

PAUL RUDOLPH'S LOUIS MICHEELS HOUSE
16 Minute Man Hill
Westport
Fairfield County
Connecticut

HABS CT-475
CT-475

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HABS
CT-475
(page 1)

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Location: 16 Minute Man Hill, Westport, Fairfield County, Connecticut. The property is 1.4 acres and the UTM coordinates are Zone 18, Easting 638280, Northing 4552340. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Current Owner: Louis J. Micheels.

Significance: The Micheels House is a detached, single-family private residence designed by the architect Paul Rudolph for Dr. and Mrs. Louis J. Micheels. The Micheels House is significant because of the innovative use of forms and materials in its construction and from its association with the groundbreaking work of one of the country's most important modern architects.

Description: The following was originally written for the National Register of Historic Places nomination (2006).

Location and Setting

The Micheels House occupies a gently sloping site on the summit of Minute Man Hill overlooking Compo Beach and Long Island Sound, approximately one-half mile from the center of Westport, Connecticut. The house is situated at the north end of the parcel in order to facilitate automobile access and to take maximum advantage of the site's natural grades and superb views. An in-ground swimming pool is set into the natural grade below the house. The remainder of the parcel is lightly landscaped with a rolling lawn edged by mature trees.

The Micheels House is set in an affluent suburban neighborhood among other high-end single-family homes in a network of public roads and private lanes that conform to the irregular coastal topography. The neighborhood is bordered on the north by Interstate 95 (the main highway connection to New York City along the Connecticut shore) and on the south by Compo Beach (site of a British troop landing during the Revolutionary War) and Long Island Sound. To the west of the neighborhood, the Saugatuck River empties into Long Island Sound. To the east, the wide crescent of Compo Beach leads to Sherwood Island State Park on the shore of the sound. Compo Road is the main north-south artery in the neighborhood, connecting Compo Beach to US Route 1 and Connecticut Route 15 (the Merritt Parkway) at the northern end of Westport.

Layout and Appearance

In designing the Micheels House, architect Paul Rudolph worked closely with Dr. and Mrs. Micheels to merge innovative forms and materials with the inherent natural qualities of the site. The result is a low-lying cantilevered structure with seven interior levels perched lightly on the brow of the hill with an open view south to the islands in Long Island Sound. The house encloses a total of 3,336 square feet of finished space.

The Micheels House is accessed by a winding private road (Minute Man Hill) that begins at South Compo Rd. in Westport near the famous Minuteman statue. The narrow paved road leads up the hill to a simple asphalt driveway that approaches the Micheels House from the west.

The presentation of the Micheels House is carefully staged since it is accessible primarily by private

automobile. The view of the house from the road is limited, revealing only a large garage door at the lower level, a wide stucco wall above, a band of narrow windows and a flat roofline. The landscape views are partially obscured by low stucco walls that run north and west from the garage walls adjacent to the driveway.

The primary entrance to the house is through a gate in the garden wall on the north side which leads to a simple insulated metal entrance door with a glass sidelight. The entrance door opens to an entrance vestibule with steps leading both up and down. Proceeding up the stairs to the main level, the visitor arrives in a high-ceilinged living room with a blond brick fireplace at the east end and a continuous wall of glass with a dramatic view southward over the terraced lawns to Long Island Sound. Stepping out onto the wooden terrace on the south side of the house, one comes to appreciate the simple genius of the structure.

The main elevation of the house faces south across the wide terraced lawn. The building is constructed of a series of intersecting and overlapping planes supported by compound wooden posts and separated by ribbons of glass windows and airy voids. Overall, the house appears to be three stories high, but it is built into the hill so that the lower levels are fully exposed at the east end. Slatted wooden walkways, open terraces, a sheltered patio and an in-ground swimming pool connect the house to the terraced lawn and provide ever-changing angles for the solid planes of the house.

The Micheels House is constructed almost completely of wood with very little steel framing. Laminated wood beams define the major planes of the house and are fitted with metal copings along the top edges and metal vent panels along the bottom. Some of the horizontal beams project off of the building in a position that moderates the high summer sun, but allows full sunlight in winter. The exterior skin of the house is a type of stucco consisting of pebbles of Arctic white quartz embedded in a cementitious matrix against an expanded wire lath that is attached to the wooden beams. The result is complex textural and visual character that changes according to the angle and quality of the light.

The windows of the house are continuous bands and panels of insulated glass interspersed with sliding glass doors. The windows are artfully arranged to provide a negative reflection of the solid horizontal beams and to light the interior spaces in surprising ways. While most of the windows on the primary (south) elevation are large and expansive, those on the three secondary elevations tend to be narrow ribbons that run along the top, bottom, or sides of the walls in order to light the interior spaces while still preserving privacy. The varying window configurations included fixed panes, casements, sliders and awning windows.

The rooflines of the house are all flat, but at different levels relating to the horizontal distribution of space. The roofs were originally covered with an asbestos-containing material over plywood sheathing. Storm drains are incorporated in each roof level to carry the water away from the house.

On the east elevation, the house is fully detached from the hillside and supported by wooden columns on a concrete patio. The glass sliding doors and large windows of the office and guestroom are visible at the lowest level. The solid horizontal plane of the cantilevered upper floor provides a shelter for the patio area. Mature evergreens and flowering trees line the slope northward.

On the north elevation, the Micheels House is partially concealed by the shallow setback and the numerous border plantings. A concrete walkway connects the north door to the driveway through a narrow gate in the stucco garden wall. The multiple planes and levels of the house loom above a small north lawn, effectively concealing the view southward.

On the west elevation, the large garage doors at grade are sheltered by cantilevered decks and glass-enclosed rooms above. A stucco garden wall adjacent to the driveway leads directly to the south lawn and the full view of the house.

The landscape design is simple and informal. Border plantings of evergreens, deciduous trees and flower beds mimic the natural characteristics of the landscape, while the irregular terraces lead the eye to the sparkling water and clustered islands of Long Island Sound. By locating the house at the north end of the parcel and the pool near the east end, the designer has managed to maintain an open landscape that invites a broad and distant view without immediately noticing the distraction of adjacent houses.

The interior of the Micheels House is organized on seven partial levels. The largest room is the main living room in the center of the house. From the high-ceiling space flooded with natural light, one can proceed east on the same level to the master bathroom and bedroom. One level higher to the west is the dining room, kitchen and additional bedrooms. One level lower to the east is the guest suite (complete with Murphy bed in the closet) that Dr. Micheels used as his office. At the lower level on the west end is the garage (large enough to dry sails) and the mechanical room.

The interior finishes throughout the house are simple, consisting primarily of white-painted sheetrock walls and ceilings. The floors are set with large square clay tiles in the vestibule, basement, kitchen and bathrooms, but are carpeted in most other rooms. The rooms and corridors are lit by recessed electric can fixtures with rotating baffles. All the rooms are equipped with plentiful storage in the form of closets, open shelves, multiple drawers and hinged bins with recessed steel pulls. The only decorative finishes are the blond brick hearth of the fireplace at the east end of the living room and the ocean-blue ceramic tile squares in the walls of the master bathroom.

Current Condition

Until 2006, the Micheels House was continuously occupied and meticulously maintained by the original owners. Periodic repairs included replacement of some of the 3x6 Norwegian fir posts that had developed wood rot and replacement of some of the insulated glass panes that tended to fog up. Good site drainage and good natural ventilation have helped to prevent any significant damage to the structure while it was occupied.

The view of Long Island Sound, which was a crucial element in the design of the house, has been slightly compromised by a large residence built directly south of the Micheels House in the 1990s. Fortunately, the bordering trees partially conceal the new house and the vista of Long Island Sound is still visible from the upper terraces.

Since the decision to sell the house for demolition in November 2006, the property has been vacant and poorly protected. In anticipation of demolition, the prospective buyer has already removed the roof covering, pulled off some of the wooden walkways and bulldozed the stucco garden walls adjacent to the garage. Some of the insulated glass windows have been smashed. Interior carpeting, floors and walls have been damaged by water penetration through the unprotected roof, particularly in the living room on the main level. There have been reports of individuals removing interior elements from the house for reuse in other locations.

Despite recent damage, the Micheels House is still largely intact and could be easily restored. The design of the house is well preserved, yet the future of the house is in doubt.

Architect: Paul M. Rudolph (1918-97).

The following excerpt is from the National Register of Historic Places nomination (2006).

Architect Michael Glynn has summarized the career of Paul Rudolph as one of America's most significant modern architects:

Paul Marvin Rudolph was born in 1918 in Elkton, Kentucky. He had an unconventional upbringing as a result of his father, a Methodist minister, leading an itinerant life following the principles of his church. Paul spent most of his childhood in a succession of schools and colleges in the Southern states, culminating in five years spent at the Alabama Polytechnic Institute where he studied from 1935 until 1940. Following a year of working in an architectural office in Birmingham, Alabama, he entered the Harvard Graduate School of Design in 1941 in the company of his fellow students, Philip Johnson, Ulrich Franzen, I.M. Pei, John Johansen and others who were to later attain fame. He was drafted into the navy in 1942; from 1943 until his discharge in 1946, he was officer-in-charge of ship construction at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Returning to Harvard after his discharge, he earned his masters degree in 1947 under Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus movement in architecture.

Rudolph's response to Walter Gropius' architectural pedagogy at Harvard presaged his later career as an individualist, a loner, a maverick – much the same in some ways as Frank Lloyd Wright. Rudolph became disenchanted with the emphasis placed by Gropius on collaboration, teamwork, and the rationalization of the design process. He was more influenced by Wright than by Harvard; indeed Wright's architectural themes and ideas reverberate in much of Rudolph's buildings and urban design right to the end of his life.

After Harvard, Rudolph settled in Sarasota, Florida where he practiced in partnership with Ralph Twitchell, an architect thirty years his senior. Immediately prior to commencing this practice, he spent time in Europe on a foreign travel scholarship. He returned profoundly influenced by European towns and cities, particularly those he visited in Italy. This experience further convinced him that Gropius' delegation of the design of urban fabric to planners rather than to architects was a gross dereliction. The inventive, minimal vacation houses he built in the Sarasota vicinity in the late 1940s and through the 1950s led to critical acclaim quickly followed by national attention in the popular press.

The Rudolph-Twitchell partnership ended in 1952 and from then onward Rudolph practiced alone, even when he had a burgeoning practice that would have led most architects to seek some sort of partnership or corporate organization. Wellesley College's Jewett Arts Center was Rudolph's first major commission. Riverview High School in Sarasota and the Sarasota Senior High School followed on the heels of the Wellesley project. In 1957-58 he designed Yale's Greeley Memorial Laboratory. And in the autumn of 1957 he was offered the chairmanship of Yale's School of Architecture; he held that position from 1958 to 1965. Commissions for the Yale Art and Architecture Building, Married Students' Housing at Yale, the Temple Street Parking Garage in New Haven and a plethora of other important commissions, including the immense Boston Government Service Center, soon followed. The high tide of Rudolph's creativity occurred in the 1960s through the 1970s.

In the mature phase of his career, commissions for individual houses were taken selectively. Thus the relatively small number of houses from this period heightens their individual significance. Residential commissions allowed Rudolph the freedom to explore ideas unencumbered by institutional budgets and weighty programs. His houses often fulfill the poetic power expressed in his extraordinary drawings: two-dimensional surfaces orchestrating architectural space, the interpenetration of architectural masses, irregular silhouettes, the dynamism of contained space released to the land's horizon. The Micheel's house in Westport, Connecticut (1972), which followed on the heels of the huge Sid Bass house in Fort Worth, is a tour de force in exploring these themes.

As Sybil Moholy-Nagy put it in her essay published in the *Architecture of Paul Rudolph* (Praeger, 1970, Moholy-Nagy and Gerhard Schwab, p. 16): "The sheer volume of

accomplishment, and the identification with every type of building, from villas to urban centers, now appears to have been a violent struggle for self-assertion against the encroachments of administrative anonymity.”

Now, ten years after Rudolph's death, both the architectural profession and scholars are looking at Rudolph's work with renewed interest and fresh eyes - and fresh analysis. His work is overwhelmingly rich and idiosyncratic – perhaps in the uniquely American spirit of personal striving and romanticism. The reassessment of his life and work is just beginning. When it is completed, it may turn out that he will be judged to be -along with Louis Kahn and one or two other figures – the most important architect of the second half of the 20th century.

Louis Micheels

The life of Dr. Louis Micheels, who commissioned Paul Rudolph to design the Westport house, is significant in its own right and achingly expressive of the major themes of 20th century modernism.

Louis J. Micheels was born in the Netherlands in 1917 and pursued a career in psychiatry and psychoanalysis. As a Jew, he was a victim of German anti-Semitism and Nazi totalitarianism. He was transported to Auschwitz where he was imprisoned for two years (1944-45) and then to Dachau. He survived the death camps and moved to America where he enjoyed a career as a Professor of Psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine. He garnered widespread acclaim for his autobiographical publication, Doctor #117641: A Holocaust Memoir (Yale University Press, 1989).

The house that Dr. Micheels and his wife commissioned Paul Rudolph to design in Westport represents the experimental freedom and underlying prosperity of the post-World War II era in America. The house fits beautifully into the landscape providing wide views of Long Island Sound from every room and every level. The fluid interior floor plan and the plethora of built-in storage (closets, shelves, bins and drawers) are the architect's sympathetic and inspired response to the client's stated needs.

The Micheels family lived in the 1972 Rudolph-designed house for more than thirty years and raised their children there. Their own advancing age and a desire to reside closer to their grown children finally persuaded Dr. & Mrs. Micheels to sell the house in 2006. Speaking by telephone from his new residence in suburban Boston, Dr. Micheels told an interviewer that he never was unhappy with the house. Like any property, the Rudolph-designed house required periodic maintenance and repairs, but the house was cool in the summer, warm in the winter and comfortable year round. (Interview with Gregory Farmer, Dec. 21, 2006.)

Architectural Significance

The Micheels House designed by Paul Rudolph in 1972 combines form, material, function in a masterful fashion. The cantilevered horizontal design, the careful interplay of voids and solids and the dynamic multi-level interior floor plan represent the best of Paul Rudolph's creative explorations.

The essential character of the Micheels House was summarized by Roberto de Alba in *Paul Rudolph: The Late Work* (2003).

One of Louis Micheels's requests at the beginning of the design process was a view of the Long Island Sound from every room in the house. Stretching from east to west in its linear configuration, the Micheels Residence enjoys a southern exposure that favors the prevailing breezes and a splendid view of the sound. With the house's design, Rudolph sought to express a sense of motion using a composition of parallel planes and structural members that appear to slide by one another,

overlapping and interlocking at right angles. The concept of motion is expressed in the way spaces plug into one another with overlapping parallel walls and in the way the walls and structural members physically connect to one another, partially interlocking and continuing past the intersection.

The house extends horizontally from west to east as the site drops away in rolling terraces, so that the west end is firmly resting on the ground while the east end projects over it, supported by slender four-post columns. Every element of the composition reinforces the strong linear character of the house.

As in other houses designed by Rudolph, the approaching visitor encounters a nearly blind façade. By contrast, the opposite façade opens to the view of Long Island Sound with three different outdoor decks and large glazed areas that let in the southern light. Flat box beams, hung from supporting beams, offer protection from the high sun. The three main floors of the house unfold into seven levels of living spaces: the sail drying room in the basement, the living room, dining room, kitchen and master bedroom suite on the main level and two bedrooms and a library on the third floor. The exterior finish is exposed concrete aggregate, and the interior is smooth plaster. The house is painted white inside and out.

Like many experimental designs, the Micheels House had some inherent flaws that became more apparent over time. The built-in drainage systems on the flat roofs clogged with ice in the winter and required heating coils. Some of the insulated glass window panes fogged up as the seals aged. Seasonal flexing of the wooden structural members resulted in surface cracks and moisture penetration in the stucco skin. These were all minor inconveniences that did not detract from the superb conception of the house as a whole.

Historical Context: This section was originally written for the National Register of Historic Places nomination (2006).

The development of Westport as a commuter suburb represents the dominant pattern of 20th century development in major American metropolitan areas. Located only 50 miles from downtown Manhattan and with excellent commuter rail and highway connections, the old waterfront community of Westport, Connecticut witnessed a surge in suburban development in the decades after World War II. Through zoning and land use planning, the community's traditional character was largely preserved even as the population grew from 11,667 in 1950, to 20,955 in 1960. The current population of 25,749 (Federal 2000 census) marks a slight decline from the 1970 peak of 27,318.

The Town of Westport encompasses a land area of 22.4 square miles with a density of 1,150 people per square mile. The community is primarily residential with the largest local employers being the Westport School District (752 employees), the Town of Westport municipal government (297 employees), the Hall-Brooke Foundation health facility (292 employees) and the Ryan Partnership marketing consultant firm (250 employees). The non-profit Save the Children Foundation and the Westport/Wilton YMCA together employ another 430 people. Most of Westport's residents are employed in the metro New York area with significant numbers involved in professional services (16.3% of the local labor force), finance, insurance and real estate (14.1%) and retail trade (13.0%).

Early History

Colonial settlement along the Saugatuck River in what is now Westport began in 1639 with settlers from both Connecticut and New Amsterdam (New York). Compo Beach on Long Island Sound was the site of a British troop landing during the Revolutionary War, part of a foray by Major-General William Tryon to destroy the rebel arsenal in Danbury (CT) in 1777. The British troops were attacked from behind by local Minutemen

from Westport and surrounding communities.

In the early 19th century, Westport was one of a series of small Connecticut shore towns supported primarily by coastal shipping and trade with some local manufacturing. It was incorporated as a separate town in 1835 with land taken from the adjacent towns of Fairfield, Weston and Norwalk.

Transportation improvements supported the growth of Westport, beginning with the establishment of the Post Road (US Route 1) through Saugatuck in 1807. The railroad connection to New York began operation in 1842, providing faster market transport for local agricultural products. During the Civil War, Westport was the leading commercial supplier of onions to the Union Army.

The automobile offered mobility and independence to affluent consumers in the early 20th century and strengthened Westport's links to the New York metropolitan area. Westport's attractive shoreline and clean air made it a favored destination for summer homes. Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald vacationed in Westport in the 1920s. The Vanderbilt family was among the first to build a large summer cottage in the community. (The Vanderbilt estate is now the Greens Farms Academy, a private school.) The Westport Country Playhouse was established in 1930 and helped strengthen the community's status as an artist colony and cultural retreat.

Modern Suburb

The opening of the Merritt Turnpike (Connecticut Route 15) in 1938 marked the beginning of modern suburban development along the Connecticut shore and marked the beginning of Westport's transformation from a summer artist colony to a year-round bedroom community. By 1958 when the Connecticut Turnpike (Interstate 95) opened, Westport's suburban character was well established. Westport's suburban appeal was celebrated on television (*I Love Lucy* in the 1950s and *Bewitched* in the 1960s) and in popular fiction (Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives*, 1972).

The Micheels House, designed by Paul Rudolph in 1972, is a culmination and masterful expression of Westport's modern suburban development. Unlike the suburban tract houses that exist in many communities, the Micheels House is an architect-designed masterpiece resulting from the fruitful collaboration of architect and client. With its multiple levels and fluid floor plan, the Micheels House expresses the best in modern residential design. Its location on the brow of the hill with a view across a terraced lawn to Long Island Sound blends the house perfectly with the grade of the local landscape. The subtle in-ground pool near the lowest level of the house offers a private indulgence without detracting from the natural setting.

Westport's suburban growth peaked in the 1980s when virtually all the buildable land in the community had been developed. High land values, a quality school system and strong zoning preserved Westport's character as an affluent suburb of New York City. In the 2000 Federal census, the town's median household income was \$125,872 against a median statewide (Connecticut) household income of \$58,371 and a national median household income of \$46,192 (Source: US Census Bureau).

Since the 1990s, the demands of the local real estate market and the continuing increase in land values have led to a "tear-down" trend in Westport. With very little open land available for development, the value of existing lots has increased much faster than the value of the often modest houses now standing. The result is a growing pressure to purchase an existing property in order to tear down the existing building and replace it with a larger residence. The "tear-down" trend has two predictable outcomes: 1) the loss of scale and character in established neighborhoods and 2) the rush to demolish significant architectural treasures like the Micheels House.

Historian:

Adapted from the NRHP nomination prepared by Gregory Farmer and the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, with Paul Loether (then of the CT SHPO), 2006; with contributions by Todd Levine, Architectural Historian, Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, 2010.