

An Interview with Michael McKinnell

You and Gerhard Kallmann were drawn quite singularly to concrete from the beginning. Your three early projects in Boston [Boston City Hall, the Government Center Parking Garage, and the Five Cent Savings Bank] were all purely concrete buildings. Even your gymnasium at Exeter was partially in concrete. What influences and what reasons caused this to be the case?

The answer is three-fold. First of all, Gerhard and I were basically Europeans. He had been here longer than I had; I had only been here two or three years. So we were carrying our European legacy with us, and concrete was the material of choice in Europe. Steel was somewhat exotic. The second influence was that our master, Le Corbusier, built in concrete. And the third consideration—probably by far the most important—was that we were particularly interested in imbuing architecture with an authenticity. We thought concrete was the appropriate material to achieve this. When you build in concrete, what you see is what you get. The building is concrete, it is made in concrete, it is structured in concrete.

We were surrounded by a depressing era, particularly in New York, of commercial buildings that were built in steel. There were third-removed Miesian firms like Harrison & Abramovitz, who were not bad architects, but who were producing buildings for commercial clients which we were in revolt against. Nothing that we looked at in such work was actually authentic. It had a steel structure, clad in travertine or limestone or marble. Hung ceilings erased all the mechanicals from view. It was a type of cosmetic architecture. For ideological reasons—and in Gerhard's case, for philosophical and aesthetic reasons—we were in revolt against this architecture.

The idea of authenticity was emerging in the air at that time. Was it something gaining widespread attention in Boston in particular? Since Boston ultimately produced such a significant amount of concrete architecture, do you think that the question of authenticity took deeper hold here?

I think there was a greater cohesion in Boston's modern architecture than there was in New York. And that was very largely the result of an architect who was too often maligned, Walter Gropius. There was no question that the young people under Gropius's guidance at The Architects' Collaborative were concerned with these issues. They were building in concrete and were displaying concrete. They believed that things should appear the way they were, rather than wanting to construct an appearance. That moral tenor was very apparent among Boston's architects, including people such as Tad Stahl.

In effect, there was a nascent architectural culture here, centered around Gropius as well as Harvard and its graduates. One must remember that Gropius was not the only teacher at Harvard who was influential. Marcel Breuer shared many of these beliefs. Boston was known in architectural circles for both Harvard and MIT. These schools were influential here in a way that they were not in New York. Columbia was not very consequential. And in Philadelphia, Kahn was based at Penn, but his professional voice was much more important than the school's.

Are there examples of work that occurred in the sixties in Boston that were particularly important to you? What sort of impact, for example, did the Carpenter Center have on architects in Boston?

Very little. It was curious. I think most architects and people in Boston considered the Carpenter Center to be an alien intrusion that was very exotic—rather strange in the Cambridge environment. On the other hand, Josep Luis Sert's work offered a counterpoint to Gropius. Sert represented a clear European legacy with an admiration for Le Corbusier. He also demonstrated a capacity to achieve commissions of some size for institutions like Boston University and Harvard. Gerhard and I, in particular, believed that Josep Luis Sert's work was exemplary. And of course it was nearly all in concrete. *Boston's architects had just produced some of modernism's seminal buildings. Saarinen's work at MIT, for instance, used concrete. But concrete came into much more widespread use all of a sudden in the late fifties and early sixties. It catches on. What is the reason it took off and became so pervasive in Boston's buildings for a decade and a half?*

One reason was that it was actually competitive with the cost of steel. Later it was no longer competitive because of the amount labor involved in making concrete. Steel was much quicker. But the widespread use of concrete was caused by a lot of different small reasons: what the architects wanted to use; the European influence of the time, particularly Le Corbusier; and the work of the previous generation, people like Saarinen. The previous generation had used concrete in ways that exploited its capacity to make curvilinear forms or to span with concrete shells—architects like Victor Lundy, who nobody has heard of anymore these days, or Pier Luigi Nervi, who was very much in people's eye.

These were examples of structural gymnastics based on concrete's power to span, which is quite different from almost everything else built in Boston by your generation.

Exactly. But concrete was in the air. People were interested in the material. I think there were many reasons for its use. As Peter Collins, who taught me at Manchester said: "Concrete is the stone of our time." *In your generation's work, how important were the capacities and the qualities of the material itself—concrete's abilities to span, be poured in place, or be made in precast modules? How much was that a part of the vocabulary of the work being produced at that time?*

Gerhard and I were not particularly attracted to concrete for its inherent structural capacities. When we designed City Hall, we really wanted to make this exemplar of an authentic architecture. The characteristic of concrete that we enjoyed most was that one material could do so much, and could be seen to do so much. It could be the structure. It could be the cladding. It could be the floors, it could be the walls. There's a kind of all-through-ness about it that I'm sure we carried to excess in City Hall. I think if we could have done it, we would have used concrete to make the light switches.

Because of its coherence as a singular construction system?

Yes.

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And because it is not a layered system? Well, it is layered with steel.

But it isn't applied. To us, concrete just seemed right. I think it is true to say that young architects tend to work against the system. That's their way of bluntly drawing attention to themselves and the ideas they have. They call that avant-garde. At the time, there weren't many concrete buildings around. So young architects were drawn to the material as a statement, which was perhaps largely a negative statement, that "here I am, I'm different, I'm opposing the architecture of Emery Roth and Edward Durrell Stone." Concrete stood against the stream of what we considered decadently degenerate frippery and surface concerns. I think that's what drew young people to concrete.

Gerhard knew Philip Johnson quite well. After we won the City Hall competition, we were walking along Madison Avenue, and we spied Johnson coming towards us, waving his arms in typical Johnsonian fashion. "Ah! I'm so happy for you two young boys who have won this competition. Absolutely marvelous. I think it's wonderful. And it's so ugly!" We thought that was the greatest praise we could get. And concrete certainly had something to do with that.

It was purposely in the face of the establishment?

Yes. And because it was used in bridges and engineering. Boston suddenly underwent an enormous growth in its institutions, hospitals, and government services, mostly in concrete. Were these buildings seen as innovative or interesting—or politically contentious?

I can't represent myself as any kind of judge of people's opinions then. Boston was in a cataclysmic economic and social decline. There were serious racial problems and poverty, a precipitous decline in public services, and a lack of faith in the city from the financial community. City planner Ed Logue told Mayor Collins that Boston had to make a powerful statement of faith in the city. And that statement was Government Center. Simply put, Government Center is what turned Boston around. Very soon after its completion, the commercial market revived. Now interestingly enough, most of the buildings built in the complex were in concrete. This was very controversial and became even more so when Jane Jacobs appeared on the scene. *Concrete architecture in Boston dries up very quickly. Your Five Cent Savings opened in 1973, at a time when many other concrete buildings were being built. But by 1976, there are very few new concrete buildings. What caused the end of this heroic concrete period? You mentioned economics, for one.*

Definitely there was a change in the air. I don't know when postmodernism starts and I don't think postmodernism is even properly identified today. Ernesto Rogers in his Torre Velasca was actually working in a postmodern fashion in the sense that he was not driven with blinders by the theoretical and ideological underpinnings of the modern movement. He was willing to accept references to things outside.

You have spoken of such symbolic references in your City Hall design.

Postmodernism was an emerging concept, not a language.

Yes, postmodern ideas were beginning to take hold earlier than most people imagine, especially with the liberty to draw on sources. The ideological straightjacket of modernism had been put back in the closet. Gerhard came to grips with the danger of ideology very early. It is a seducer, but also a tyrant. I was beginning to perhaps understand that. We had finished City Hall, Five Cent Savings, the gymnasium at Exeter. And we didn't have any work. It was a very lean time when we finally received the commission for the American

Academy of Arts and Sciences. I remember Lawrence Anderson fixing us with his very blue eyes and saying: "We want you to do what you want in making a building. We have only one thing to say. There will be not one square inch of concrete exposed in this building." Gerhard very genuinely responded: "Andy, this is the opportunity for us. We're carrying this albatross of concrete and City Hall around with us."

Was that a widespread feeling?

I'm sure many architects had that same experience or at least sensed it, saying we've got to move onto something that is a little bit more comfortable for people to exist in.

So it was partially the public perception that concrete was too hard or too serious a material?

Definitely—and there was a political aspect to it as well. While in the early sixties we witnessed a euphoria with Kennedy as a heroic figure, later in that decade people turned against heroism in the political world. The young people in '68 were staunchly opposed to anything that smacked of authority. And it was also true in architecture. Bob Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown became immensely influential.

While City Hall appears authoritarian, you've also written and spoken about it as creating an armature for future change. Given its infrastructural legacy, was concrete a necessary component to achieve this effect?

Absolutely. First of all, concrete does not come out perfectly. It bears the imprint of the maker. It's not a sublime thing. It shows the process of its actual making. Of course, Sert, Rudolph, and we exaggerated that characteristic. We believed that concrete was noble and the appropriate material to use because it symbolized longevity, it symbolized permanence. The Romans used it. It also symbolized a faith in the future—that the building was going to last. And that was an act of resistance against the likes of Emery Roth architecture. *The firm Emery Roth also produces concrete buildings, but later. It is another case where the establishment turns around and absorbs the techniques of the resistance. But before that happened, much was built and still stands in our urban fabric. What do you think the legacy of the heroic period is for our city?*

As we all know, Boston's mayor wants to sell or preferably tear down City Hall. But as Bill LeMessurier once said, it will take a controlled nuclear device to get rid of this building. So in a very real way, perhaps, we have made our legacy using concrete because it is so bloody difficult to get rid of. That quality was important. Concrete architecture was in people's face, as it was for Rudolph too. "Here it is. There's not much you can do about it. You better learn to live with it because it's here to stay." Rudolph's work resisted even the fire down in New Haven. We were right in the sense that architecture had to be rethought as something which is long-lived and, over time, could be decorated, embellished, and adorned by subsequent generations. *But weren't those aspirations, not a pejorative? Judging by the way you have spoken about your ideas, this architecture was something we would want to live with. Something that would be worthy of becoming a ruin in five hundred years.*

Absolutely. And that was perhaps our hubris. But then architecture is a hubristic profession and art. That's why I think you come up with words like "heroic" and "noble." I think those are the terms in which all architects—whatever they say—secretly think of themselves.

Michael McKinnell is a co-founder of the firm Kallmann, McKinnell & Wood Architects. His work includes Boston City Hall, the Five Cent Savings Bank, and the Government Center Parking Structure. Interviewer Mark Pasnik is a co-director of the pinkcomma gallery and a principal of the design firm over,under.