



Robert A.M. Stern

**EDITORS' NOTE** Robert A.M. Stern founded Robert A.M. Stern Architects in 1969 and continues to lead the firm as Senior Partner, directing the design of the firm's projects. He is a fellow of the American Institute of Architects and received the AIA New York Chapter's Medal of Honor in 1984 and the Chapter's President's Award in 2001. Stern is the 2011 Driehaus Prize laureate and, in 2008, received the 10th Vincent Scully Prize from the National Building Museum. In 2007, he received both the Athena Award from the Congress for the New Urbanism and the Board of Directors' Honor from the Institute of Classical Architecture and Classical America. Stern has served as Dean of the Yale School of Architecture since 1998. From 1984 to 1988, he was the first director of Columbia's Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture. He is the author of several books, the most recent being *Pedagogy and Place: 100 Years of Architecture Education at Yale*, co-authored with Jimmy Stamp, to be released in April 2016. In 1976, 1980, and 1996, he was among the architects selected to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale, and he served as Chair of the International Jury in 2012. Stern is a graduate of Columbia University and Yale University.

**FIRM BRIEF** Robert A.M. Stern Architects, LLP ([ramsa.com](http://ramsa.com)), is a 320-person firm of architects, interior designers, and supporting staff. Over its 47-year history, the firm has established an international reputation as a leading design firm with wide experience in residential, commercial, and institutional work. As the firm's practice has diversified, its geographical scope has broadened to include projects in Europe, Asia, South America, and throughout the United States. The firm maintains an attention to detail and commitment to design quality, which has earned it international recognition, and numerous awards and citations for design excellence, including National Honor Awards of the American Institute of Architects, and a lengthening list of repeat clients. Currently, the firm has projects underway in 23 states as well as in Canada, Peru, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Russia, Taiwan, and China.

# The Robert A.M. Stern Architects Approach

An Interview with Robert A.M. Stern,  
Founder and Senior Partner, Robert A.M. Stern Architects

**Looking at the leadership this firm has consistently displayed, what is it that has made it so special?**

The firm is a partnership composed of many of the people who have worked with me for decades – some since they were my students. We've evolved together and they accept my leadership; I in turn accept that my partners and so many others make enormous contributions to the work. What is the point of hiring people as good as me? I always want to be surrounded by people who are better than I am.

**Is it important that the next generation understands the value of pencil and paper or has it changed?**

It's very important that younger architects include in their training and way of thinking the role of hand-drawing in designing buildings.

I am alarmed by the loss of connection between the hand and the eye and the brain – there is no more powerful connection in the design process. At Yale, hand-drawing courses are required. We also offer a seminar in Rome, which takes students to this great center of Western architectural culture to draw buildings and public spaces.

I regret that some of my younger colleagues in the profession believe that everything can be done well on the computer. A computer computes; it doesn't see.

I would love to know that we have it right at Yale, but the computer is a very seductive tool. Of course, here in my professional office we have enormous resources for computation and excellent people who deal with IT – but we continue to draw by hand as we design, working back and forth with the computers, and we make physical models. We use digital means to elaborate our ideas, but we use traditional methodologies to establish our design concepts.

**Are there certain characteristics that identify a Robert A.M. Stern building?**

We try to make buildings that are specific to their location. We do not seek to be *auteur*-architects but, on the other hand, people do appreciate something that could be called the Robert Stern approach. It's my belief that a building should participate in a conversation across time with its neighbors. Not every new building needs to slap you in the face.

If there is one overarching design principle beyond how a building fits in, it is how a building unfolds as you move through it. This

idea was drilled into me by Philip Johnson, but it has a long history and was at the core of the beaux arts system of education, the best ever devised.

**Do you equate architecture with painting a portrait?**

Many architects specialize in autobiography or self-portraiture; their buildings are all about them. This afflicts architects at even the highest levels.

In this office, we try to tailor our buildings to their physical settings and to the connections with the larger culture of architecture as a whole – our buildings attempt to climb on the shoulders of what went before, rather than pour calumny on the past. We solve functional problems as well as anybody, but we don't want to base a building on functionalism because uses will change over time – we want each new building to have an enduring cultural value and to be adaptable.

Our buildings are biographies of places, of institutions. They grow out of time-honored typologies. For instance, what is a library? This is one of the most vexing questions in contemporary design, as the functions of libraries are changing dramatically in the face of digital communication. People are doing far more on the keyboard. Still, libraries are packed with people, so how much is the library as a building type really changing? People still want to sit in a wonderful room, bathed in light, to do their reading and writing and daydreaming amidst other people. That's why Starbucks is successful – to put a communal table in a coffee shop is to bring people together. Of course, a library should be much more than a Starbucks. It should have grand scale; it should be a public place that takes one away from the ordinary settings of daily life, that lifts the spirit.

**Does every building for you have to be high-profile? Is that your sweet spot?**

For every project we take on, we try to do our very best. We take on projects that are modest in size provided we have a sympathetic client and enough money so that their and our "big" ideas can be well executed.

I never turn down any project unless the client seems difficult to work with, or if the budget doesn't match their appetite. There is honest – and important – work to be done designing modest buildings. Not every building by a high-profile architect needs to be a self-referential icon.

I fight to make buildings that are part of the scene in which they're located. It's an impulse that has become an obsession with me and my partners, and it's a very important thing to do. In doing this, we sometimes find ourselves swimming against the tide. For example, some universities think their campuses are sculpture museums, with each building representing a different moment and style. As a result, what could be an orderly community

of buildings becomes complete chaos. An architectural zoo is not a very high order of community.

**Is there an appreciation today of the impact that architecture truly has on emotion and productivity?**

There is a lot of interest in how people work in offices, in particular.

Natural light and fresh air are now getting the recognition they deserve. Flexible interior plans, which allow people to work individually or in groups, are the order of the day, but can get out of control. However, the impulse to give people more individuality or allow them to realize their individuality as part of their work process is correct.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the struggle was to make every building as much like Mies van der Rohe's Seagram building as possible. Today, we allow ourselves more variety; stylistic freedom is the watchword of our post-modern era. But freedom is not the same as incivility. I believe freedom entails a certain civility principally measured in the way a building addresses the public realm.

It took a long time for the development community to recognize how important buildings are to the life of a city, especially how buildings shape and enliven streets by their design and by the way they provide the settings for the services that create lively streets. The fact that businesspeople have begun to act on this understanding helps to explain why people once again want to live and work in cities. Historically, only the institutions of state or religion or people of great wealth regarded architecture as important. Now developers also see this to be the case – and given that developers are the most powerful agents of physical change in most cities, this is crucial.

**Are you surprised to see the type of life in these cities-within-cities that are being built in New York City?**

Take the High Line as a case in point. It has brought about amazing things – I'm proud to have been a very early supporter of it. My contribution was not much in the way of cash, but I was able to make a few well-chosen telephone calls that helped get some of the movers and shakers interested.

Now the High Line is such a success that I'm concerned about the goose that lays the golden egg – sometimes a place can be killed by its success.

When Amanda Burden was Mayor Bloomberg's planning commissioner, she did a great job of steering development along the High Line. It remains to be seen what will happen in the current administration there and elsewhere in the city. Most of Mayor de Blasio's initiatives are well intentioned socially, but it's up to architects and developers to give those social intentions physical form.

**As you grow and take on more projects, is it harder to be as deeply engaged personally?**

My partners help not only with design but also largely relieve me of day-to-day operations.

The irony is that when I became the Dean at Yale in 1998, I found myself doing things in New Haven that I had never done in the office – dealing with crises of people having meltdowns, budgets that would go up and down, and so on. So I can be good at administration – and even enjoy it.

But when I've been in the office at any period in my career, my focus has been and still is on initiating designs, meeting with clients, trying to listen to what they want, steering them a little, and nudging them to reach a bit higher.

My partners and I work together on each project. We have a studio system. The partners have studios and teams assembled for each new commission. I meet regularly with teams to review whether they are staying on track or hitting a wall I can help them steer around.

Do I go to the site to oversee construction? I closely monitor progress through photography, but I'm not out there supervising things in the field. Near the end of a project, I try to be on site a lot – some say too much – fussing over the final details.

**How important is the concept of collaboration in your work?**

From day one, collaboration has been extremely important to us in terms of working with key people in other disciplines. We are constantly learning from our collaborators.

**You're known to enjoy seeing people grow and investing in them. What led to this?**

We have a tradition whereby, at a certain point, when one of our projects is very long in gestation or when a certain significant milestone is reached, we have a dinner with our in-house design team. I enjoy these events; they're relaxed, irreverent, and fun because our design staff are not only hard working and talented, but they're interesting people too – and smart.

**How important is it that the next generation takes time to really learn their craft before advancing?**

Don't do what I did – I never worked for an architect. But I quickly joined a partnership with John Hagmann, a fellow Yale student, who knew much more about how to run an office than I, who knew nothing; he even had to show me how to fold drawings for compact storage. But I knew how to coax a client and to push the envelope of design.

Today, things are much more complex – so I recommend that graduating architects work for established firms where they can learn and get paid for it. ●



*Comcast Center, the tallest building in Philadelphia, designed by Robert A. M. Stern Architects*