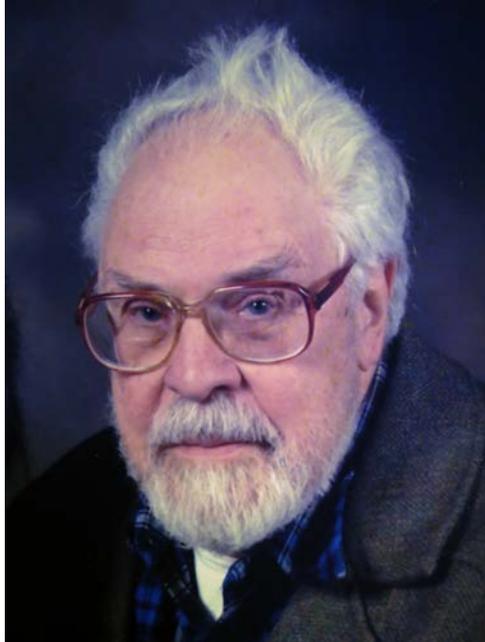


Philip Thiel Obituary (1920 – 2014)



Philip Thiel

Philip Thiel, Professor Emeritus of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Washington, Naval Architect and community activist, died peacefully at home surrounded by family and friends Saturday, May 10, 2014. He was 93 years old.

His Work

Thiel left an impact in fields as diverse as naval architecture, architectural design and urban planning pedagogy, environmental psychology and community advocacy for people-centered urban design and development. He published *Freehand Drawing* (1965), *Visual Awareness and Design* (1981) and *People, Paths and Purposes* (1997), which introduced “experiential notation,” or ways to describe the human experience of moving through the built environment. Through his courses and books he brought passionate commitment, multi-disciplinary intellectual breadth, and analytical rigor to his teaching. He opened students’ eyes to multiple aspects of visual perception, awareness and communication, and introduced them to a design philosophy centered around a rigorous study of the human end-users’ needs, practices and desires. He advocated designing with an understanding of how the built environment affects human use and interaction both physically and psychologically. Indulging his love of exploring new cultures and built environments, over the years he impacted student lives in the thousands through his teaching from Berkeley and Seattle, to Tokyo and Sapporo, Japan, from Arhus, Denmark to Bolivia and Peru.

Background

Thiel was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1920 to Philip Thiel and Alma Theone (Meyer). As a boy he visited his father at the Brooklyn shipyards, where his father ran a freight forwarding company. Enthralled by the harbour activity of tugboats and freighters, he took a Bachelor of Science in Naval Architecture in 1943 at Webb Institute of Naval Architecture. The last years of World War II he designed ships in Boston to support the war effort. In 1945 he was awarded a patent for a design based on his Webb final thesis which was a prototype for container shipping, the "Sectional Ship." After the war he spent what he considered halcyon days working with sixth-generation wooden boat builder, Dana Story, at the famed Story family shipyard in Essex before going on to take a Masters of Science in Naval Architecture at University of Michigan in 1948.

Invited to teach naval architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he met artist and theorist György Kepes, who was teaching visual design in a program that later became MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies. Inspired by Kepes' theories on visual perception and communication, he quit his job teaching to study "dry land architecture," completing his Bachelor of Science in Architecture in 1952. He joked, "I was the only person to come to MIT as a professor and leave as a student." While at MIT, Thiel was also able to work with Kevin Lynch, and was influenced by his studies of the human understanding of urban space. This would eventually lead in 1969 to his co-founding the first interdisciplinary journal focused on person/environment relationships, *Environment and Behavior*, with Gary Winkel and Francis Ventner. Following MIT, Thiel worked briefly at Bauhaus architects Marcel Breuer's office in New York and Walter Gropius' office, The Architects' Collaborative (TAC) in Cambridge before deciding his heart was in teaching and academia.

In 1954, Thiel followed William Wurster, who had been Dean at MIT, to the School of Architecture at UC Berkeley to join the faculty. He worked with noted designer Charles Eames on a new introductory program for design, and was involved in the establishment by Wurster in 1959 of the College of Environmental Design. A non-conformist even at bohemian Berkeley, he refused to wear the then mandatory tie – finally cutting a strip of cloth with a slit for his top button, and wearing this in protest. When Thiel came to the University of Washington in 1961, he built on his experiences from MIT and Berkeley, developing an introductory studio course on design, championing the establishment of the architecture department's woodshop and photography studio, and honing the pedagogical theory which he would later bring to universities around the world.

Japan

Thiel formed a deep relationship with Japan, in particular, through two connections. While at Gropius' office, he met architect and educator Kiyoshi Seike; then at Berkeley he met his wife, artist Midori Kono, who shared his professional interest in the Japanese arts and culture. The confluence of these two important relationships would take him to Japan numerous times over the years, teaching at the Tokyo Institute of Technology and Sapporo School of Design, developing deep and enduring collegial friendships.

Wooden Boat Design

In the mid-1970's, Thiel revisited his naval architecture roots, designing a series of pedal-powered wooden boats, starting with the Dorycycle, progressing through the Skiff-cycle, Aphasia and the Escargot. The latter, with a cabin for sleeping 3-4 people, was inspired by his enthusiasm for sailing the canals of France for two weeks every year from 1997-2010. These trips became iconic for gathering friends, colleagues and students from all over the world for two weeks of sudden immersion with Admiral Thiel in boat-handling, lock-navigating and investigations into the built environment and *esprit* of French village life. His wooden boat designs have been built by enthusiasts from Seattle to Australia to Berlin.

“Retirement”

In his seventies, after unsuccessfully battling forced retirement, Thiel became more involved in civic activism, largely inspired by Victor Steinbrueck, the UW architecture professor who led the campaign to save the Pike Place Market in 1972. Spearheading efforts to humanize the urban environment by creating "pocket parks" wherever possible, and preserving the character of existing neighborhoods, he was granted lifelong free coffee by the Allegro café for his successful efforts to minimize the impact of redevelopment of the church across the alley. He achieved some measure of media notoriety when the 70" salvaged historic Kaplan propeller intended as sculpture for the North Passage Point Park was stolen from his backyard. The thieves abandoned the propeller after a blitz of newspaper and television bulletins about the theft. Until the very end he was working on a community advocacy project to ensure the inclusion of a public plaza as part of the University District Sound Transit station.

Thiel is survived by his wife of 59 years, Midori Kono in Seattle, his son Kenji in Los Angeles, daughters Tamiko in Munich and Kiko in London, his sister Janet Bachman in Florida, and granddaughter, Ravenna in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. His other son, Peter Akira, died in 1978. A memorial celebration of Philip Thiel's life is planned for later this summer. For more information about the memorial celebration, Philip Thiel's life, and donation suggestions (in lieu of flowers), please go to:

www.mission-base.com/philipthiel