

Photo: Arton Grassl



Learning from Charles Moore: Two Sisters, Four Houses, and Me

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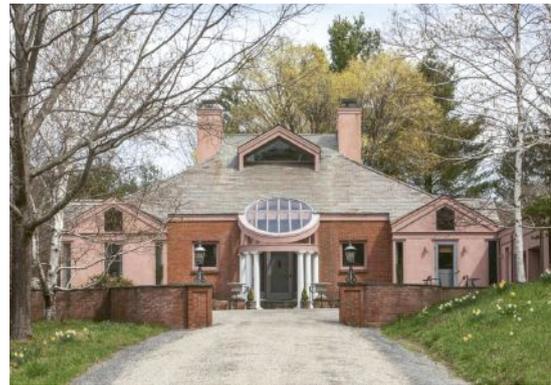
About 50 years ago, the renowned architect, educator, and author Charles Moore was hired by Frederick and Dorothy Rudolph to design a vacation house on Captiva Island, Florida, and about a decade later in the late 1970s, they hired him again to design their permanent residence in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Charles was often called the father of Postmodernism, and was a prolific proponent through such books as “The Place of Houses.” With the exception of his small houses, however, I

was never a big fan of his work. But I still have a tattered copy of that book, because it was the first time that someone had articulated for me the process of designing a house, including a programmatic checklist to follow.

The houses that Charles designed for the Rudolphs were classic examples of Postmodernism—with historical references, whimsical details, bright colors, high skylit spaces, and connecting pods.

About the time Charles was designing their second house, I established my first office in a Cambridge, Massachusetts, apartment across the street from where Marta Rudolph, one of



Photos: Courtesy Marta Rudolph and Lisa Cushman

Previous page: Eck MacNeely's house for Lisa Cushman in Williamstown, Massachusetts, offers multiple vantage points to the landscape. This page: The Rudolphs' houses in Captiva, Florida (left) and in Williamstown (above) by Charles Moore.

the Rudolphs' daughters, lived. We became occasional friends over the years, and I advised her now and then on small architectural projects. At the time I had no idea her parents had hired Charles Moore, but I did sense that Marta had an educated, discerning eye, which made her fun to work with.

A few years ago, Lisa Cushman, Marta's sister, asked me to design a new house for her and her husband, Michael, in Williamstown, and shortly after that, Marta also asked me to design the renovation of an older home she had just purchased in Northampton, Massachusetts. I still had no idea that Marta and Lisa were the daughters of Frederick and Dorothy, but I knew that they both had a good feeling for the design process and, as I liked to say to them, this was my first architectural *ménage à trois*.

Throughout the design development for both projects, I gradually became aware of the Charles Moore connection. It was never explicitly discussed, but it was clearly in the background. I consciously never brought it up, but something was special about my collaboration with both sisters. They seemed to have a natural ability to understand the design process, and I came to wonder if that was a result of their upbringing or being around their parents as they were designing their two houses.

I was very aware from my many years of residential practice that the best clients were often those who had previously done a design project, but it had not occurred to me that children brought up around the design process might benefit similarly. I decided to ask them about it when both houses were completed, and their comments are enlightening for all residential architects.

Surprisingly, just like me, both sisters had mixed feelings about the Charles Moore houses. The Captiva house,

where they spent most of their time, was their favorite: It was whimsical and playful, and blended in with the natural environment. The architect was good at "bringing the outside in," the sisters concurred, and had designed a variety of separate spaces "that were small and invitingly comfortable environments," said Marta. Lisa recalled how Charles even designed her a yacht on a napkin when he visited Captiva, and that personal involvement and inclusiveness deeply impressed both siblings.

On the other hand, Marta pointed out that the Williamstown house "looked so out of place in the neighborhood." The



Photo: Anton Grassl

Above: Eck MacNeely's remodel of Marta Rudolph's house in Northampton, Massachusetts, upgrades its connection to the patio and garden.

architectural nod to Monticello “over-directed the design process to the point that some of the interior spaces were cramped and less than optimal in terms of functionality.” (The reference to Monticello may have derived from Frederick Rudolph, who was a professor of American History at Williams College.)

Why the same recipe with different results? As a lesson for architects, Charles Moore had spent four or five days residing with Frederick and Dorothy to see how they lived before designing the Captiva house, but he turned the Williamstown house over to an associate after sketching the original design.

From both experiences Lisa and Marta also came away with lessons. To paraphrase: Charles Moore made us feel comfortable and taught us that building a house was really easy. He asked us how we lived and what we wanted, and watching the process was inspirational and instilled a real interest in architecture. He was, as Marta summed it up, “a cool guy.”

While working with me, both sisters definitely wanted houses more like Captiva—ones that blended with their neighborhoods and natural environment, with plenty of windows

to take advantage of natural light and views. Individual spaces were important, but only within a relatively open floor plan. But they wanted some of the textures, colors, and provision for family collections that had been in their parents’ houses. Most important, as Lisa put it, both Marta and she considered it a “real privilege to design their own homes”—to decide where and how they wanted to live.

It was critical that I listened closely to those desires. There’s no question in my mind that their sense of privilege and, yes, fun came from their experience with their parents and Charles Moore. It’s beyond our control as architects to influence the previous lives of our clients, but it’s well within our control to provide inspiration and fun to all of our clients, old and young alike. They will be better clients for the journey; and we will be better architects for it, too.

Jeremiah Eck, FAIA, is the founding principal of Eck MacNeely Architects in Boston, specializing in residential and academic work. He is also the author of three books on house design, a landscape painter, and a former lecturer in architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.