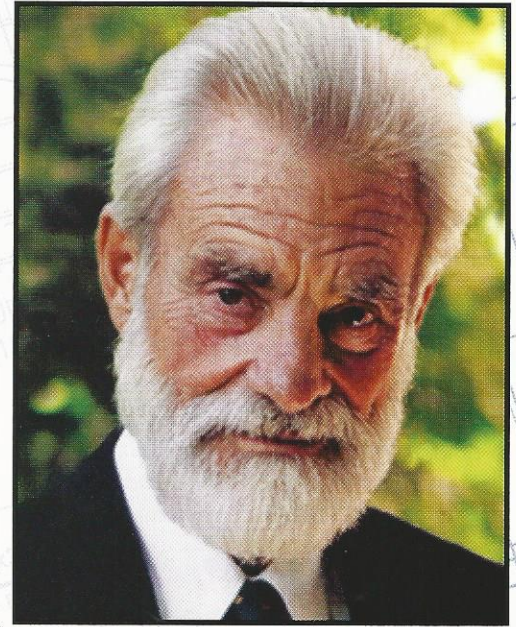
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— by Jack Short

Photos from archives and by Jack Short

designed by

TIM SEIBERT



Driving through southwest Florida, a certain style of house or building will stand out to the keen observer, though the designs themselves are not meant to stand out. The minimal style, characterized by flat roofs and high ceilings and also by a truly unique use of space and shadow, is known now as the Sarasota School of Architecture, and one of its most famous practitioners lives in Boca Grande.

Tim Seibert was honored recently at a dinner hosted by the Sarasota Architectural Foundation and supported by the Sarasota Community Foundation. There, architect Joyce Owens interviewed Seibert about his life, his influences, and his crucial part in developing the Sarasota School of Architecture, which gained national and eventually international recognition in the post-war era.

Seibert is known around Boca Grande and Sarasota for his candor, though he requires some amount of prodding from any interviewer.

Joyce Owens prodded delicately but effectively. She is also an accomplished architect. Owens graduated Notre Dame and established herself as an architect in England before relocating to southwest Florida in 2004. She has a practice in Ft. Myers and Naples.

Seibert, as Owens pointed out, is a fellow at the American Institute of Architects.

"You don't get an FAIA without having done your time," she said in her introduction, "and having done very well all through your career."

Seibert graduated from Stanford before getting his degree in architecture at the University of Florida.

He described what he called a "heady atmosphere" for a young architect -- Sarasota in the 1950s. He met Paul Rudolph and Philip Hiss and worked as a professional draftsman for Jack Twitchell, a builder.

"There were a lot of great clients because this was then a place where various artists writers, painters sculptors, writers for TV, came to live because it was beautiful and empty and nice," he said.

But he cautioned that money wasn't necessarily what engendered the movement.

"Some of them had money and some of them didn't. It was less about money and more about ideas," he said. "Many of the houses were very small."



After working for Twitchell and Rudolph, Seibert established his own firm in 1955, is now owned by another generation of architects with whom he maintains a close relationship.

As a joke, and a testament to their work, he told me during

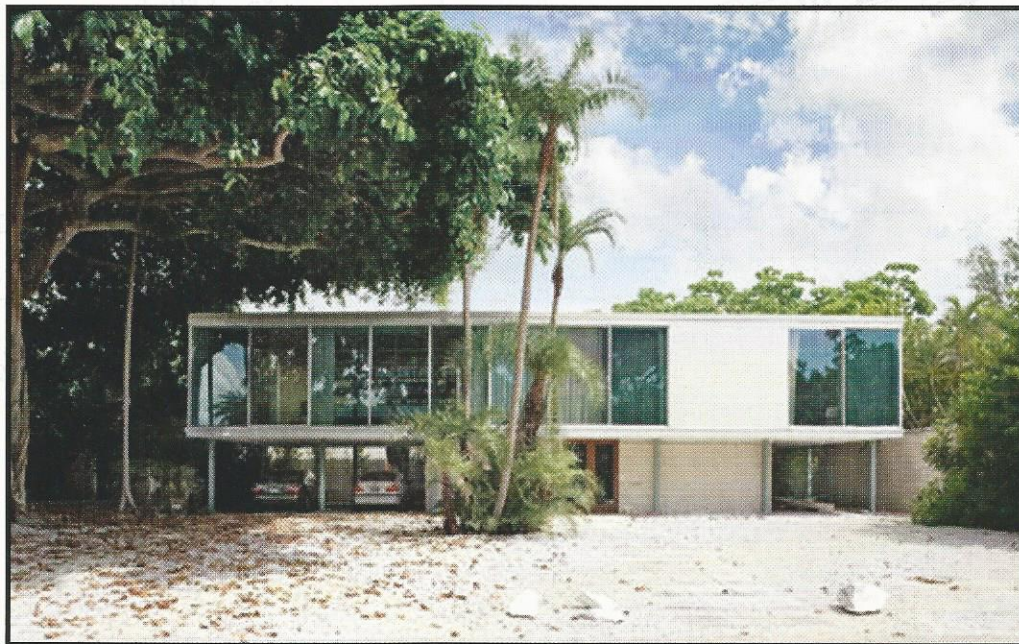
an aside, he had some photos of their work mixed in with slides of his own that played during the dinner. With no small amount of satisfaction, and a little mischief, he noted that no one had realized it.

During his career, Seibert designed smaller projects, such as John MacDonald's house, but also larger scale projects such as the Longboat Key Club, Bay Plaza and the Bayport Beach and Tennis Club. He also worked abroad, designing in Australia, the Caribbean, Hawaii and France.

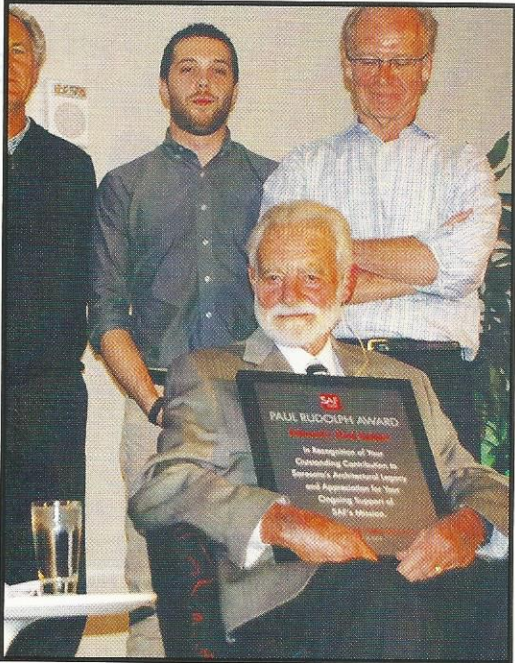
According to the SAF, Paul Twitchell founded the style, which was only later called the Sarasota School for lack of a better name, as Seibert indicated. Its practitioners were influenced by the stripped-down minimalism and flat roofs of the post World War I Bauhaus school, but incorporated elements (such as high floors and ceilings) designed as a response to problems unique to southwest Florida and to use new materials available.

As Owens said, the shapes and design elements were used to encourage shade and cross-ventilation during a time before air conditioning was common in homes or offices. She described "visual extensions that brought the inside out and the outside in."

Seibert said of his education that it taught him how to solve problems. That kind of practical responsiveness characterizes much of Seibert's views on architecture, and he is unsur-



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not dead!



prisingly offended by what he characterizes as an intrusion of building departments and permitting agencies into the practice of designing and building structures.

"We were free," he said. "The government wasn't bothering us. There was no county building department. In 1952 I took time off from college and I built my own house. I never talked to one single government person. I never got a building permit and I did exactly as I pleased. ... I built that house all by myself, I lived there 30 years ... and today that house would be so illegal you can't believe but it lasted 30 years -- how can this be?"

He is occasionally wry and very rarely equivocal about architecture or architects as well. Of post-modernism, for example, Seibert said "the idea was that you sort of painted architecture on instead of making it integral to the building." He had no kind words for the designer of Sarasota's down-

town library, recommending that the architect who made it be sealed up in one of pillars that adorn the first floor.

When asked what he would advise a new generation, he told them to build sailboats.

Seibert lamented that architects now have to obtain a series of licenses and certifications before then can begin designing buildings, and bureaucratic hurdles have marred that architecture as a practice. Seibert was, in fact, reluctant to paint a rosy picture for aspiring designers.

Seibert designs sailboats now rather than buildings. But he is frequently honored for his extensive accomplishments and for the buildings he designed throughout his career. But he is grounded and circumspect. He is circumspect about his accolades and seems to take them with a certain amount of perspective.

"The moment you start believing what they write about you," he said, "you're doomed."

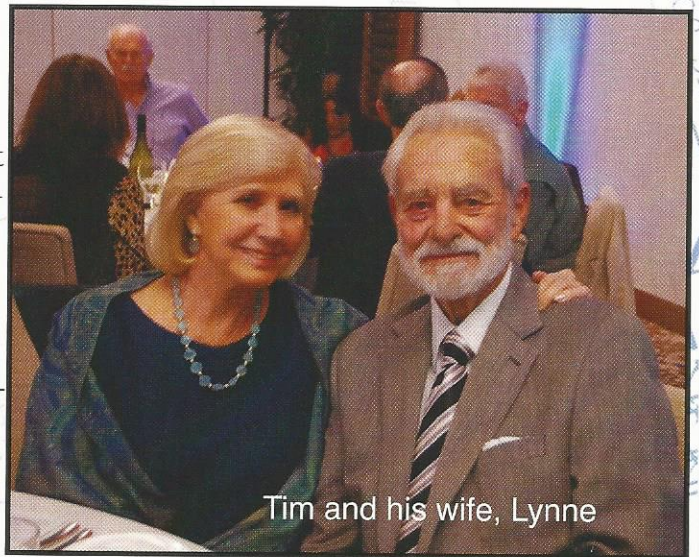
Paul Rudolph for example rode high on a wave of critical acclaim but, according to Seibert, was taken down by the same "New York cognoscenti" when their favor turned elsewhere.

"You have to start thinking for yourself," he said. " ...

I knew a number of very well-educated, very good architects who have never amounted to a hill of beans because they couldn't do their own work."

Seibert is gracious about the recognition he receives, and is happy to have dinner or a conversation with people who have a genuine curiosity about design and architecture, or the history of this important movement. But he always gets a joke in if he can, especially for an appreciative audience.

"There's no business like show business," he quipped.



Tim and his wife, Lynne