



Photo provided by KING'S WAY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The History of Springfield Design

Since World War II, a handful of names have had tremendous impact on the local skyline

by *Jeremy Elwood* · jelwood@sbj.net

While the recent controversy over proposed changes to Park Central Square has put the spotlight on the work of nationally renowned designer Lawrence Halprin, industry leaders say much of Springfield's significant architecture traces its roots to local architects.

Richard Stahl, Eugene Johnson, Harold Casey, A.C. "Deac" Esterly and Gene Butler are among those credited with shaping Springfield architecture since the end of World War II, and their fingerprints can be seen in the buildings they designed and the designers they trained.

- A.C. Esterly founded his practice in 1947. Though he died in 1988, his firm remains today as Esterly, Schneider & Associates Inc., which formed in 1985. Esterly's mark can still be felt in the projects he designed – including the McDaniel Building, the Professional Building and numerous area school and hospital projects.
- Richard Stahl opened his office in 1948 and designed a long list of buildings, ranging from Trinity Lutheran Church and King's Way United Methodist Church to Drury University's Breech School of Business to the original Parkview High School.
- Harold Casey joined the world of professional architects in 1945; in addition to designing projects that include the Springfield Art Museum, Hickory Hills Elementary, numerous fire stations and most of the original dormitories at Missouri State University,

he worked to renovate numerous classical buildings downtown including the Holland Building, where he kept his office for most of his career.

- Though Eugene Johnson moved to California several years ago, his body of work is largely dominated by the Assemblies of God, for which he designed several facilities, including the Gospel Publishing House building on Boonville Avenue.
- Gene Butler did more work in other parts of the region than in Springfield, but his firm laid the groundwork for several city design studios, including his son's startup, Butler, Rosenbury & Partners Inc.

The sanctuary at King's Way United Methodist Church is a recognizable design of influential Springfield architect Richard Stahl.



Allen Casey followed in his father's center city footsteps.

The legacies

Perhaps more influential than the work of these design pioneers is the list of professionals who point to them as mentors and inspiration.

"I would say 90 percent of the architects of this generation were spawned out of Stahl and Esterly," said Alan Bates of Bates & Associates Architects.

Bates should know – he got into the architecture business following in the footsteps of his father, Warren Bates, who went to work for Esterly in 1959 after graduating from the University of Kansas.

The list of architects who worked for Johnson includes Ed Waters and Bob Marshall of Marshall-Waters-Woody Associates Inc. and Windsor Warren of Warren & Goodin Inc. Architects-Engineers.

Casey, who died in 1990, added his son, Allen, to Casey & Associates Inc., which now does business as Casey Architecture, in 1974. The younger Casey has continued his father's efforts to rebuild downtown, having served as president of the Downtown Springfield Association as well

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as current president of Urban Districts Alliance.

The Butlers are another father-and-son duo. Gene Butler started his firm in Springfield in 1953, and it became a haven for several well-known names, including Phil Smith, most recently of JPS & Associates, and Joe Larose of Larose & Schober Engineering.

"I got to visit with a lot of his contemporaries," said Butler's son, Geoffrey Butler, who started working for Butler & Associates in high school before entering college in 1971. "It's been interesting to come back and work with those guys and talk about the impact he had."

Butler ended up starting his own firm after his father died in the late 1970s at age 42.

Butler, Rosenbury & Partners is now the largest architecture firm in Springfield, according to Springfield Business Journal research. The influence of that firm – and, by extension, of Gene Butler – continues, as many designers who once worked for BRP have gone on to start firms including Duke Wells Architecture and H Design Group.

The impact of Stahl

But Stahl, who died in 2001, was perhaps the biggest influence on the current generation of designers.

His firm produced, among others, Galen Pellham, who went on to co-found what is now Pellham Phillips Architects & Engineers; Missouri State University architect and Director of Campus Planning Doug

Sampson; and Hood-Rich Architects and Engineers co-founder Jack Hood.

Jack Taylor, Stahl's partner for nearly 20 years, said Stahl was an innovator in south-west Missouri.

"He introduced contemporary architecture to Springfield," Taylor said. "Most of the architecture prior to his start dealt with pretty much what had been done before and copies of that."

Stahl also was the guiding influence on his granddaughter, Jennifer Wilson, who now has her own eponymous Springfield firm. Wilson said she's not surprised by all the connections between architects locally, both through Stahl's office and others.

"The architecture community is a pretty small family," said Wilson, who worked for Butler, Rosenbury & Partners for 12 years before striking out on her own in January. "Everybody has worked with everybody at some point in their career."

The styles

While seeing the effect of these local masters is not difficult, finding a distinctive style among them is tougher.

Most of the buildings built before the World War II period, according to Alan Bates, fell into the classic and neoclassic schools. Many of the historic buildings on Park Central Square are examples.

"Then it moved into this contemporary modernism, straight out of Chicago," Bates said. "The glass and steel-frame buildings

Professional Affiliation

Harold Casey's influence on the architecture industry expands beyond Springfield.

He was part of a group that founded the Missouri Association of Registered Architects in 1953, and later founded the National Association of Registered Architects.

"At the time, the American Institute of Architects was an entity for any and all architects," Allen Casey said, noting that his father served as president of both organizations.

"The concern was to have a group strictly for registered architects. NARA has since dissolved, when the AIA took on a role that dealt with that. That's what they had hoped for – that the AIA would take on the concerns of registered architects."

came out of the fires of Chicago. That's what they all were following back then."

Allen Casey said his father's style was not so much in the look of his buildings as it was in the purpose of his work.

"One thing I picked up from him was the community design idea," said Casey, who owns and occupies the same Holland Building where his father worked for most of his career. "He took me around and introduced me to everyone he could think of, helped me get acquainted with civic leaders. I got very involved in center city activities, as he had been."

Finding a particular style is further

Home Work

While architects aren't required for single-family home designs, two notable names in home design came up in SBJ's conversations on the history of Springfield architecture.

Springfieldian Don Russell and Arkansas native E. Fay Jones both designed numerous area homes. The architecture community holds so much regard for Russell's work, in fact, that a Russell-designed home was the first remodeled house to be featured in the Home Builders Association of Greater Springfield Parade of Homes.

Some of the commercial names in Springfield history designed homes as well; Richard Stahl's career started as a home designer for notable designer Carl Bissman, while Harold Casey designed several homes in the area, including his own in Wildwood Estates.

complicated by the fact that many buildings have been significantly modified since their construction – Parkview High School is currently undergoing renovations, as are some the MSU dorms.

Bates is nonplussed about the changes; he said they're just a part of the business.

"People talk about timeless architecture, but very few things are timeless," he said. "The reality of it is the majority of buildings today are made to be 50-year buildings, and the next generation that buys them will bring them up to modern standards. It's the cycle of a building, just like people don't wear bow ties and derbies anymore."