3 COMMENTS

Tim Seibert: Retired, but very much in demand

By Harold Bubil , Herald-Tribune / Saturday, January 24, 2015 Follow

It has been quite a fall and winter for Tim Seibert.

Although he has been retired for 25 years, Edward J. “Tim” Seibert, 87, is more popular than ever on the architectural party circuit.

A soft-spoken, but also outspoken, storyteller, Seibert was honored by the Sarasota Architectural Foundation at a recent dinner that included a conversation moderated by Fort Myers architect Joyce Owens.

A few weeks earlier, a documentary titled “The Seibert Effect,” by Larry Reinebach, was presented by the Center for Architecture Sarasota.

Seibert also was a star of SAF’s Sarasota MOD Weekend in October, being featured on a panel discussion with veterans of the “Sarasota school” of midcentury modern architecture, and leading a bus tour to some of his most notable buildings.

“I don’t know if he is such a popular speaker as a very well-known and respected gentleman in the community,” Owens said. “In his youth, he was very active, both in business and socially in the community. He didn’t keep himself hidden amongst the architectural community, or bother to compete with them. He spent his time with others because he liked people with interests outside of architecture, such as sailing and building.

“Tim has made it very clear that he was unlike his professional contemporaries. He was not an egotistical architect, but a good one who gave his clients what they asked for, not what he expected or hoped to find in the architectural press — although that did happen as times. He likes people and they like him back.”

“Modernism is very popular right now,” said Tampa-based architect and author John Howey. Noting that Seibert is known for his articulate, thoughtful and understatedly funny manner, Howey added, “People want to get him” while they can.

Seibert likes to project the persona of a cranky old man, but Owens disputes that. “Tim Seibert is a very passionate man. Just because he doesn’t have the patience to tolerate fools any longer, he feels he at times he is getting grumpy. I think he just wants to focus on the things he cares about and loves, and doesn’t want to waste his energy on inconsequential pursuits.”

Introducing the Reinebach-produced video at the Herald-Tribune’s Community Room, Sarasota historian Jeff LaHurd recalled an instance 25 years ago when he was working on a history project and called Seibert for an interview.

“This was a case of one of the state’s greatest architects on the phone to Jeff La-Who? And yet he invited me up to his office, was very cordial to me, and gave me a lot of information on how the city government worked in the 1950s and ’60s, before Government in the Sunshine was enacted.

“I left there and I thought, ‘This is a real gentleman.’ And I still feel that way.”

Noting that Seibert is not afraid to speak his mind, LaHurd compiled a list of his “10 favorite” Tim Seibert quotations published in the Herald-Tribune. Among them:

• About Longboat Key, where Seibert designed many buildings for the Arvida Corp. in the 1960s and beyond — “It was a beautiful piece of nature in the 1940s. I always thought of it as a wild, tropical island. Now I am playing a considerable role in its development. And yes, that gives me a lot to think about. I honestly don’t know what I would do if I could turn back the hands of time on Longboat.”

• On Siesta Key, where Seibert used to live — “Siesta looks the way it does because so many members of the old Sarasota establishment sold their land out to developers and got big bucks. Now some of these same people still live there and are wondering, ‘What happened?’ ”

• On property insurance — “I always thought it was ridiculous that the government should provide flood insurance to rich people. In the old days, you built a shack on Point of Rocks, and when the wind blew it down, you built another one.”

• On the downtown bayfront — “In the one place where you’d think we’d have a concept plan, we’ve got cultural indigestion.”

• “A newspaper interviewer,” LaHurd said, “asked Tim if he was greedy. Tim smiled and replied, ‘Only normally so.’ ”

• On growth — “Growth is inevitable and we should be planning for it instead of fighting it every step of the way.”

• On the guiding principle of local government — “If we are incompetent enough, maybe nobody will come in.”

• On today’s architects — “Now I find when I talk to architects about buildings as art, they get a blank look and sort of sidle away and go drink with somebody else.”

The Owens interview

Excerpts of Joyce Owens’ interview at an SAF dinner in Seibert’s honor at The Francis in downtown Sarasota:

Q: What brought you to Sarasota and what made you decide to become an architect?

Joyce Owens interviews Tim Seibert. Harold Bubil photo.

A: World War II brought me to Sarasota. My father was career Navy, and he went overseas a few days after Pearl Harbor, which irritated my mother profoundly. So we decided to put the names of places we knew in a hat, and Sarasota came out of the hat. We knew about Sarasota from one of the Lindsay girls, whom my mother knew in Hawaii. We got in car and drove to Sarasota in January 1942. It was a very different place. I keep boring poor Lynn (his wife) with tales of yesterday, but I remember when St. Armands was all palm trees and roots had displaced the curbstones. What is now Café L’Europe had no roof; it used to be Ringling’s tract office. There was a ruined hotel on the south end of Longboat Key. My mother bought a $7,500 house, which I hear today is worth about $1 million.

Q: You came back to Sarasota after going to Stanford, is that right?

A: Well, my father came home on leave and decided I was leading the wrong kind of life, so I ended up in military school. While I was in military school, I took an exam for the Navy flight program, and unfortunately, I guess, I passed. And then good old Harry Truman dropped the bomb and the war was over. I had never thought of anything except the military life. I also thought I would probably be the worst pilot that ever lived. I had terrible

coordination. So I got out of the Navy. I had known a girl in high school and I went to California, passed the (Stanford) entrance exam and spent two years getting educated in spite of myself.

Q: You decided to come back to Sarasota and were thinking about becoming an architect.

A: I had been pre-architecture at Stanford. That was sort of a prep school for Harvard, I guess, and I didn't want to go to Harvard. I read the brochure for the University of Florida, and I thought I could do that, so I went to UF.

Q: So when you got back here, you had very good luck finding clients at cocktail parties, is that right?

A: That was 1950. Cocktail parties are wonderful; I met Phil Hiss (Lido Shores developer) at one. The hostess said, 'You are both interested in architecture; why don't you chat?' And in a half hour, Phil said, 'Do you want a job drafting?' He had an architect designing his first house in Lido Shores, so that summer, I worked for his architect. That was a very good learning experience.

In those days, there was no air-conditioning, and we had to draw on paper with very soft pencils and lay towels around the drawings so we wouldn't get them wet. You couldn't scale anything because the paper changed all the time. But I like that better than computers.

Q: Who were some of the people you met as you went through those early days?

A: After working for Phil, I went to the university in the fall and commenced to learn how to be an architect. (Professor) Ted Fearney gave us different kinds of assignments, like design a gas station or a commercial building, or houses. He taught us how to solve problems. He was very practical and quite a scholar, too. We became friends later in life, and even worked together.

I remember the day when I realized I could be an architect, and understood how to do this. And that was very nice.

Q: At this time, you were getting to know all the players. What was the connection between Phil Hiss and Victor Lundy and yourself?

A: It was a very heady atmosphere for a young guy. I knew Paul (Rudolph) early on. When he did the (Healy) guest house, I hadn't known him then; that was 1952. But shortly thereafter we met. I worked for him a little bit. It is hard for people to understand that in those days, he didn't have any work. He had just split from Twitchell. I

actually saw him turn a client away because he was not a good enough client. I sort of admired him that. I don't think I have ever done that.

Victor Lundy was the most talented architect I knew, and a very fine artist.

Then I worked for Phil, and that was the best of all educations, because Paul was doing the Umbrella House. Phil would have Paul over for dinner, and Paul would mark up my drawings with a soft pencil to pay for his dinner, because Phil was not sure I had it right. It was a wonderful way to learn.

Q: During that time, this whole idea of what we now call the Sarasota school — you have issue with it.

A: Well, I was there and I know what happened. Gene Leedy invented that term in 1982 for an AIA convention. That is when it happened.

Q: There is this myth that it was a wonderful, sort of cooperative time. You say it wasn't so . . .

A: I say architects are like cats; they don't socialize.

Q: Was it more competitive than the story leads us to believe?

A: Paul was certainly competitive, no question about that. And Victor (Lundy) was the most talented man I have ever known. Just natural talent. He wouldn't do it the way they teach you at Harvard and Yale. He had to do it his way. He is a natural artist and draws beautifully, which is rare.

Q: So it was a little bit competitive, but there also are some stories about it being a little bit wild.

A: You don't compete with Paul Rudolph, because he would beat me every time. I wasn't that much competition to anybody.

Q: How about socially, having some fun?

A: We had a lot of fun always, and I sometimes mixed in a couple of martinis at lunch. The architects that I enjoyed the most weren't the most famous. I enjoyed the people. I enjoyed the chicanery of the Old South. Getting building permits was different.

Q: There is a rumor about you being in Paul Rudolph's convertible on St. Armands Circle, scantily clad. Is that true?

A: That is not true. It was Jack West. His mother gave him a Chevrolet convertible. We went to the beach and skinny-dipped and had a few drinks and got in the car. It was a different … today they would probably put you in jail for life.

Q: Just a quick definition of the Sarasota School – the space and shapes and forms that encouraged shade and cross-ventilation, a visual extension that brought the inside out and the outside in. There were new materials, new technologies, new styles – all about creating a unique response to the climate. It was a very regional response. And during the time that architects were creating these buildings and quite a stir around the country, you started your own practice in 1955, Tim, and you were right in the thick of it. Why did architecture flourish in Sarasota at that time? You say it was a perfect storm.

A: The real answer to that is, because we were free. When we worked on Lido Shores, Phil (Hiss) owned the land, it was his project, and he wanted good buildings. He wanted buildings that suited the Florida climate. He got Paul to do the Umbrella House, and the government wasn't bothering us. There was no county building department.

In 1952, I took time off from college and built my own house. And I never talked to one single government person. I never got one building permit. I did exactly as I pleased, and by the way, the bank lent me $10,000 because in those days, they knew people wouldn't run away. I built that house all by myself and lived there 30 years, mortgage-free, and today that house would be so illegal that you can't believe it.

Q: This was the postwar time, and in Sarasota, it was more than just "no bureaucracy" (that helped create the architectural awakening).

A: Going at it from a more scholarly approach, Paul was taught by (Walter) Gropius (at Harvard), and then he adapted some of these (International Style) ideas to Sarasota and its climate. Some of these were quite small buildings, but they were lovely buildings, and they much written about and talked about. The New York writers, the critics were just panting with desire for this kind of work.

Surely it was about the talent, and there were a lot of great clients, too, because this was a place where various

artists, writers, painters, sculptors, writers for TV came to live because it was beautiful. Some of them had lots of money. But it really wasn't so much about money. It was about ideas. A lot of the houses were very small.

Q: It seems like Paul, more than Victor Lundy, was very interested in the press, and he often designed his buildings with the intent he would get them published. His own efforts brought a lot of attention to Sarasota.

A: In the early days, he spent a great deal of his time in New York and later became dean of architecture at Yale. He was part of the intellectual set. And he was brought down by that same intellectual cognoscenti bunch, when (architect Robert) Venturi made those ridiculous "Learning from Las Vegas" statements. This was the beginning of postmodernism, and today you don't see a lot of postmodernism. Those buildings don't last very well. He built this silly house for his mother with a stair that went nowhere. The idea was that you painted the architecture on instead of making it integral to the building.

It was very intellectual, and I think architects really must think for themselves. If you are 24 or 30 or 12, you have to start thinking for yourself, and when you don't, you are going to get ruined.

When Venturi came in, and all of a sudden, Paul wasn't popular anymore, Paul went to the orient and built all kinds of great buildings, which in the pre-computer days were very, very hard to figure out.

Q: There were a lot of references to the Sarasota School in those buildings, but they are high-rises, multifamily buildings. It is a shame that this whole (postmodern) movement came along, because it ended up that in Rudolph's best years, he was so experienced and so talented, his best buildings were done in Asia.

A: Nothing ever stopped Paul. He was not competition, he was just a friend. But all there ever was for Paul was architecture. When we had dinner, we talked about architecture. He was so far ahead of me that it was a wonderful thing that he would have dinner with me. I could never do what he did, and I never could compete and never really wanted to.

Q: But you had a lot more fun.

A: Probably. But I did buildings my way. Once again, if you try to be somebody else, you will face ruination. I know a number of very well educated architects, very good architects, that have never amounted to a hill of beans because they couldn't do their own work. Being yourself is a real pain in the keister, but you have to do it.

HAROLD BUBIL
Harold Bubil is real estate editor of the Herald-Tribune Media Group. Born in Newport, R.I., his family moved to Sarasota in 1958. Harold graduated from Sarasota High School in 1970 and the University of Florida in 1974 with a degree in journalism. For the Herald-Tribune, he writes and edits stories about residential real estate, architecture, green building and local development history. He also is a photographer, videographer and public speaker. Contact him via email, or at (941) 361-4805.

SIMILAR STORIES

Bubil: The Bentley in the parking space? It could be worse

Market snapshot: Riverwood Golf and Country Club in Charlotte County

Real estate briefs

Ways to make the sick feel at home