
THE SAGA OF A NEIGHBORHOOD MOTION PICTURE THEATER: THE SHAW SHOW

by David J. Simmons

The American film industry owed a great debt of gratitude to the neighborhood motion picture theater. The theater popularized movies, helping to shape the lifestyle of several generations of Americans.

On April 30th, 1915 the St. Louis Daily Record announced the issuing of a city building permit to the Shaw Investment Company covering the construction of a neighborhood motion picture theater being built at 3901-3905 Shaw Avenue located at 39th Street. Situated on the Park South-Hampton streetcar line in the heart of the 39th Street business district, this building relied on the local architectural firm of Kennerly and Stiegemeyer for its design and construction supervision. Between 1913 and 1923 they fashioned a series of neighborhood movie houses including the Lindell Theater at 3511 North Grand (1914), the Webster Theater at 2111-2125 North 12th Street (1915), the Shenandoah Theater at 2227 South Broadway (1917), the Grand Florissant Theater at 2138 East Grand (1919), and the Kingsland Theater at 6459 Gravois (1923). When their partnership dissolved around 1930, Stiegemeyer continued to focus on movie houses mostly scattered across down state Illinois and southern Missouri.

Construction of the Shaw Show lasted four months and cost close to \$30,000. This theater opened on Labor Day, September 6th, 1915 with a 2:00 p.m. matinee and a 6:30 p.m. evening performance of a black and white silent film enhanced by live musical accompaniment. A theater ticket cost five cents.

A paved concrete plaza featuring a twenty-five foot street set-back occupied the area in front of the theater. Measuring 53 feet across the theater front on Shaw Avenue, the building extended along 39th Street to a depth of 142 feet, terminating at the alley. Consisting of a two-story front section and a connecting one-story rear auditorium, the theater accommodated 998 people. The upper floor of the

front section housed the office space, storage area, projection room, and toilet facilities. At the far left of the first floor front, an entrance into a staircase hall gave access to the second floor. Two theater entrances, a ticket office, and a small lobby equipped with a refreshment counter filled the first floor area. A marquee sheltered the entrance and ticket areas.



Shaw Theater entrance and marquee

Brick wall construction throughout, the theater employed a cast iron concave roof over the auditorium supported by steel trusses and resting on reinforced concrete piers. In the audience room, a sloped concrete floor served the seating area with carpeting in the aisles and the space in the rear behind the seating. The standing room area, restroom, and drinking fountain resided at the back of the auditorium. The audience egress consisted of six exit routes. Three exits on the west wall opened into a concrete paved gang-way and the three exits on the east wall accessed 39th Street. Exits on the middle and at the front of the audience room required steps to reach ground level. A narrow stage four feet high located at the front supported a movie screen draped with velvet curtains. In spite of a limited budget, the Shaw made every effort to offer a modest version of the amenities to found at the movie palace or legitimate theater.

Talking films first appeared at this theater in 1928. A decade later management at the Shaw remodeled the premises, adding air conditioning to its amenities and installing the Shaw vertical sign at the southeast corner of the building.

The Depression of the 1930's, the war years, and the post war era of the 1940's brought large crowds to the Shaw, but subsequent decades witnessed a large decline in attendance.

After forty-nine years of community service, the Shaw fell victim to the advent of television and the construction of Highway 44, which divided the neighborhood into two parts, wrecked hundreds of dwellings, displaced thousands of people, and destroyed the 39th Street business district. Also, lack of a parking area contributed to the demise of most neighborhood theaters. Increasing automobile use inspired the development of the drive-in movie theater, functioning as an alternative to the neighborhood show. Following closure, the theater's future seemed uncertain. Once the property sold, new ownership transformed the building into a grocery store removing all aspects of its former purpose. Recently a second change of ownership resulted in another rebirth of the building into a banquet facility.



The historic Shaw Theater renovated into the Wild Carrot event space

In the waning years of the last century, the neighborhood movie theater passed from the landscape. A few theaters became worship centers. Some of them traveled the route from neglect and deterioration to abandonment. Others remodeled for another purpose giving them new life. But most theater properties ended their existence as vacant lots.

Once upon a time before the invention of television and when most people depended on public transportation or walked to their destinations, the neighborhood motion picture theater offered pictorial entertainment to the local people who lived a distance away.

REMEMBERING THE SHAW SHOW

by David J. Simmons

As a young man from 1945 to 1950, I experienced the magic of the film make-believe offered at the Shaw Movie Theater. Like myself most local people who attended this theater, I walked to my destination covering a six city block route one way. Theater management scheduled as evening

performance seven days a week adding a matinee on both Saturday and Sunday. Lasting a total of three hours, a typical performance featured two full-length movies, coming attraction segments, a newsreel and sometimes a cartoon. Spectators at the Shaw watched second and subsequent run movies with exposure to a large collection of B grade films. Each week the theater changed attractions twice providing three different programs. An exception to this arrangement was the Saturday matinee focusing on entertaining children with two Western movies and a weekly serial installment. Every evening the theater and the ticket office opened for business at 6:00 p.m. and forty-five minutes later the movie started. Usually the entertainment finished before 10:00 p.m. During the summer months the air conditioning brought crowds to the show seeking to escape the heat. Admission cost was fifteen cents for children and thirty-five cents for adults.

The Shaw movie legacy enhanced my life with entertainment and helped shape my character through the informal education these films provided. Then in 1950 the television appeared in my daily routine replacing my need for the movies at the local neighborhood theater.

Steigemeyer Legacy Small Town Community Movie Theater Locations

Illinois

Alton (1937)
Carbondale (1939)
Carmi (1939)
East St. Louis (1945)
Herrin (1938)
Metropolis (1938)
Mounds (1938)
Mount Carmel (1937)
Newton (1936)
Pana (1939)
Roxana (1939)
Sandoval (1940)

Missouri

California (1937)
Salem (1937)
Vandalia (1936)

Kentucky

Murray (1938)

Local Theaters, Stiegemeyer

Beverly Theater (1937), 7140 Olive
Criterton Theater (1938), 2644 Franklin
Gem Theater (1935), 8840 St. Charles Rock Road
Kirkwood Theater (1938), Kirkwood and Pittman
Laclede Theater (1938), 3116 Laclede

McNair Theater (1940), McNair and Pestolozzi
Ozarks Theater (1936), 103 East Lockwood
Shady Oak Theater (1936), Forsythe and Hanley

Drive-In Theater, Stiegemeier

Airway Drive In (1947), St. Charles Rock Road & Ashely

ST. LOUIS' DRIVE-IN MOVIE THEATER EXPERIENCE

by David J. Simmons

The local drive-in motion picture theater movement achieved popularity especially among young people after the Second World War. But this movement proved to be short lived. Two generations later, the drive-in movie experience had expired.

After an extended period of development, Charles Hollingshead invented the basic plan for all drive-in movie theaters constructed in this country. Having obtained a patent for his idea and established a company to license this product, he built in 1933 the first drive-in movie theater close to Camden, New Jersey. Construction of a second drive-in movie house in the same area followed quickly and both projects enjoyed success. Public acceptance of the movie drive-in concept remained cautious prior to the war years with a total of fifty movie drive-ins completed by 1941. During the post war years drive-in movie construction reached a total of 1,700 by 1950 and peaked at 4,175 in the late 1950s. The number of drive-in movie houses declined rapidly after 1960. Attendance at the drive-in movies continued to be strong through the 1960s.

The popularity of the drive-in theater depended on single young people, usually teens and young married couples usually with children. The post war baby boom and the increased availability of automobiles for young people fueled the drive-in movie growth. Using the car for theater seating allowed the entire family in casual dress to attend the drive-in movie theater without regard for a child care arrangement. To entice families, drive-ins offered kids free admission, playground area, mechanical rides – little trains, and pony rides on the weekend. In addition, many theaters served regular meals including hot dogs and hamburgers as well as snacks and drinks. All of these amenities contributed to the carnival-like atmosphere found at the drive-in. One element of caution, bad weather, meant the cancellation of the evening's entertainment.

Ranging in size from nine to twenty plus acres, an open field along a major road formed the basis of a drive-in theater layout. Placed along the roadside of the lot at its center, the

screen faced outward toward the back of the premises. Elevated at least ten feet above the ground, the slightly tilted screen leaned forward towards the viewers for better picture focus and measured at least sixty feet across and rising to a height of forty feet. A later improvement allowed owners to spray the screen with a glass-like coating making it easier to clean and improving its brightness quality.

The audience viewing area in front of the screen relied on a series of semi-circular (fan shaped) parking levels ascending in height from the lowest in front to the highest in the rear. A road called a ramp accessed each level. Each parking space angled upward at the rear to view the movie and downward at the front to exit on the next lower ramp. Most drive-ins contained between five and fourteen ramps. Located at the center of ramp five or six, a concrete block building called the dug-out housed the theater office, projection booth, concession stand and restrooms. Theater sound came from speakers at the front of the audience area, then speakers attached to poles scattered about the audience area, and finally, in car clip-on speaker boxes. Simple egress dictated a single line entrance with ticket booth on one side of the drive-in and a multi-lane exit on the other side.

Between 1940 and 1965, local construction history of the drive-in movie theaters recorded the construction of twelve drive-in theaters in St. Louis City and County. While the first theater opened in 1940, nine of the other theaters started operations during the seven year period from 1948 to 1954. By the mid-1980s, only two drive-in theaters survived with the last one closing in 2001. Their automobile capacity ranged from four hundred to twelve hundred cars. Their length of operation varied from ten to fifty-three years. Architect Elkington's plans prepared in 1956 for the Hampton Drive-In to be located at the southwest corner of Chippewa and Hampton failed to be executed. Outside this focus period, two drive-in theaters built after 1965 included the I-270 Drive-In at 2925 Dunn Road, Florissant operational (1973 to 1980) with a 1,400 car capacity and the I-44 Drive-In at Highway 44 and Highway 141, Valley Park, operational (1972 to 1983) with a 300 car capacity.

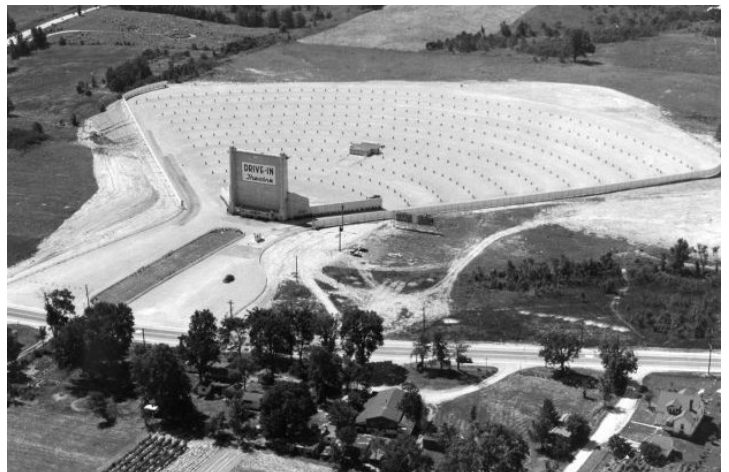
1. Manchester Drive-In Theater at 12500 Manchester opened in 1940 as St. Louis' first drive-in theater, closed during the war, it reopened in the mid-1940s and continued until 1967. The site sold and the theater demolished to make way for the West County Mall. Located on a fifteen acre site, it accommodated 500 cars on six ramps. Out of town owner, Phillip Smith, built the theater for the Midwest Drive-In Co.
2. Airway Drive-In Theater at 10634 St. Charles Rock Road operated from 1948 to 1986. Architect O. W. Stegemeier designed this theater for Henry Holloway. With a capacity of twelve hundred cars, it featured a thirty foot high animated neon sign of a marching and baton twirling drum majorette in front of the theater.

3. 66 Park In Theater at 9438 Watson Road lasted from 1948 to 1997. Northside Amusement Company hired local architects William H. Mills and Son to do the design work. With a capacity of twelve hundred autos, this nineteen acre site used thirteen ramps. Wehrenberg purchased the theater six months after it opened.
4. Ronnie's Drive-In Theater at 5320 south Lindbergh started in 1948. A shopping center replaced it in 1978 after thirty u=years of theater entertainment. Mills Architects prepared the plans for Wehrenberg to cover this twenty acre site with a capacity of twelve hundred vehicles.
5. North Drive-In Theater at 9425 Lewis and Clark Road offered entertainment for 53 years from 1948 to 2001. A Mill's design for Fred Wehrenberg, this theater contained one thousand parking spaces.
6. St. Ann Drive-In Theater at 10425 St. Charles Rock Road provided film shows fir thirty-five years (1950 to 1984). Architect Lewis Wilson (Los Angeles, California) built this theater for local owner Charles Vatterott. The theater arrangement called for four screens, one audience area, and parking for one thousand cars.
7. Skyline Drive-In Theater at Natural Bridge and Lambert Field began operations in 1950. A decade later the airport authority purchased this property for airport expansion. Built for Ray Parker, this theater had six hundred parking spaces. In 1958 the screen burned from a lightning strike.
8. Broadway Drive-in Theater at 4300South Broadway started an eleven year operation in 1953. Then in 1964 the highway department purchased part of this nine acre site to construct Highway 55. At Ray Parker's request, architect C. Willingham made the plans for this theater fronting along Broadway for 411 feet with seven hundred and fifty parking spaces.
9. Holiday Drive-In Theater at 9900 Page in Overland remained open for thirty years (1954 to 1984). Hope Realty hired Gerhardt Kramer, local architect, to plan this theater with one thousand parking spots.
10. South Twin Drive-In Theater at Lemay Ferry Road and Buckley Road also presented films for thirty years (1954 to 1984). The engineering firm of Sverdrup and Parcel directed this project for M. Missenserhoff at a cost of \$450,000. This was the first St. Louis drive-in to have two screens each with its own audience area. Each area had a capacity of five hundred and fifty cars. In addition, South Twin provided in-car heaters. After theater demolition in 1984, Dierberg's Market occupied the site.
11. Thunderbird Drive-In Theater at 5900 Natural Bridge entertained the public from 1954 to 1977. Designed for H. Bearman by the architectural firm of Kramer and Harms, this theater contained enough parking for five hundred cars. The owner spent \$225,000 on this project.
12. Olympic Drive-In Theater at 6878 St. Charles Rock Road, Pagedale, gave the public regular and blue film entertainment beginning in 1962 and terminating in 1977.

12. Olympic Drive-In Theater (cont.)

Owner Herbert Hartsteen erected this four hundred car drive-in theater. Blue film controversy plagued the Olympic many years leading to several police raids of the premises and the arrest of many under age teen attendees by the Pagedale and St. Louis county authorities. A lengthy court battle against the Olympic made its way through the St. Louis County court system.

The convenience and the leisure atmosphere of the drive-in movie theater delighted the first post-World War Two generation, but subsequent generations found their entertainment venues elsewhere as with television expansion into cable, retail movie rentals, and shopping center cinemas. Restrictive zoning laws and increased land values discouraged the construction of new drive-in theaters. Likewise, these conditions pressured existing drive-in theaters to close their doors and reassign the property for a more financially rewarding purpose, such as a shopping center. These causes eventually resulted in the demise of the drive-in movie theater experience.



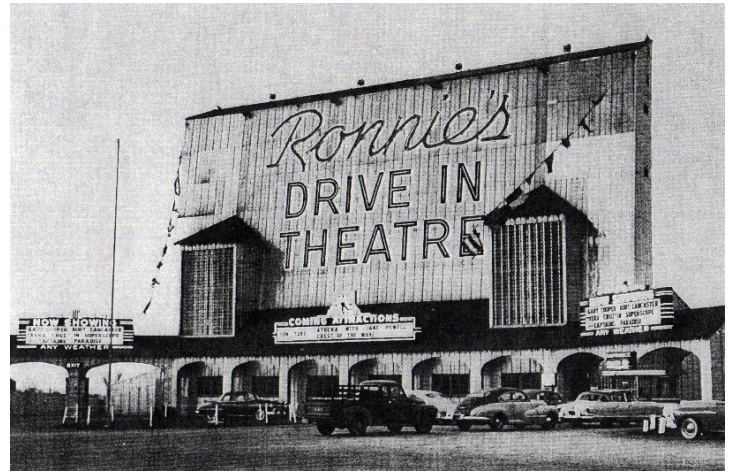
Aerial view of a typical drive-in arrangement



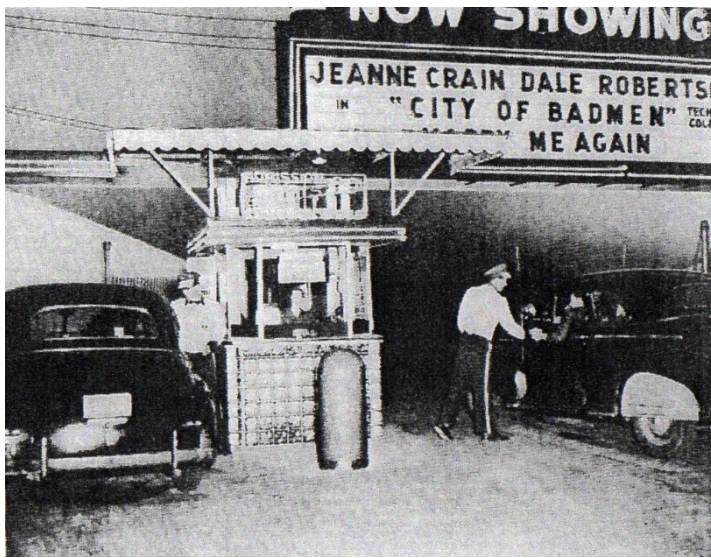
Aerial view of a "dug-out" which would house the theater office, projection booth, concession stand and restrooms



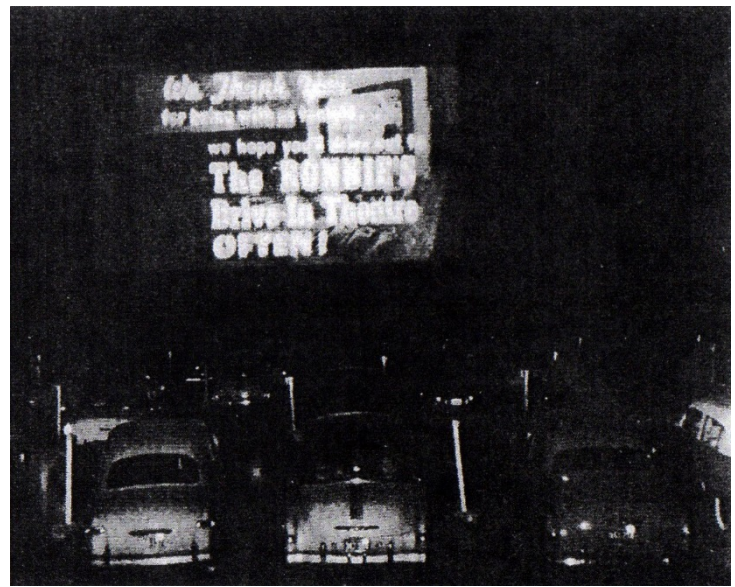
"66" Park In Theatre; Prom Magazine, May 1954



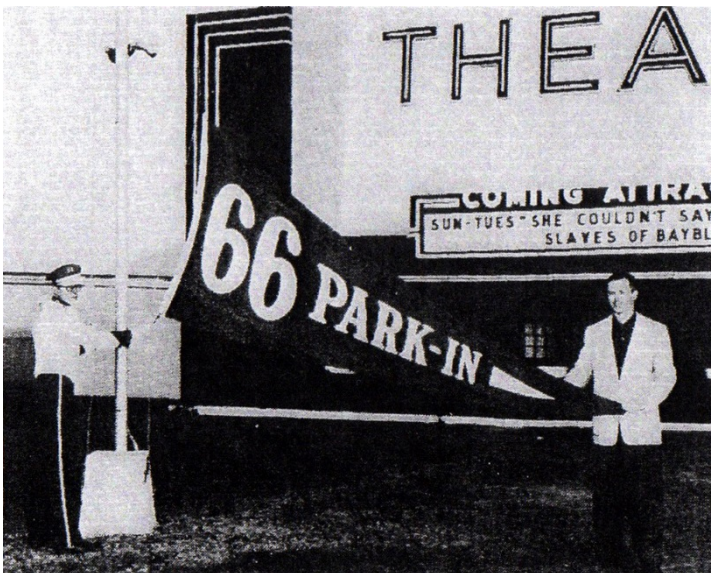
Ronnie's Drive In Theatre; Prom Magazine, April 1955



"66" Park In Theatre; Entry Gates; Prom Magazine, May 1954



Ronnie's Drive In Theatre; Prom Magazine, April 1954



"66" Park In Theatre; Pennant; Prom Magazine, May 1954



Teens at Ronnie's Drive In Theatre; Prom Magazine, April 1955

Illinois Drive-In Movie Theaters

1. Alton – Cameo
2. Alton – Starlite
3. Beardstown – Starlight
4. Belleville – Sky Vue
5. Belleview – Anna
6. Breeze – Avon
7. Cahokia – Cahokia
8. Carbondale – Waring Auto
9. Carbondale – Diane
10. Caseyville – East St. Louis
11. Centralia – Centralia
12. East St. Louis – De Val
13. East St. Louis – Falcon
14. East St. Louis – Mounds
15. East St. Louis – Shop City
16. Effingham – Rustic Starlite
17. Godfrey – Green Valley
18. Highland – Air Park
19. Litchfield – Skyview
20. McLeansboro – Sunset
21. Metropolis – El Capitain \
22. Metropolis – Auto Vue
23. Mitchell – Bel Air
24. Mount Olive – Sunset
25. Mount Vernon – Mt. Vernon
26. Mount Vernon – Starland
27. Quincy – Gem City
28. Salem – Cluster
29. Wood River – Capri
30. Wood River – Altwood ,

Missouri Drive-In Movie Theaters

1. Arcadia – Kellarney
2. Columbia – Broadway
3. Columbia – Parkdale
4. De Soto – Skyview
5. Farmington – Corral
6. Fredricktown – Hi Y
7. Fulton – Fulton
8. Garwood – Hwy 21
9. Hannibal – Sky 111
10. Illmo – Cape
11. Jackson – Sherman’s Jackson
12. Lebanon – Moonlite
13. Paris – Major
14. Perryville – Hilltop
15. Pevely – North Hwy 61
16. Potosi – Starlite
17. Rolla – Rolla
18. Salem – Starlite
19. St. Charles – Plaza
20. St. Charles – St. Charles
21. St. Peters – I-270
22. Sullivan - Grande

Missouri Drive-In Movie Theaters (cont.)

22. Warrenton – Moto Vue
23. Washington – Sunset

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2. St. Louis Daily Record
11.21.47; 3.11.48; 2.15.50; 7.13.50; 7.21.53
4.21.54; 10.27.54; 5.18.56; 10.31.58
3. Prom Magazine entries
4. Listing articles in newspapers
5. Missouri Historical Society contains incomplete plans for drive-ins – as follows:

Ronnie’s Drive-In
66 Park In Drive-In



“66” Park In Theatre;
Mr. Paul Krueger (standing),
Ronnie Krueger (in car),
Ray Moss (manager),
Prom Magazine,
May 1954

LIFE WITHIN – THE ATRIUM HOUSE RECONSIDERED

by John C. Guenther, FAIA, LEED AP

Courtyard houses have a long and universal history, with their origins dating to 3000 BC in Iran, India and China. The courtyard houses of the City of Ur were developed between 2400 BC to 2300 BC, while the Greek peristyle houses date to the 4th or 5th century BC. The Roman urban houses of the 1st century BC to 4th century AD consisted of two rectangular courtyards – a smaller atrium and a larger peristyle.

These courtyard or atrium houses offered air, light, privacy, security and tranquility to their occupants. They also made efficient use of available land within their urban settings, as evidenced by those found in Antigua, Guatemala from the 1700s.

When, in 1964, J. Robert Green, AIA was engaged by Fischer & Frichtel, Inc., home builders and developers, to create a design which offered “something different” to their prospective home buyers, architect Green turned to the time honored building type of an atrium design, but with modern sensibilities.

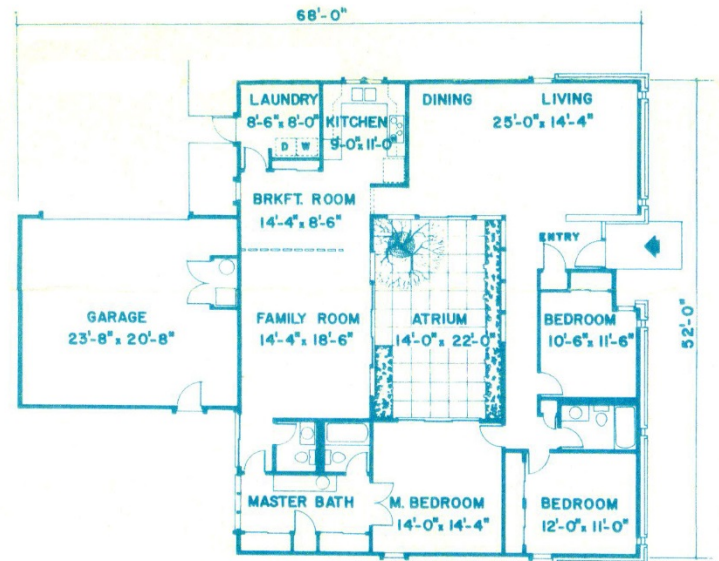
The context for the atrium houses was the Fox Creek subdivision located in Ballwin, Missouri, across from the Fox Creek Golf Course (now the Ballwin Golf Course). The subdivision land planning was very typical, with gently curving streets, lots of varying geometries and cul-de-sacs.

Given the context and program, J. Robert Green, AIA, reasoned that an atrium concept would be ideal for several reasons. It provided a personal environment to the homeowners with great outdoor privacy. Its compact and efficient plan would fit on a small lot and didn’t need an outward view. It was adaptable to various neighborhoods. It offered security without appearing inexpensive. It was affordable. It was well insulated and energy efficient. Lastly, it fit into its neighborhood seamlessly with its generous hip roofs and broad protective overhangs sheltering its brick and wood batten siding. In fact, the inner atrium is not revealed from the exterior view, thereby remaining a delightful surprise to first time visitors upon entry.

For the homeowners, the 14’ x 22’ central atrium, open to the sky and defined by its full height glass walls, offered abundant daylight into all of the living spaces arranged around its perimeter while allowing easy access through

sliding glass doors to the atrium for an “indoor-outdoor” lifestyle.

A careful study of the floor plan reveals that it is carefully arranged for maximum efficiency and zoned for the daily patterns of a family’s use, accommodating family gatherings as well as an individual’s need for privacy and personal space.



Atrium House Floor Plan

This impressive design went on to be promoted as the “House of New Dimensions” by Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company. In promotional materials, the design was described as “...using light, reflection and color for an exciting new sense of space. Through light – soft, diffused



Aerial perspective rendering of the Atrium House

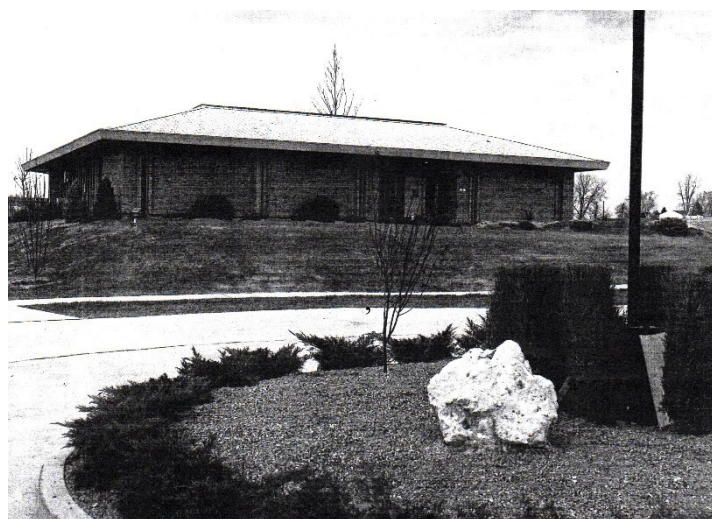


Perspective rendering of the living room and dining room looking towards the central atrium.

light, direct “spot” light, natural daylight – the dimensions of your home are no longer limited to the number of square feet, but become part of a richly varied, infinite pattern of light and shadow.”



Atrium at night



4 Sweet Meadows Lane

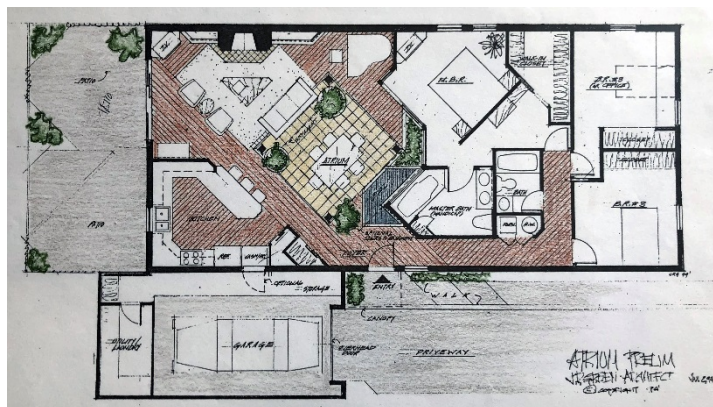
Seven of the Atrium House designs were built in the Fox Creek Subdivision alone. They are located at 302 Holloway Road off of Spring Oaks Drive, 207, 214, 221 and 303 Fawn Meadows Drive, 10 Cool Meadows Drive and 4 Sweet Meadows Drive – the house featured in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch in the Sunday edition, November 7, 1965.



221 Fawn Meadows Drive

With a strong belief in the importance of aesthetics in modern design, the potential of prefabrication to produce efficient, well-built dwellings for contemporary life, and that thoughtful, contemporary design can uplift and ennoble our daily lives, J. Robert Green, AIA went on to develop a series of atrium house designs, culminating in a design which could be pre-fabricated in factories under controlled conditions. With two halves 14’ wide x 55’ long, they could be shipped by tractor-trailers over the roads and assembled on the owner’s property.

A noble idea to ennoble our daily lives.



Floor plan, Prefab Atrium House



Presentation model, Prefab Atrium House

A graduate of the University of Arkansas School of Architecture where E. Fay Jones, FAIA and AIA Gold Medal winner, taught (and later served as dean), J. Robert Green, AIA went on to work for Edward Durell Stone, FAIA, of New York. While in Stone’s office, Green assisted in the design and construction documents production on the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi. After military service in Korea, he returned to St. Louis to work in the office of William Adair Bernoudy, FAIA – Brenoudy-MutruxBauer. He then went on to work in the office of Victor Lundy, FAIA, of New York before returning to his home town of St. Louis, where he worked with Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum on The St. Louis Planetarium and Southern Illinois University Science and Academic Building. He then established his own practice, J. Robert Green – Architect, and focused on contemporary residential and small commercial design.

This article is composed from interviews with J. Robert Green, AIA (March 20, 1932 - May 31, 2021) by John C. Guenther, FAIA, LEED AP, on June 22 and 29, 2018 and a visit together to his Atrium House design at 302 Holloway Road on July 1, 2018.

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St. Louis Public Library – Central Library
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Zoom webinar
fourth Tuesday of the month
(except for Thanksgiving week)
6:30 pm – 8:00 pm

2021 Spring

Esley Hamilton
Past Preservation Historian, St. Louis County Parks
“The Architecture of Oscar Niemeyer”
February 23, 2021

Robert McCarter
Ruth and Norman Moore Professor of Architecture,
Washington University in St. Louis
“The Architecture of Carlo Scarpa: Recomposing Place,
Intertwining Time, Transforming Reality”
March 23, 2021

John C. Guenther, FAIA, LEED AP
Principal, John C. Guenther Architect LLC
President, Society of Architectural Historians St. Louis Chapter
“Antonio Barluzzi – A Roman Architect in the Holy Land”
April 27, 2021

2021 Fall

Peter Wollenberg
Architectural Conservator
Wollenberg Building Conservation, LLC
“Lustron Homes, St. Louis and Beyond”
September 28, 2021

Karen Bode Baxter
Architectural Historian and Preservation Specialist
“St. Louis Globe Democrat Building/St. Louis Post-Dispatch Building”
October 26, 2021

Aaron Frei
Craftsman and President
Emil Frei & Associates
“The Art and History of Stain Glass”
November 16, 2021

<https://spl.bibliocommons.com/events/search?q=architecture%20SAH>
registration link for lectures

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St. Louis and Missouri Valley Chapters

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- Fall Issue 15 August
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