

HARRIS ARMSTRONG

Harris Armstrong holds a unique place in the history of St. Louis architecture as the first architect to design and erect a building in the full-fledged International Style, the style of 20th century modernism that had originated in Europe in the 1920s. From this beginning, Armstrong became and remained one of the leaders in the profession, turning out a series of carefully considered designs for buildings of all types that equaled the best in the nation. His work was frequently published nationally and abroad. His reputation has remained high after his death. Books and exhibitions feature his designs, the archive of his work at Washington University attracts scholars and students, and historic preservation bodies throughout the region identify his buildings as worthy of preservation.

Harris Armstrong was born in 1899 in Edwardsville, Illinois, the son of a tobacco salesman. He began his study of architecture in 1923, attending Washington University's night school while working as office boy and draftsman for G. F. A. Bruggeman. He later spent a year at Ohio State but gained most of his architectural education through a series of jobs for the leading "period" architects of the day in St. Louis: LaBeaume & Klein, Maritz & Young, and Isadore Shank. Returning from New York City in late 1930, Armstrong experienced several lean years in private practice before receiving three important commissions in 1934. One was for a small clubhouse at Crystal Lake Golf Club. A second was for a Shell Oil station prominently situated at Lindell and Vandeventer. He designed a striking wedge-shaped terracotta-clad building with a tall mast but got little credit for it, as it was published anonymously.

By contrast, the Shanley Building, the third of these projects, was given eleven pages in the *Architectural Record* of November, 1936. The English publication *Architectural Review* featured it the following March. Photographs were displayed in the U. S. Pavilion at the 1937 Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques Appliquées à la Vie Moderne in Paris, and the design captured a silver medal. The Shanley Building was an office for an orthodontist located in what was then the small low-rise St. Louis County Seat of Clayton. It is generally recognized as the first International Style building in the Midwest.

Beginning with the Shanley Building, Armstrong's designs appeared annually in *Architectural Record*. *Architectural Forum* surveyed his recent work in 1945, and *Pencil Points* did a biographical sketch the following year. By then Armstrong had become more interested in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, and white had been replaced in his palette by the reds and greens of brick walls and sheltering copper roofs. His association with physicians remained strong, and he produced medical facilities in the suburban communities of Brentwood, Clayton, Kirkwood and Webster Groves as well as the Grant Clinic in St. Louis. For Drs. Carl F. and Gerti T. Cori, he designed one of the earliest International Style houses locally. The Coris shared the Nobel Prize for physiology in 1947. Another notable Armstrong house was built overlooking the Missouri River for Dr. Evarts Graham, whose research established the link between smoking and cancer.

In the post-war period, Armstrong's Lutheran Church of the Atonement in Florissant was one of the first A-frame churches in the nation. For South Kingshighway in St. Louis, Armstrong designed one of the first and most innovative high-rise buildings of the post-war period, the

Magic Chef office, which had a ceiling in its showroom lobby designed by sculptor Isamu Noguchi.

In the fifties, Armstrong continued to design notable residences, including the Fred Evens House in Ladue and the Arthur Stockstrom House in Sunset Hills. His new home for the Ethical Society on Clayton Road in Ladue attracted much attention. The McDonnell Aircraft Corporation, later McDonnell-Douglas, turned to Armstrong for its seven million dollar engineering campus in Hazelwood and later built a second research campus down the road. He was awarded fourth prize in the competition for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, the only local architect to place. Outside the St. Louis area, he designed the new Federal Building in Kansas City, the officers' club at Fort Benning, Georgia, and the U. S. Consulate in Basra, Iraq. Because of the personal attention he gave to every design, however, his office remained small, located in a building of his own design just down the street from his home in Oakland.

By his later years, Armstrong was recognized as the dean of the modern movement in St. Louis. He was named a fellow of the American Institute of Architects in 1955 and served as president of the St. Louis chapter in 1960. He and his wife Louise were known for their sociability, and their recipe for champagne punch was recorded in chapter minutes and later published. He retired in 1971 and died in 1973.

Several of Armstrong's buildings have been listed in the National Register of Historic Places, including the Shanley Building and the Cori House. The Webster Groves Historic Preservation Commission and the St. Louis County Historic Buildings Commission have designated several Armstrong buildings as landmarks. The Harris Armstrong papers, including drawings, photographs, publications, and other writings, are held by Washington University.

SOME SOURCES

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