

Thomas
Colbert
1954—
2015





TOM COLBERT'S LIFE FOLLOWED A PATH FROM New Orleans, where he was born, to New York, where he spent time as a child; to Princeton, New Jersey, and Cambridge, England, as an architecture student; to Dublin as a young professional, College Station as a teacher, and finally Houston, where he became an esteemed professional, colleague, educator, and friend. Tom died of stomach cancer on August 21, 2015, and he is sorely missed by his family and friends.

Tom received an A.B. in Architecture and Urban Planning from Princeton University in 1976 and an Honors Diploma in Architecture from Cambridge University in 1978. He arrived at the University of Houston in 1985 and taught across the undergraduate and graduate programs. Over the years he served as Assistant to the Dean, Coordinator of third-year and fifth-year undergraduate design studios, and Director of Graduate Studies for more than a decade. His devotion to architectural education, the profession, and the discipline of architecture was recognized in 2014 when he was honored as "Educator of the Year" by the American Institute of Architects, Houston. Tom believed in opening doors and broadening horizons wherever possible. He single-handedly developed exchange programs with schools of architecture in Paris and Moscow and in 1990 he curated an exhibition of the Parisian Grand Architectural Projects at the College of Architecture. Visitors included the French president Francois Mitterrand. Tom had a wide variety of interests, and he engaged in meaningful causes that ranged from prison conditions, to documentation of the Upper Texas Coast via aerial photographs, to natural disaster prevention.

Tom maintained a passion for the lively culture and the seductive decrepitude of his native New Orleans. Mardi Gras was always an occasion for celebration and Cajun cuisine. Tom was devastated by the news that the levees had broken during Hurricane Katrina and the damage it meant for the city and his own architect father's notable modern house. That emotion was quickly translated to Houston's benefit. Since similar or even worse damage could occur in the Houston/Galveston area, Tom became heavily involved in coastal planning. He documented, he obtained grants, he organized symposia, he informed, he planned, he worked with others — locally as well as with universities in Louisiana, Buenos Aires, and Delft. He participated in the SSPEED Center (Severe Storm Prediction, Education, and Evacuation from Disasters), and he was chair of the AIA Houston Urban Design Committee. A frequent contributor to *Cite* and editorial committee chair, he guest-edited special issues on hurricanes, Chinese cities, and the environment. Tom had

a vision and a purpose: to protect the Houston area and other coastal communities from flooding and tidal surge and avoid destruction such as that caused by Katrina — all while creating urban amenities and making the area more attractive.

Tom had the fortunate opportunity to spend much of the summer of 2014 in New Orleans enjoying the city. Before returning to Houston he headed off to the International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennale where University of Houston College of Architecture students displayed work inspired by his research. He then continued on to the International Architecture Biennial Rotterdam as an invited speaker and presented "New Perspectives for the Galveston Bay."

Tom was a voice of reason. He was patient. He was humble. He was a calm yet tenacious force as a teacher, an architect, an urbanist, an activist, and as an artist. Tom's life as an artist, however, was unknown to even many of the people who knew him well. He finally displayed a small fraction of the drawings he did over several decades in an exhibition at the Architecture Center Houston from May to August 2015. Tom's drawings are truly stunning. They are at the same time very simple and very complex works of free-hand lines on paper. They are a patient, playful and sophisticated weaving of lines — a mysterious calligraphy with a message of connectivity. Tom's drawings are about fundamentals, but also about the endless. Some evoke the constellations of a night sky. They surely reveal something of the man who made them.

One of the walls in Tom's hospice room was a sort of collage his family made that was composed of photographs and colorful drawings by his grandchildren and cards and notes and letters he received from friends and colleagues and students. The notes were heartwarming, and they expressed affection and love and gratitude. That makeshift wall began to tell the story of a life. What was also impressive about the notes, beyond their content, is that they were handwritten — something rare in our digital age. They showed the same humanity that Tom sought in his drawings, his work, and his life. When Tom talked about his drawings he said that "each line is a tracing of a personal history, a dance that creates a point of connection between author and viewer." Tom made many connections with many people in many ways. He made a mark, and he has left a great deal to remember him by.

An exhibition of Tom Colbert's drawings will be in the Joseph Mashburn Gallery at the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture and Design March 29 to April 21. Books about William Stern and Colbert's exploration of art and architecture will be for sale. ●