

Thiry, Paul Albert (1904-1993)

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Among Washington's most illustrious architects of his generation, Paul Thiry exerted a major influence in the emergence of the "Northwest style" of architecture as an early proponent of modernist design, while also advancing urban ideals. As principal architect of the 1962 Seattle World's Fair, Thiry helped craft the ongoing legacy of the Seattle Center and manifested his commitment to effective city planning. His urban advocacy included his service on key local and regional planning bodies, and as an appointee of President Kennedy to the U.S. Capitol Planning Commission and the President's Council on Pennsylvania Avenue. His wide-ranging and much-honored work over a career spanning nearly 50 years includes signature residential projects in and beyond Seattle, the Seattle Center Coliseum (later remodeled as KeyArena), the Frye Art Museum, and the Museum of History & Industry in Seattle, the Washington State Library on Olympia's Capitol Mall, numerous churches located throughout Washington, campus plans and buildings at the University of Washington, Washington State University, and Western Washington University, and planning for Montana's Libby Dam and other large public projects throughout the United States. Augmenting extensive publication and exhibition of his design and planning work, Thiry expressed his thoughts and opinions on a range of subjects in writing published in local and national newspapers, journals, and books and in numerous speaking engagements.

Early Years

Paul Thiry was born in Nome, Alaska, on September 11, 1904, during the heyday of the Gold Rush. At age 2 he moved to San Francisco with his parents, Hippolyte Thiry, a Parisian mining engineer, and Louise Schwaebel Thiry. After the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906 destroyed their home, the family moved back to Nome. In 1909, the young Paul and his mother spent the better part of a year in Paris with their family there, and his mother established a business importing French clothing for the wealthy families of Nome and Seattle. Mother and son spent part of each year in residence at Seattle's Lincoln Hotel where she arranged importation and shipping, and also helped dress Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) and Isadora Duncan (1878-1927).

Following his father's return to France in 1914 to go to war (from which he never returned), Thiry and his mother moved to Seattle. Previously schooled mostly by his well-educated mother, Thiry began studies at Saint Martin's, a Benedictine boarding school in Lacey. He graduated in 1920, at age 15 and in the same year

began pre-med studies at the University of Washington. He soon abandoned that study in favor of architecture where he could exercise his skill in drawing, in part stimulated by his interest in renderings of the Villa de Medici and other classical scenes and expressed in his cartoons for the *Sun Dodger* (University of Washington student magazine) and *Tyee* (University of Washington yearbook).

In a 1983 oral history conducted by Meredith L. Clausen, Paul Thiry reflected on his family heritage, noting that his "father's grandfather ... Adrian Thiry, [was] a contemporary of Eiffel and developed many steel structures especially ... greenhouse and ... shaped steel fabrications; at one time they designed a group of greenhouses for the Shah of Persia, and reputedly he also was the inventor of barbed wire" (Thiry/Clausen interview). His lineage also includes the name Mansart, possibly linked to the renowned French architect Francois Mansart (1598-1666).

Studying Architecture

Thiry began architecture studies in 1923, under the tutelage of the architecture school's founder, Carl F. Gould (1873-1939), and under Arthur Herrman (1898-1933), who taught in the Beaux Arts tradition, rooted in classic architecture forms. Thiry's education included summer internships in the offices of Seattle architects Henry Bittman (1881-1955) and John Graham Sr. (1873-1955).

In 1927 Thiry went abroad to study for several months at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts at Fontainebleau, along with several students from the United States including UW classmate Welton Becket (1902-1969), who went on to a distinguished architectural career in Los Angeles. In 1928 Thiry graduated from the UW with the Bachelor of Architecture degree, also earning the Student Medal given by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and membership in the Tau Sigma Delta architecture honorary society.

Thiry earned his architect's license (Washington No. 110) and opened his own practice in 1929, working alone or with one or two other people. His early designs, such as the Lakecrest/Lake Court Apartments (Montlake, Seattle, 1929) and St. Edwards Catholic Church (Shelton, 1931) referenced historic styles, including French Norman and Colonial revival forms.

New Places, New Design Views

As the Great Depression slowed his work, Thiry set out on travels that expanded his ideas about architecture and urban design. He attended the Chicago Century of Progress International Exhibition in 1933, which he described as "a museum of new architectural styles and construction techniques, of city plans and new technologies There were some very interesting buildings ... like Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion house, and ... a lot of it was Art Moderne, but just the same it was a complete change" (Thiry/Clausen interview). He noted also: "after seeing the structure at the Chicago Fair, it always seemed to me that form had to follow function, and design had to show structure. I thought that there were so many new elements being developed that there should be a new architecture, but I didn't get much support in that viewpoint ... [from] the people that I was taught by at the University." "All too often the structural system of a building was buried under an alien architecture, whether colonial or Romanesque or Gothic Going on to Japan the

following year, I had a chance to build on the things that I had seen in Chicago" (Thiry/McConaghy interview).

So Thiry's travels continued. He related:

"I had a friend that I'd gone to school with, by the name of Matsumoto, who ... had gone back to Japan and he wanted me to come and work with him in Japan. And so ... I went home one day, being thoroughly disgusted when I had lost my last client ... and I said to my mother, 'For two cents, I'd go to Japan and work with Matsumoto.' And so she said, 'Well, why don't you?' And so the next day, anyway, I went down to the ticket office for the American Mail Line. At that time too there were a lot of strikes and ships were all tied up and it was kind of a mess. And so I said, 'I'd like to get a ticket to Yokohama,' a round trip, because I wanted to be sure to get home, and I wanted to have my ticket paid for in advance if I ran into trouble The ticket wasn't too much, as money went — as money goes now. And so I thought, 'Well, if I'm going to go there, maybe I should get a ticket to Manila and back,' because I could live on the boat and have no problem as far as my daily subsistence was concerned. So the man said, 'Well, if you're going to get tickets to Manila, why don't you get a ticket around the world? It's only a few dollars more.' And so I said, 'Well, how long would it take to go around the world?' And he said, 'Well, the ticket covers about 35,000 miles and it would take about three-and-a-half, four months, if you just stayed on the boat' So I got a ticket around the world and then I took off for Japan and I worked with Matsumoto for a while" (Thiry/Clausen interview).

During his six months in Japan, Thiry contacted his fellow UW architecture student George Nakashima (1905-1990, later a world-renowned designer of furniture), then employed by Antonin Raymond (1888-1976), a Czechoslovakia-born American architect who had stayed in Japan after working with Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) on Tokyo's Imperial Hotel, introducing the International Style to Japan. Thiry continued on to France where he spent an afternoon with Charles-Edouard Le Corbusier (1877-1966), known for his breakthrough concept of the house as a "machine for living." Later Thiry observed, "I didn't really have the full comprehension of the possibilities of change until after I went to Japan" (Thiry/Clausen interview).

Thiry's journey continued, taking him to cities throughout Asia over several months, with a stint of work with a Chinese architect. He sailed back to the U.S. East coast, stopping in Washington, D.C. and New York City before sailing home through the Panama Canal.

Returning Home

After his return to Seattle, Thiry joined in partnership from 1935 to 1940 with architect Alban A. Shay (1899-1984). As Thiry recalled it: "Alban Shay offered me an opportunity to be a partner with him. I came back imbued with new ways to do things and Shay was willing. ... In fact, when he encountered a new plan he would sometimes say, 'Do you want traditional or modern mystic?'" (Thiry/Clausen interview). "In the mid-1930s ... Thiry built houses for himself and other clients in traditional neighborhoods such as Capitol Hill, Leschi, Denny Blaine and Madison Park. He and contractor Edwin C. Edwards developed some double