



The lasting impact of Sarasota architect Tim Seibert

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Remembering him through vintage photographs and the words of those who knew him

From 1955 to his retirement in 1994, Edward John “Tim” Seibert was one of Sarasota’s most influential architects.

He knew how to cultivate clients and meet their needs. Many of them became lifelong friends.

He knew how to manage a large office, turn a profit and train young architects. He was respected by contractors; longtime Sarasota builder Pat Ball, who himself is highly regarded for the quality of his work, was among the last people to visit Seibert before he died on Dec. 2 at age 91.

“You knew when you were in a Seibert house,” said Ball, who never worked with Seibert but has renovated buildings he designed. “You were in quite a thing.

“We redo them, and they come out spectacular.”

But most of all, Seibert knew how to design buildings that were true to the principles of modernism, while at the same time respecting the culture and environment of Sarasota.

Unlike his hero, Paul Rudolph, Seibert spent his entire career in Sarasota. He thrived in a constantly changing community, although in his later years, from the perspective of his retirement home in Boca Grande, the overhaul of Sarasota’s built environment left him somewhat dismayed.

But for nearly 40 years, he was among the community’s go-to architects, winning dozens of design awards and professional honors along the way as principal of Seibert Architects, which he founded in 1955 as a 28-year-old.

He was among the original architects of the midcentury modern movement that came to be known as the “Sarasota School,” designing simple and functional beach houses for seasonal residents while adhering to the tenets of “clarity of concept” and “honest use of materials.”

Clarity of concept “refers to geometry. Clarity of geometrical concept,” Seibert told the Herald-Tribune in 2001. “I have worked with young designers who do the plan the way the owner wants it, and they sort of raise the walls and put some nifty stuff on it, and it doesn’t work. You have to think of it in three dimensions, and you have to think of it very clearly.

“When you look at the classics, some 15th- or 16th-century houses in Italy, you will find that their geometry is always very, very clear. There’s a lot of ornament on it, but the geometry is readily apparent. Scale, proportion and clear geometry. Is it a cube? How do these things relate to each other? How do they join, what are the shapes all about? That’s the way you have to think about it, and I think people always have thought about good architecture that way.”

He built a house for himself in 1952 on a Siesta Key canal. It was simple and could be opened to the outdoors. That was before air-conditioning became an affordable option for houses. Walls of sliding-glass panels and jalousie windows provided ventilation for structures that were sited to take advantage of prevailing breezes. That soon changed.

Seibert’s early-1950s Hiss Studio in Lido Shores helped usher in the age of conditioned air in Sarasota.

“In the late ’50s, it became popular to say that now we had conquered nature and you could build the same building anywhere in the world, because you could overcome nature with air-conditioning,” Seibert said in 2001. “Today, all of a sudden we are looking at an incipient energy crisis, and maybe we can’t do everything, maybe we don’t control nature.

“I always thought architecture was a lot more fun when we worked with nature instead of against it.”

In the 1970s and ’80s, he translated modernism to the condominium high rise — often a much-derided building form. He gave the concrete box a sense of perspective and elegance, but never opulence. As the Arvida Corp. developed Longboat Key, Seibert was its architect of choice.

The best designs, Seibert once told me, are those that reflect the time and place in which they were created.

“His creativity helped shape Sarasota into the place we love, a wonderful contribution to our community,” said Cathy Antunes on Facebook.

This is reflected in the photographs, blueprints and other documents related to Seibert’s architecture that are archived at the Seibert Architects office on Fifth Street near Central Avenue in Sarasota. The vintage photographs were taken shortly after the structures were completed by such photographers as Joseph Molitor, Jim Novak, Ray Cora, G. Wayne Swicord and others. They are reproduced with this article.

Tributes for the master

Seibert was widely admired in Sarasota, especially in the architectural profession.

“I was saddened by his death because he was a fine architect and definitely a leader of the Sarasota School before we called it that,” said Frank Folsom Smith, FAIA, who is four years Seibert’s junior. “I looked up to him. He had that dignified way about him, the way he spoke. He did wonderful things and had a good practice for a long time. The young people who are running it now are really staying in the lane and following his principles. That is a testament to Seibert’s strength of convictions. They have picked up on it.”

One of the “young people” is Sam Holladay, who went to work for Seibert in 1972, at age 25, and never left his office; he is now principal architect of Seibert Architects. “He was a major influence on me in my career and life,” Holladay said. “He was really good about giving you an assignment and letting you go with it, not riding over you the whole time. You learned a lot that way. He just said, ‘Go do it.’ It was a fantastic learning experience.”

That is not to say Seibert was too busy cultivating clients to attend to the details of his staff’s design work.

“I would think he was not paying attention to me or my projects,” Holladay said, “but on Monday mornings, he would ask questions about things he would not know unless he came in on Sundays and read the files. It was amazing how much he kept up on things.

“He always had his hand in the design. He was a great critic. If anyone was stuck, they would discuss the designs and he would have something to say and it would move forward.”

Jerry Sparkman of Sweet Sparkman architects never worked with Seibert, but did meet with him before the firm renovated Seibert’s 1960s Siesta Beach Pavilion and built a companion structure next door.

“He has been a huge influence on me,” Sparkman said. “He was very generous with his time. He came into the office before we started, and he spent an hour or two telling me stories from the past. It was like talking to someone from a different era — his whole sense of what architecture is supposed to do.”

Joyce Owens, FAIA, a Fort Myers architect who interviewed Seibert at several public events in recent years, said, “If there hadn’t been people like him, the Sarasota School would have died out with Victor Lundy and Paul Rudolph.

“He had a graciousness. When I interviewed him, he was insistent that the other architects along the way got credit. He came back to the fact that there was Jack West, and this person and that person. That was such a ‘not-an-architect’ thing to do. He was not egocentric. He did not feel the need to be not-gracious to other architects.”

Owens said Seibert did not care about stamping “Tim Seibert” on a building. “His goal was to make his clients happy,” she added. “But if you look at his buildings, they are beautiful. Maybe he did compromise for his clients, but his buildings were always such wonderful solutions for whatever his clients’ needs were.”

Where Rudolph used complex explorations of form, and Lundy delighted people with his curvy roofs, Seibert “loved the idea of using shadow to create shapes. Rudolph was always three-dimensional, and with Lundy you always saw the curves,” Owens said. “For Tim, he carved into the building so the shadows could become the decoration. That was a fresh approach, and he did it very well.”

“Tim always looked out for not only architecture, but also architects,” said Sarasota architect Jonathan Parks. “He was extremely intelligent and was able to synthesize many complex ideas into a sound bite that people in the profession were proud of, but also lay people could understand.”

Said Christopher Wilson, who teaches architectural history at Ringling College and is board chair of the Sarasota Architectural Foundation, “It was incredible the amount of stuff he has done that you don’t know about. He had a modest temperament and personality” that stood in contrast to Rudolph’s penchant for self-promotion.

At one point, 80 percent of Arvida Corp.’s Longboat Key projects were on Seibert’s drawing boards.

“He had clients, and he had repeat clients, which said something, because when you have repeat clients, that means your first experience was good enough for them to repeat,” Wilson said.

“He was a good person, a very talented man,” said Carl Abbott, FAIA. “Some good friends who worked for him said Tim was a real team leader instead of being so much an individual, like some architects — like me — tend to be. He was a team player, which is good. One of the first things I saw of his was his own house, no longer standing, which was really, really nice.”

Having built his own house, by his own hand, Seibert was the kind of architect who respected construction and the constructors.

“Of all the architects I have ever met, I related to him the most,” said Josh Wynne, one of Sarasota’s leading custom builders today. “I loved his pragmatism and his willingness to say it how it was. His genius appeared to be of the simple, effortless type. I wish I had the opportunity to work with him.

“Fortunately, his legacy will survive us all.”

That legacy was recognized by the Sarasota Architectural Foundation in 2017 when it made Seibert’s career the focus of the annual Sarasota MOD Weekend.

“Tim had an extraordinary life,” said former SAF board chair Janet Minker, “filled with amazing adventures, awesome architecture and loving family and friends.”