

## INTRODUCTION

William Newton Morgan was an American architect of singular vision, whose body of work both reflects and transcends the dominant themes of modern architecture—simplicity, lack of ornamentation, and the building as a machine for living.<sup>1</sup> In 1960, as Morgan was beginning his architectural practice, the architect and critic Peter Blake wrote that all modern buildings refer back to Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, or Frank Lloyd Wright.<sup>2</sup> “The fact is that virtually no modern building constructed today would look the way it does if it had not been for the work of one or more of these three men,” Blake wrote.<sup>3</sup> There is ample evidence of the influence of Le Corbusier and Wright on Morgan but scant evidence of the curtain walls prevalent in Mies van der Rohe’s work. And even though Morgan can be situated in the modernist canon, he did more than amplify the movement’s founding voices. As with many highly regarded Florida modernists, Morgan designed buildings that responded to that state’s weather. Florida modernists, including Morgan, also made wide use of concrete. With abundant water and sand, concrete was cheap in Florida, and mild winters mean less cracking from the freezing and thawing found in colder climates.

As his career evolved, Morgan transcended the architectural themes of the mid-twentieth century by folding earth architecture and the designs of prehistoric American builders into

modernism. The result can be seen in strikingly original government buildings, museums, apartment buildings, and private residences on the East Coast of the United States, particularly in his native state of Florida.

Morgan earned his bachelor's degree in architectural sciences from Harvard College in 1952, with a course of study that initially included pre-law classes and social anthropology, but he later turned toward architecture. Following graduation, he served as an officer in the U.S. Navy in Korea and the Pacific. His military service shaped his design vision by introducing him to the architecture and landscapes of Asian and Pacific civilizations. The navy also instilled in Morgan leadership and focus, both qualities he put to use in his subsequent three years as a married father attending Harvard's Graduate School of Design (GSD) while working part of that time for internationally recognized architect Paul Rudolph, who then maintained an office at 26 Church Street near Harvard Square.

From his earliest assignments at GSD Morgan sought to build upon the architectural foundations of ancient civilizations, reinterpreted for the modern era. He authored five books on archaeology and earth architecture that examine how early civilizations in North America and Micronesia, and elsewhere around the world, adapted buildings to their environments. Morgan's interest in pre-Columbian architecture dates to boyhood summers in the American Southwest, where the arid and less developed desert environment contributed to the survival of numerous pre-Columbian villages.

Although Morgan drew upon early architecture in his designs, his sensibility was fundamentally modern. Morgan trained at one of the key centers of modernism in the world. While at GSD (and as an undergraduate student at Harvard College), he was associated with the modern movement's central figures, such as Josep Lluís Sert and Walter Gropius, as well as with the architectural historian Eduard Sekler. However, the influence of Paul Rudolph on Morgan's work and his approach to design was profound. Rudolph's influences were clearly visible in Morgan's earliest structures in Jacksonville and Atlantic Beach, Florida, and in his

searching and creative response to each new commission. There are also numerous parallels between Morgan and his mentor. Both trained at GSD, both served in the navy, both saw their initial professional success in postwar Florida beach communities, both benefited from Harvard's Wheelwright Prize, which exposed them to architecture around the world, and both used modern materials in novel ways that helped to redefine modern architecture.

But while other modernists sought to forge a new architecture by denying the past, Morgan resolutely and increasingly embraced early architecture. In so doing, he made modern forms more meaningful, more approachable, and arguably more intimately linked to the history and essence of the places where they were built.

Morgan described his preference for “fresh, direct, clearheaded designs” and “sensitively related components with consistent details.” His approach to each project was simple and bold. His architecture was innovative and daring, and his confidence in his creativity was refreshingly resolute. “The first step in creating architecture is to think outside the box,” he said in an interview at eighty-four years of age. “The second step, and those that follow, are the same as the first.”

Morgan was a perfectionist, and architects were eager to work for him and learn from him. Most of them later went on to start their own firms. As with many highly respected architects, William Morgan did not lack for ego. One of his last clients, Francis Lott, recalls praising Morgan, who replied: “There is Frank [Lloyd Wright], Mies [van der Rohe], Corbu [Le Corbusier] and *moi!*” But in almost the same breath Morgan could be modest and self-effacing. He delighted in pointing to the lifeguard stand he designed for the City of Atlantic Beach, Florida, and declaring it to be his best work.

This book examines the evolution of Morgan's development as an architect, beginning with the early influences in his childhood and through his undergraduate and graduate studies at Harvard, and continuing to a professional career that spanned the second half of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first. This story is told in words and pictures.

The words—many in the architect’s own voice—communicate the spirit of inquiry and invention that characterized Morgan’s vision. The accompanying images illustrate and highlight how he translated that vision into a bold corpus of work.

Although much had been written about Morgan, including two architectural monographs, in later years it became evident that there was a need for and the possibility of a book that would be more biographical and personal, one that would consider as well some of his works that had not been documented in the previous monographs. As Morgan stoically battled ailments that limited his activity over the last eight years of his life, the architect, his wife, Bunny, and I all agreed that it would be useful to capture the words and spirit of this creative force. That is the goal of this book. With that goal, most of the information presented on the following pages is derived from personal interviews with Morgan, as well as with his family members, associates, and clients, and from autobiographical notes handwritten by Morgan between 2013 and 2015 and delivered to me.

The objective is not to provide an analysis of Morgan’s career, or a comprehensive parade of all his work, but to provide a more personal insight into the forces that shaped a great architect and his achievements.

We begin with a biographical foundation, discussing important events in Morgan’s life up to the start of his architectural practice in Atlantic Beach, Florida, near Jacksonville. This includes project examples from Morgan’s years at GSD that prefigure major themes of his later work, such as the use of earth as a building material and topography as an element of design, tensile structures to create lightweight and powerful shapes, and tree forms as supports—aspects of his work that developed and evolved as Morgan’s career progressed.

The story continues with Morgan’s professional career, and it illustrates how the design themes he explored at GSD developed and evolved under his creative watch. For William Newton Morgan, work was very much his life. During much of his career he was in the office six days per week and then worked at home on Sundays. When recessions hit and the architectural practice slowed down, he would turn his focus to archaeological research, which

led to the publication of five books on archaeology and architecture during three decades. Morgan was a workaholic, and he constantly thought about architecture, including ancient architecture. As such, a description of his life beyond graduate school should focus on his architecture and his research.

This account relies heavily on Morgan's own recollections and descriptions, but it is not a comprehensive examination of Morgan's work. Rather, it focuses on the core projects that he considered important and relevant to telling the story of his development as an architect. The list of projects selected for highlighting here was developed over the course of many conversations with Morgan in 2014 and 2015.

Two previous works are valuable resources for anyone wanting more information on Morgan. Readers wanting more description of his entire opus and less of a biographical sketch may wish to consult Paul Spreiregen's and Robert McCarter's excellent monographs.<sup>4</sup> This work provides a different perspective by examining the evolution of Morgan's influences and design ideas not only over the course of his long and accomplished career but even further back into his earliest years. I hope it provides added details that supplement the previous monographs.

In recent years many of the buildings designed by modernist architects, who worked principally with concrete, and sometimes in the style described as brutalism, have been demolished or are threatened.<sup>5</sup> As admired as he is by architects, preservationists, and fans of modernism, many of Paul Rudolph's buildings, some of which were concrete fabrications, have been destroyed or disfigured. Since 2007 Riverview High School in Sarasota, Florida, the Orange County Government Center in Goshen, New York, and three private residences have been victimized.

Many of Morgan's larger works arguably fall under the brutalist rubric. But all of Morgan's major commercial, governmental, and religious buildings survive as this is written, although one—the Federal Building and Courthouse in Fort Lauderdale, Florida—faces an uncertain future. Three of his residential projects have been demolished. While some of his remaining

works have been adorned or altered in ways that Morgan would find objectionable, the strong and clear statement of his designs remains apparent to an eye educated in his style. Through William Morgan's words and his celebrated structures, this book provides tangible examples of an expressive and individualistic American architect and his contributions to the modern movement.