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Charles Gwathmey, Architect Loyal to Aesthetics of High Modernism, Dies at 71

By [FRED A. BERNSTEIN](#)
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Charles Gwathmey, an architect who turned his love of Modernism and passion for geometrical complexity into a series of compelling houses and sometimes controversial public buildings, died on Monday in Manhattan. He was 71 and lived in Manhattan.



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times
Charles Gwathmey in 1993.

The cause was esophageal cancer, said Mr. Gwathmey's stepson, Eric Steel.

Mr. Gwathmey was part of a generation of architects who put their own aesthetic stamp on the "high Modernist" style developed in the early 20th century by Le Corbusier and others. Many of Mr. Gwathmey's best buildings were houses. A series of wealthy clients — including Steven Spielberg, David Geffen, Jerry Seinfeld and Jeffrey Katzenberg —

chose him to create living spaces that were boldly geometric and luxuriously appointed, modern but certainly not spare.

Gwathmey Siegel & Associates, which Mr. Gwathmey founded with Robert Siegel in 1968, was a rare architecture firm to maintain a thriving residential practice (its first apartment, in 1969, was for the actress Faye Dunaway) while also creating large buildings for schools, museums and private real estate developers.

Many blended effortlessly into the urban fabric. They included the International Center of Photography in Midtown Manhattan; the Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, Queens; an expansion of the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard; and dozens more.

But a few of Gwathmey Siegel's buildings — including a 1992 addition to the Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan and the more recent Astor Place condominiums in the East Village — were denounced by critics as insufficiently deferential to their surroundings.

Among architects, Mr. Gwathmey was admired for his steadfastness during the 1980s, when some of his contemporaries turned to historicist, or post-Modernist styles.

“A lot of people jumped ship, but Charlie was loyal to Modernism,” said Peter Eisenman, the architect and theorist.

Cynthia Davidson, an author and editor, devoted an entire issue of her journal, *ANY: Architecture New York*, to Mr. Gwathmey in the late 1990s. She did so, she said, after realizing that “there’s a lot of interest in Charles’s work among the younger generation of architects.”

“He’s somebody they look at — that they *have* to look at,” Ms. Davidson added.

Mr. Gwathmey (pronounced GWAHTH-mee) himself was a dashing figure, given to Savile Row suits and shoes from the London boot maker John Lobb. He drove black sports cars from which he stripped details he considered extraneous and lived in refined style, in an apartment of his own design.

He became a sensation while still in his 20s, when, with his partner at the time, Richard Henderson, he designed a house for his parents, Robert and Rosalie Gwathmey, both artists, on the East End of Long Island. Completed in 1966, at a cost of \$35,000, the Gwathmey house attracted throngs of visitors and was consistently named one of the most influential buildings of the modern era.

Mr. Gwathmey described the house — a 1,200-square-foot cedar-clad composition of cubes, triangles and cylinders — as “a solid block that has been carved back to its essence.”

“There is no additive, no vestigial, no applied anything that detracts from its primary presence,” he said.

Mr. Gwathmey thought of the house and its adjoining studio as sculptures. “They are not,” he declared, “organic or integrated with nature.”

In 2001 Mr. Gwathmey inherited the house from his mother and began a renovation that included covering the original concrete floor with marble. The upgrade was a sign of Mr. Gwathmey’s extraordinary success during the intervening years. Only a few miles away, he had designed a sprawling vacation compound for Mr. Spielberg.

Many of his clients returned to him for second or third houses. Mr. Spielberg said in a telephone interview, “Whenever I had a project on the East Coast, the first call I made was to Charlie.” He added that Mr. Gwathmey “liked to mix it up” — liked to take strong stands in defense of his design ideas — but “if there hadn’t been the sparks, the architecture wouldn’t have been as brilliant.”

Though lavish, Mr. Gwathmey’s residential designs were more about “This is who I am” than “This is what I’ve got,” Mr. Steel said. But they also reflected Mr. Gwathmey’s predilections for using angles and curves to create interlocking spaces, usually framed by materials like onyx, stainless steel and bird’s-eye maple.

Mr. Gwathmey formed his partnership with Mr. Siegel in 1968. (They had first met as students at the High School of Music & Art in Manhattan.) One of their most daring projects was a renovation of Whig Hall at Princeton University, a neo-Classical building that had been damaged in a fire. Inserting Corbusian forms where part of the original facade was missing, they created a thrilling combination of traditional and avant-garde design.

Other prominent buildings included the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass., and the Science, Industry and Business Library of the New York Public Library on Madison Avenue. Among the firm’s most recent projects was a W Hotel in Hoboken, N.J. The new United States Mission to the United Nations, on First Avenue in Manhattan, is under construction.

In New York, Gwathmey Siegel was perhaps most famous for its addition to Frank Lloyd Wright’s design of the Guggenheim Museum on Fifth Avenue. The

addition, completed in 1992, consists of a rectangular 10-story tower behind Wright's famous spiral.

The firm's original proposal, for a much larger, cantilevered box, was denounced as obtrusive by critics and preservationists. In the end Mr. Gwathmey settled on a limestone slab that entirely defers to Mr. Wright's powerful building. Paul Goldberger, then the architecture critic for *The New York Times* and now a critic for *The New Yorker*, ultimately concluded that with the renovation masterminded by Gwathmey Siegel and the addition, the Guggenheim "is now a better museum *and* a better work of architecture."

More recently, Mr. Gwathmey designed the Astor Place condominiums, a curvy glass building in the East Village. It was influenced by the sinuous towers of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe but lacked the serenity associated with Mies's best buildings. Nicolai Ouroussoff, *The Times's* current architecture critic, called the tower "squat and clumsy" and said it rested on "a banal glass box."

Yale University selected Gwathmey Siegel to renovate and enlarge its Art & Architecture Building, a much maligned 1963 masterpiece by Paul Rudolph that had been badly altered over the decades. Mr. Gwathmey was widely praised for bringing Rudolph's architecture back to life. But when it was completed, last summer, the same critics who loved the restoration dismissed the addition; Mr. Ouroussoff called it "sadly conventional."

Still, Mr. Gwathmey took pride in having completed a building at Yale, his alma mater, that engaged in a conversation with Rudolph's building, as well as with the 1953 Yale University Art Gallery by Louis I. Kahn across the street.

Mr. Eisenman said that Mr. Gwathmey deserved more credit than he got for making sure that his building didn't overpower its neighbors. "Charles was able to sublimate his ego and produce really sophisticated solutions to plan problems, to circulation problems — but those aren't the kinds of things that make headlines," Mr. Eisenman said.

Charles Gwathmey was born on June 19, 1938, in Charlotte, N.C., and was reared both there and in New York City. He began college at the University of Pennsylvania and then moved to Yale, from which he graduated with a master's

degree in architecture in 1962. He then spent two years traveling through Europe, where he paid particular attention to the works of Le Corbusier. Fresh from that trip, he made a splash with his parents' house, in Amagansett, N.Y., and soon became known as one of five young architects — Mr. Gwathmey was the youngest — who were reinterpreting Corbusian convention.

The group, known variously as the Five or the Whites (for the color of most of their buildings) or the New York School, consisted of Mr. Gwathmey, Michael Graves, Mr. Eisenman, John Hejduk and Richard Meier. The Five added visual flourishes (and in some cases theoretical underpinnings) to the unadorned white architecture of their idol, Corbusier, creating ever-more-elaborate buildings out of familiar Corbusian forms. They were known for using architecture not as a social or environmental tool, but as a way of achieving aesthetic perfection.

Over the years Mr. Gwathmey taught at a number of architecture schools, including those of Harvard, Yale and Princeton and, in Manhattan, of Columbia and Cooper Union.

Mr. Gwathmey's first marriage, to Emily Gwathmey, ended in divorce; they had one daughter, Annie Gwathmey of Los Angeles, who survives him. He is also survived by his wife, the former Bette-Ann Damson, now Bette-Ann Gwathmey, who is the vice president for corporate philanthropy at Polo Ralph Lauren, and his stepson, Mr. Steel, of New York.

Mr. Steel said that "the same level of meticulousness that you see in his work, you'd see in every aspect of his life." Even in the hospital during Mr. Gwathmey's final illness, Mr. Steel said, "everything had to line up."