The Ralph Rapson Collection: 1935-1954

(1935-1954)
5 linear ft.

Acquisition Number: 2012-01

Acquisition: Gift of Rip Rapson.

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BIOGRAPHY

Ralph Rapson was born on September 13, 1914, in Alma, Michigan, son of Mabel Nickel Rapson, a homemaker and civic volunteer, and Frank Thomas Rapson, an electrical engineer. Studying mechanical drawing in high school to prepare himself as an artist, he entered Alma College, a liberal arts institution, in 1933.

In 1935, he won a scholarship to the University of Michigan’s College of Architecture. The night before graduation, in 1938, a fire destroyed his work and that of his two colleagues – John Van der Meulen and Pollard. On refusing to reconstruct the material, the dean withheld Rapson’s diploma, which he eventually received ten years later from the new dean, Wells Bennett. The day after graduating, Rapson and John Van der Meulen entered a small project (the 4/16 House) into a competition organized by Architectural Forum magazine, which received an honorable mention and a $50 prize. After being admitted to the Phi Kappa Phi honor society in 1938, Rapson was encouraged to apply for a two-year George G. Booth Traveling Fellowship in Architecture. Although he was not awarded the fellowship, his drawing impressed Eliel Saarinen, who offered Rapson a scholarship to attend Cranbrook Academy of Art that fall. There he pursued graduate studies in architecture and urban planning for two years.

Prior to commencing the semester, Rapson set up his studio and was invited to help Saarinen with a planning project, which was to provide an analysis of the site for a new State Capitol complex in Lansing, Michigan. Following this experience, Rapson decided to focus more on architecture than planning. Between 1938 and 1942, as part of his study, Rapson contributed designs and drawings and built models for various projects and competitions with which Saarinen and his associates were engaged.

As part of the training philosophy at Cranbrook, Rapson was exposed to many diverse disciplines including weaving, sculpture, metalwork, painting, photography, and graphics. One of Rapson’s submissions to the Museum of Modern Art’s Competition for Organic Design later became known as the Rapson Rapid Rocker, and lead to a new phase in his career. Hans Knoll asked Rapson to send some designs for outdoor chairs and Rapson became the first Cranbrook-trained designer to design for Knoll.

Between 1940 and 1942, Rapson practiced with the firms ‘Saarinen and Saarinen’ and ‘Saarinen, Swanson, and Saarinen’ before moving to Chicago for a teaching position as Head of the Architectural Curriculum at the Institute of Design. Simultaneously, he practiced architecture with two Chicago firms before establishing the ‘Ralph Rapson Architect’ firm between 1942-1954. He and his firm relocated to Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1946 and he became Assistant Professor at the School of Architecture and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, teaching alongside Finnish architect Alvar Aalto.
In 1951, Rapson was hired by the U.S. State Department to design a series of American embassies in Western Europe with architect John Van der Meulen. Rapson served as the Dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Minnesota from 1954-1984. He continued to work in private practice in Minneapolis until his death in 2008.

**SCOPE AND CONTENT**

The Ralph Rapson Papers are organized into the following series: **Biographical, Teaching, Competitions, Projects, Research, Photographs, Negatives, and Oversize.**

The **Biographical** series is very small and does not contain much material relative to Rapson’s early life, however, materials relative to his education are contained here.

The **Teaching** series contains correspondence, coursework materials and publications relevant to Rapson’s experiences in Boston and Chicago. They are arranged alphabetically, then chronologically.

**Competitions** is a series which primarily contains materials about the various competitions that Rapson entered from 1935-1954. The bulk of this series is secondary source materials – pre-competition announcements and post-competition publications. The series is arranged chronologically.

The **Projects** series includes residences, institutional projects and embassies. It is also alphabetically and covers 1938-1954. Of note is the correspondence with various clients, especially for projects that were not built and are heretofore unknown.

The **Research** series has been artificially arranged alphabetically by subject. While most of these secondary source materials can be found in original publications in research/university libraries (including Cranbrook Academy of Art Library), they remain part of this collection as they reflect Rapson’s interests and thought processes regarding architecture, materials use, and design. The researcher will find distinct connections by utilizing this series in conjunction with project files, photographs, and architectural drawings.

**Photographs** includes reproduction photographs of architectural drawings – most of which are in the collection; some of which were retained by family members.

The bulk of the **Negatives** series are copy negatives which were made by Rapson and others, in large part to illustrate the publication *Ralph Rapson: Sixty Years of Modern Design.*

The **Oversize** series contains a copy of *arts and architecture* from August 1945, comprising the pages relating to the Case Study House #4 project, and oversize prints of drawings.
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8. General, Ephemera, 1945-1953
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11. Notes and Outlines, ca. 1980s
12. Rapson, Inc. – Financial, 1951-1953
15. University of Michigan, Transcript

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17. Institute of Design (Chicago), Course Curricula, 1945-1948
18. Institute of Design (Chicago), Illinois Architectural Exams, 1941-1948
19. Institute of Design (Chicago), Lecture Series - The City: Organism and Artifact, 1944
20. MIT, Correspondence, 1950-1952
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3. Better Chicago: Administrative and Cultural Center, 1945
4. Blueprints for Tomorrow, 1944-1945
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7. Designs for Postwar Living, 1943
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13. Insulux Glass Block Competition No. 1, Jun-Jul 1939
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6. Centerline Defense Housing, 1941
7. Crow Island School, 1939
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9. Eastgate Apartments, Clippings
10. Eastgate Apartments, Correspondence, 1947-1949, 1952
11. Eastgate Apartments, Meeting Minutes, 1947-1949
12. Eastgate Apartments, Publications
13. Eastgate Apartments, Reports, 1947-1948
14. Embassies—Athens, ca.1952
15. Embassies—Bremen, ca.1951
17. Embassies—Copenhagen, Clippings, 1954
18. Embassies, General Notes
19. Embassies, General Publication
20. Embassies—The Hague, 1951
22. Embassies—Le Havre, Specifications, 1953
23. Embassies—Madrid, 1953
25. Embassies, Paris (Neuilly/Boulogne), Fact Sheets

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2. Embassies, Stockholm, Awards, 1955
3. Embassies, Stockholm, Clippings
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10. Gidwitz Residence #1, 1945-1963
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