



Ralph S. Twitchell

**Ralph Spencer Twitchell** was born on July 27, 1890 in Mansfield, Ohio. He graduated from Rollins School, Winter Park, Florida in 1910, and did graduate study in architecture at McGill University in Montreal ("in the pattern of the Royal Institute of British Architects", as Ralph put it) then at Columbia University, New York, and in Europe ("in the orderly pattern of the Beaux Arts"), earning Bachelor's and Master's degrees in architecture.

During WWI he trained as a pilot, and was assigned to the 95<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron, the "Kicking Mules", as a 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant. He became chief test pilot in the First Pursuit Group. He was wounded and badly injured on July 13, 1918, with damage to his knees, spine, and eyes. He had a fractured skull, and was unconscious for 22 days. He returned to America on the SS Mauretania on January 22, 1920, and finally made full recovery.



Ringling Mansion, "Cà d'Zan"

Ralph worked as a draftsman in New York for a number of architectural firms, and then spent 2 years in Europe, studying Moorish and Spanish architecture. In 1925, back in the US and working for the New York firm of Dwight James Baum, he came to Sarasota, Florida, to manage Baum's Florida office and to supervise building of the John Ringling Mansion, "Cà d'Zan".

For the next 8 years he spent summers Connecticut and winters in Florida, completing a number of neoclassical-style residential buildings in the north-east. Finally, in 1936, he opened his own architectural practice in Sarasota, together with a construction company, Associated Builders. His Florida buildings during this period included the Kantor Residence in Siesta Key and the Showboat House on Lake Louise. Influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright, he experimented with reinforced concrete decks and walls, and his designs took on a conspicuously more modernist look.

In 1941, Ralph hired a recent graduate of Alabama Polytechnic Institute, Paul Rudolph, who also was strongly influenced by Wright. In the 5 months before Rudolph went to Harvard, the pair produced 4 residences, including one for Twitchell himself. The advent of WWII put a temporary stop to this burst of creativity, and Ralph closed both of his Sarasota businesses and reenlisted, becoming Group Commander at Charleston Air Force Base in South Carolina.

After the war, Ralph return to Sarasota and resumed his architectural and construction businesses. In 1947, Rudolph spent time at the Twitchell office while completing his Harvard studies. Rudolph became a full-time associate in 1948, and in 1949 the Twitchell-Rudolph partnership was formalized. This collaboration resulted in an astonishing output of buildings, including the Miller Residence, the Lamolithic Houses, the Healey Guest House ("The Cocoon House"), and the Leavengood Residence. These and similar productions gained the firm international recognition as the founder of a "Sarasota School" of modern architecture.

After Rudolph departed for Yale, Ralph continued his own practice in Sarasota, for a time partnering with Jack West. From 1959 to 1965 he was in partnership with his son Tolyn.

According to his short biography in the University of Florida Architecture Archives, “Twitchell created some of the earliest structures that came to represent the Sarasota Modern style. He employed large glass windows and sliding doors in conjunction with a heavy cypress interior to create a natural feeling that focused the inhabitant on the outdoors. Additionally, he often used a locally manufactured limestone brick on the exterior. Because of this, the sand colored bricks blended into the sandy Florida ground and appeared to rise out of it.” But it was his immensely productive collaboration with Paul Rudolph that created a “Sarasota School” and captured international attention.

In a luncheon speech for the University of Florida Student Chapter of the AIA, on January 13, 1951, Ralph described not only his design philosophy but his attitude to life in general:

My wish is to give you a feeling of what I have found as the answer ... to all of the problems of life. ... Grow familiar with order, rhythm, beauty and they will give you pleasure. Grow to know them and you'll fall in love with them much like a youngster with his first sweetheart. ... Return to your childhood blocks and try some building. Pull apart a few mechanical contrivances and see what makes them click. ... Follow your natural interests – devote yourself to the people and ideas you like. ... Never do anything you do not want to do and you'll never go wrong. ... Frankly face the facts as you know them. Weigh them against your hunch and you'll be aware of wide horizons. Your former values, your facts, will melt before the penetrating heat of your hunch – your inner sight. You become a seer; wisdom is born. In other words, never let your rational brain dictate to your inner feelings. When your spirit speaks, heed it, and be wholehearted about the way you obey it.

This may be counter to your interpretation of things you've been taught, but look around again and you'll realize that to do anything well, to get fun out of doing it, you've got to **enter into the spirit of it** no matter what it be. ... Throw yourself into things wholeheartedly. Forget yourself, forget your teachings. Never look to things that someone else has done for guidance. For an idea or an inspiration – yes. For direct guidance – never.

Art is always at its greatest before it reaches perfection. The power lies in that period in which it struggles to assert itself. Great art is always vibrant with spirit – vibrant with the joy of a vital idea. What we think of today as the perfect job, tomorrow we will discard. The completed object, the material manifestation is only a symbol of the creative power that gave it birth. The true reality lies wholly in the spirit – the vibrant power that we call the “soul of the thing”. It breathes with the close knit rhythm of the living. Any shape or form or outward finish your effort may take is good design as long as it expresses that vibrant rhythm of life itself, in a balanced orderly fashion. The props, crutches and shrouds of mouldings, flutes and overlay express the feeble and the dead.

Be a child. Fall in love with the things you like. Put your fingers into the works and see what makes things click. Sit at the feet of the Master whose thoughts are right down your personal alley. Never force yourself into anyone else's pattern but do only the things you like best to do until you become their master. Enter into the spirit of creation and produce that which is fun. Suddenly, you'll awaken to find that your design will be orderly, beautiful, living, and you'll know that you have arrived. You will have found peace in simple work that will live – a peace that comes to the blessed few.

Ralph died at age 87 on January 30, 1978, in Siesta Key, Florida. His obituary, which notes that his “professional contributions to the Sarasota area were varied and included such architectural monuments as the Sarasota County Courthouse, the John Ringling Hotel, and St. Armands Shopping Circle”, does not do justice to his significant contribution to modern architecture both as an designer and builder in his own right and as a formative influence on the internationally famous architect with whom he produced many magnificently innovative buildings, Paul Rudolph.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ralph's first marriage was to Lucienne Glorieux on January 10, 1922, and they divorced in 1947 in Sarasota. She later married a Mr. Neilson. Lucienne was born November 25, 1902, in New York City. She was the daughter of Jules and Marie Glorieux of Lakeville, Connecticut. Ralph and Lucienne had three children: Sylvia Marie, born in 1925 in New York City, Tolyn Jules, born in 1928 in New York City, and Terry G., born about 1931 in Connecticut. Tolyn became an architect, and partnered with his father in Sarasota after 1959.

After Ralph and Lucienne divorced, she had Paul Rudolph design a house for her in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. The residence was designed in 1947, but not built until 1951. Construction was carried out by her sons Tolyn and Terry, with remote assistance from Ralph and his nephew Jack in Florida. The house has since been destroyed.

Ralph married Roberta S. Healy in 1950. Roberta was born on February 8, 1915, in Boston. Her parents were Warren Robert Healey and Isabel Hall Coombs. Roberta died on August 17, 1966, in Sarasota. Ralph and Roberta had two children: Aaron Lee, born 1952, and Debra Layne, born 1955.

Ralph's third marriage was to Paula Bane Behnke in June 1969 in Sarasota. Paula was born February 20, 1920, in Seattle, Washington, and died on September 24, 1994, in Sarasota.

Ralph's parents were Albert John Twitchell, born on December 31, 1848, in Brimfield, Ohio, and Ella Callista Downs, born December 29, 1851, in Defiance, Ohio. They married on September 24, 1874, in Defiance. Albert was a lawyer. They had 7 children, Ralph being the second-youngest. John "Jack" L. Twitchell, a meticulous craftsman who worked for Ralph in Sarasota in charge of Ralph's construction company, Associated Builders, was the son of Ralph's next older brother Albert. Jack built the Deering and Burkhardt houses for Paul Rudolph with Bert Brosmith.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ralph Twitchell's principal works include:

- Lido Beach Casino, Siesta Key, Sarasota, Florida, 1940 (with Arthur Saxe) (demolished)
- Twitchell Residence, Siesta Key, Sarasota, Florida, 1941 (with Paul Rudolph) (destroyed)
- Harkavy Residence, Siesta Key, Sarasota, Florida, 1946 (with Paul Rudolph)
- Denman Residence, Siesta Key, Sarasota, Florida, 1946-1947 (with Paul Rudolph)
- Miller Residence, Casey Key, Sarasota, Florida, 1947-1948 (with Paul Rudolph) (demolished)
- Revere Quality House, Sarasota, Florida, 1948 (with Paul Rudolph)
- Russell Residence, Sarasota, Florida, 1948 (with Paul Rudolph) (destroyed)
- Siegrist Residence, Venice, Florida, 1948 (with Paul Rudolph) (altered)
- Steinmetz Studio, Sarasota, Florida, 1948 (with Paul Rudolph) (altered)
- Lamolithic Development, Siesta Key, Sarasota, Florida, 1948 (with Paul Rudolph) (renovated)
- Deeds Residence, Siesta Key, Florida, 1949 (with Paul Rudolph)
- Bennett Residence, Bradenton, Florida, 1949-51 (with Paul Rudolph)
- Burnette Residence, Sarasota, Florida, 1950 (with Paul Rudolph) (destroyed)
- Healy Guest House "The Cocoon House", Siesta Key, Sarasota, Florida, 1950 (with Paul Rudolph)
- Wheelan Cottage, Sarasota, Florida, 1951 (with Paul Rudolph) (destroyed)

Leavengood Residence, St. Petersburg, Florida, 1951 (with Paul Rudolph) (destroyed)

Hudson Beach House, Venice, Florida, 1953

Andrews Residence, Sarasota, Florida, 1959

Hutchinson Residence, Casey Key, Florida, 1962 (with Tolyn Twitchell)

The following are some of Ralph's most notable works:



#### **Lido Beach Casino, Sarasota, Florida, 1940**

John Howey describes the building as follows:  
“Flanked by two entry towers, the walled-in complex faced Lido Beach and the Gulf. Within was an Olympic-sized swimming pool, surrounded by cabanas, sunbathing decks, locker rooms, shops, restaurants, lounges, and dancing areas. ... It is now considered the bridge between Twitchell’s work in the earlier 1930s and his pending total change to modernism.”



#### **Twitchell Residence, Sarasota, Florida, 1941**

This house, at 101 Big Pass, Siesta Key, Sarasota, Florida, was designed with Paul Rudolph. It was featured in Architectural Forum, September 1947. As of 1969, the owners were Garrison and Marjorie Creighton. It was sold in 2005 to current owner, Joseph King. Subsequently, it was damaged by fire, and destroyed in 2007. (Photo: Chris Mottalini)



#### **Healy Guest House, Sarasota, Florida, 1948-50**

Dubbed “The Cocoon House”, this Twitchell-Rudolph design, built at 3575 Bayou Louise Lane, Siesta Key, Sarasota, Florida, was an experiment in structure and technology, using steel straps to maintain its curved catenary shape. The roof structure is an original technological assembly: the steel straps are fastened to flexible insulation boards, and the roofing material, Cocoon, is sprayed on.

**Bennett Residence, Bradenton, Florida, 1949-51**

The Alan and Barbara Bennett Residence, at 3901 Riverview Boulevard, Bradenton, Florida, was designed with Paul Rudolph. In 2001, it was sold to architect Joseph King, who has written extensively on Rudolph. It is currently for sale again.

**Burnette Residence, Sarasota, Florida, 1950**

According to Christopher Domin and Joseph King: "The Burnette Residence introduced a new abstracted quality of space and form in the firm's work, probably derived from Rudolph's experience of early modern buildings during his trip to Europe, and made possible by the sophisticated use of reinforced concrete flat-slab construction." (Photo: Ezra Stoller)

**Leavengood Residence St. Petersburg, Florida, 1951**

This was the first two-story house produced by the Twitchell and Rudolph collaboration. The initial plans showed the house completely raised on columns, so that upper rooms had more view and more breeze, and a shaded lower level was created. The house, as built, was somewhat more anchored to the ground, but still true to the original concept. (Photo: Ezra Stoller)

**Andrews Residence, Sarasota, Florida, 1959**

This house, at 1695 Lowe Street, was designed for Lu Andrews, a long-time employee of Ralph's architectural firm. According to John King, "this is a refined example of his ideas about living in Florida: modest in scale, set within abundant nature, made of indigenous materials, and carefully detailed."

**Hutchinson Residence, Casey Key, Florida, 1962**

This house, designed with Tolyn Twitchell, is, in John Howey's words, "a one-story flat-roofed structure at the water's edge ... a combination enclosure of glassed and screened spaces that interplay".

\* \* \* \* \*

- Credits:** American Architects Directory, 1970, <http://communities.aia.org/sites/hdoaa/wiki>  
 Ancestry, <http://ancestry.com>  
 Christopher Domin & Joseph King, *Paul Rudolph: The Florida Houses*, Princeton, 2002  
 John Howey, *The Sarasota School of Architecture 1941-1966*, MIT Press, 1997  
 Sarasota Co. History Center, <http://www.sarasotahistoryalive.com/stories/journals-of-yesteryear/an-overall-design>  
 Patty Jo S. Rice, *Life and Architecture of Ralph Spencer Twitchell*, MA Thesis, FSU, 1992  
 Sarasota Convention & Visitors Bureau, "toursarasota Architecture", 2009  
 Sarasota Herald Tribune, Wednesday, February 1, 1978  
 U.Florida Architecture Archives, "The Sarasota School of Architecture", 2009,  
<http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/exhibits/sarasota.pdf>

Written by Thomas J. and Donna A. McQuade

Research by Donna A. McQuade, phone 347-274-9903, email [donna@mcquades.net](mailto:donna@mcquades.net)