A BRIEF HISTORY OF AIA LAS VEGAS
VISION STATEMENT

The American Institute of Architects is the voice of the architecture profession dedicated to:
- Serving its members
- Advancing their value
- Improving the quality of the built environment

MISSION STATEMENT

It is the mission of the Las Vegas Chapter of the American Institute of Architects to support and uphold these precepts within our state and region, and:

- To uphold the ethics and core values of the profession
- To support and promote quality architecture
- To support and advance quality opportunities for design education
- To enhance public awareness of the built environment
- To share design knowledge with the community, and
- To unite the members in fellowship

CORE VALUES

Core Values of the American Institute of Architects:
- Leadership
- Design Excellence
- Life-long Learning
- Ethical Behavior
- Inclusiveness
- Collaboration
- Client-and Member-Centered Service
Las Vegas has a 100-year history of attracting unconventional, strongly independent individuals. This city was built by those who have dared to dream beyond the ordinary and dared to risk everything on their ideas and abilities. The architects and design professionals who have chosen Las Vegas as their home clearly exhibit these attributes in abundance. So it is something of a miracle that in 1956 a handful of maverick-type architects joined together to establish the Las Vegas Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. It is even more amazing that today, 50 years later, the Chapter is still a vital entity in the community with over 500 architects and design professionals who proudly proclaim membership in AIA Las Vegas.

While 1956 is the official year the Chapter was established, the story actually begins many years earlier. Back in 1939 architects who were already practicing in Reno and Las Vegas joined together to form the Nevada State Association of Architects. This group recognized the growing need for a regulatory body and their sole stated purpose was “establishing laws to protect the profession and raise the standard of architecture in Nevada.”

The NSAA worked diligently for ten years to set in place a state architectural registration law and to establish a regulatory body. They enlisted the help of the AIA and NCARB to support their efforts and they even ran newspaper ads in order to increase public awareness and support for their effort across the state. Finally in 1949, after many failed attempts in Carson City, and thanks to the persistent labors of the architects and the full-time lobbying efforts of an architect named Graham Erskine, “AB70, An Act To Regulate The Practice Of Architecture In Nevada” was passed and the Nevada State Board of Architecture was established.

Governor Pittman appointed the first state board members, all of whom were architects and included Leman Ferris, Russell Mills and Edward Parsons (all from Reno) and Aloysius McDonald and Walter Zick from Las Vegas. They held their first meeting on July 31, 1949, where they elected officers, determined the criteria for licensure and set about issuing licenses to architects.

With the Nevada State Board of Architecture in place and their mission accomplished, the NSAA faded out of existence and the architects turned their attention to formally establishing the American Institute of Architects in Nevada. In 1949 former members of the NSAA group enlisted the help of AIA members from other states and petitioned the American Institute of Architects to charter a Nevada chapter. The charter was granted immediately and the Nevada Chapter AIA was born.

With only five AIA members the first chapter lunch meeting was held at the Riverside Hotel Casino in Reno and each member was assigned to an officer position. They then adopted the unofficial name of “Nevada AIA - The All Saints”.

Within a few months Harris Sharp and Walter Zick and other AIA members from Las Vegas joined the Nevada Chapter. To accommodate the distance between the two cities the sporadic member meetings were held half way between the two cities in Tonopah.

This soon proved to be too much of a geographic challenge, and by 1954 the Nevada AIA became the AIA Reno Chapter. At that time the architects in Las Vegas requested a charter from the Institute to establish the AIA Las Vegas Chapter. It was granted in March of 1954, however, the Chapter was not officially incorporated and established until January 6th, 1956. Walter F. Zick, AIA was elected the first president, and since there were only a few architects practicing in the city at that time – Harris Sharp, Elmo Bruner, Aloysius McDonald, Ed Kendrick and maybe a few others – they all joined the AIA and took turns holding the highest office.
George Tate, AIA, then a youngster to the group, recalls, “AIA meetings were interesting in those days, usually more social than business. At the end of my term…and “my turn” as president, which is how it was done in those days, we still had a couple of hundred dollars in the kitty, so at Pat Porcariello’s motion we had a big bash at the Coach and Four Restaurant.”

Since those early days Las Vegas and AIA members have benefited from a long list of architect-leaders who have taken on the role of President, Directors of the Board and Committee Chairs and who have served the Chapter and the community well. Through all the years since 1956 the main objectives of the AIA Las Vegas Chapter has remained the same - To uphold the Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, to elevate the profession, raise the quality of architecture and safeguard the health, safety and welfare of the public.

Throughout the 1960’s Las Vegas was booming and architects were busy building this most unusual city. It was the heyday of neon and kitch design. The “young turks” who were trying to get licensed and established in Las Vegas at that time included George Tate, Julio Lucchesi, Ed Hendricks, Jack Knighton, Jack Belcher, Jim McDaniels, Jim Little, Gerald Moffitt and Robert A. Fielden.

In 1968 the Chapter undertook a major civic project. The city was growing rapidly and the Chapter was asked to develop a master plan for the downtown area. It included an in-depth study and a scale model, which was presented to Mayor Gregson at the old city hall. The plan was to develop the vacant land west of Main Street, with Ogden and Carson Streets extended under the railroad tracks and making a big loop inside the vacant land, which would become a green area and government center. This is where the Government Center sits today, and where today the new Union Park area is being developed. This long-discussed area is the current location of the World Market Center, the Lou Ruvo Brain Center, designed by architect Frank Gehry, the Smith Performing Arts Center, Symphony Park and a variety of offices, housing, shopping and hotels and entertainment.

Where the Plaza Hotel now stands was to be a pivotal structure; a model interchange utilizing the...
railroad to deliver passengers from out-of-town and also to serve to move people to and from Henderson and Boulder City on the already existing tracks. (The germ of an idea for today’s monorail system.)

In 1969 AIA Las Vegas published this lengthy plan, which is entitled “A Checklist for Cities”, and it was also published in its entirety in a series of Sunday supplements in the newspaper. The ideas and the solutions provided by the architects in this publication are just as relevant today as when it was printed in 1969 and Las Vegas is still addressing many of the same issues that our architects were dealing with over forty years ago.

The April 2006 edition of the Chapter’s magazine, Architecture Las Vegas, provides an interesting comparison of the Checklist and the current re-development of downtown (also included in this booklet). Copies of the original Checklist for Cities are also available through the AIA Las Vegas office.

At about this time the AIA national organization became more active in supporting local chapters. The Grassroots program was formed and AIA helped subsidize the president-elects to attend the leadership sessions.

In 1969 AIA Las Vegas was selected to host the Western Mountain Region Conference in Las Vegas and asked Reno architects to help co-host the event. The conference was very successful and profits from this event were used to help fund future legislative events and scholarships for Nevada students attending architectural schools in other states.

New Officers of the Las Vegas Chapter of the American Institute of Architects are, from left, Gerald Streichlow, vice-president; David Welles, president; and Hugh Taylor, secretary-treasurer. (SUNfoto, December 15th, 1968)
During the 1970's the Chapter's leadership recognized the importance of establishing a School of Architecture at the new University of Nevada, Las Vegas campus. AIA members organized to lobby for an architecture studies program.

Led by Julio Lucchesi, AIA their efforts to secure funding for the establishment of the School of Architecture at UNLV were successful. The program began slowly but has grown and expanded to a fully accredited six-year curriculum.

Julio Lucchesi's son, Ray Lucchesi, AIA, was the program's first full-time faculty member. Through his efforts local casino owner J. Kell Houssels donated his home (Houssels House) to UNLV. The house was moved to the campus and used to house the School of Architecture for many years.

Ray Lucchesi, AIA also secured the alliance between the AIA Las Vegas Chapter and the school, and arranged for the Chapter's first permanent home inside the Houssels House on the UNLV campus. AIA Las Vegas has provided a strong communication bridge and support between the professional community and the school and students since that time.
The location of the AIA Chapter within the school and the strong relationship with the local architects as professors, advisors and mentors was instrumental in the School receiving their first NAAB accreditation and every accreditation since then.

1975, the year that Hartley Alexander, AIA was President, was a milestone for the practice of architecture in the State of Nevada. That year a group of draftsmen adopted the title of “Building Designer”, and retained a lobbyist named Mahlon Brown Jr. for the purpose of having the legislature pass a modification to Chapter 623 which would allow them to design all residential structures and any one-story commercial building.

The Las Vegas Chapter was discouraged by the efforts of the AIA Nevada lobbyist that year, and as a chapter they retained Joe Foley, Jim McDaniel’s brother-in-law, to represent architect’s interests to lobby against the provisions as hoped for by the “Building Designer” group.

The current law which permits licensing as a “Residential Designer” with restrictions on the size of project is a compromise result due to these efforts by our chapter and the lobbying efforts of Mr. Foley. There were many members of the Chapter who contributed to this effort: to name a few there were James McDaniel, Errol Hill, Bill Simpson, Art Cambeiro, Gary Guy Wilson and Ralph Bond.

Throughout the 1970’s and 80’s the Chapter maintained a significant position within the community. Many of the AIA members were selected to serve on key state and local committees and have served the public across the state. The Chapter established numerous community outreach programs including “Search for Shelter”, “Christmas in April”, “Box City” and many others.

In 1971 the AIA Las Vegas Chapter began working with the Southern Nevada Homebuilders Association to establish a High School Design Awards program.

Through this program talented high school students are recognized, rewarded and encouraged to continue in a career path that will bring them to architecture as design professionals. By 1988 the AIA Las Vegas Chapter took over the program and has built an eighteen year history with this program.
Many of the recipients of AIA High School Design Awards have gone on to attend the UNLV School of Architecture, to be recognized with AIA scholarships, to be mentored by AIA architects and to complete their internship and ARE exams while working for AIA member firms. Many are now successful practicing architects in Las Vegas.

The AIA Las Vegas Chapter was unstaffed from its inception until the early 1980’s. At this time the Architect’s Wives League was established and became an extremely influential force in Southern Nevada.

It was the Architect’s Wives League that provided the organization and administration for many of the programs. They organized and supported numerous volunteer efforts in the community and they also served as members of other prestigious local groups and advisory committees.

They organized and executed the annual AIA Las Vegas Golf Tournament (now the longest continuously running Golf Tournament in Southern Nevada) and other fund-raisers.

Profits from their activities were used to fund additional scholarships and eventually provided the basis for the AIA Las Vegas Scholarship Endowment Fund that we have today. The AIA Las Vegas Endowment Fund provides over $15,000 in scholarships and educational awards annually to architecture students at UNLV.
In 1987 a formalized design awards program was established. The Chapter has honored significant architectural design and service to the organization through this program since then. The close relationship with the School of Architecture has allowed us to establish an archive of these award recipients. The archive including submittal binders, boards and online listings is available through the UNLV Architecture Studies Library.

By 1994 the Las Vegas Chapter was still active, however, membership had declined and the operations budget did not allow for many programs or events or participation in regional or national events. The Chapter needed a full-time director who could energize it and organize the membership to a larger participation in the community.

In March of 1994, President Jon Rappel, AIA met and interviewed Randy Lavigne, a free-lance writer who was looking for writing projects and part-time employment. She was hired as part-time Executive Secretary for the small Chapter. Within six months the Chapter was re-organized and the membership was increasing. The position had become full-time and the title was changed to Executive Director.

Since that time with Randy’s guidance, the strong leadership of the AIA Presidents and Board Members and the re-energized membership, the AIA Las Vegas Chapter has grown, expanded and become one of the most active and respected components in the American Institute of Architects.

With a current membership of almost 600 and an annual budget of over $700,000 the Las Vegas Chapter provides an abundance of programs that are educational, altruistic, social and supportive for AIA members, for the UNLV School of Architecture and for the Las Vegas community.

In 2005, the AIA Las Vegas Chapter hosted the largest and most successful AIA National Convention and Design Exposition in the history of the Institute.
In doing this AIA Las Vegas has proven once again that the wild, unconventional spirit of the architects who established the Chapter is alive and thriving, and that today’s AIA Las Vegas architects and design professionals still dare to dream beyond the ordinary... and they turn those dreams into reality.

Over these past five decades AIA members have dedicated themselves to upholding the highest standards of professional conduct; have worked to elevate the profession; have raised the quality of architecture and have been committed to safeguarding the health, safety and welfare of the public. This has been a unified effort by the architects, associates and design professionals of the AIA Las Vegas Chapter. Each can be proud of the role they have played in creating this most extraordinary city, and can take pride in their continuing commitment to make a better world for us all.
SOME THOUGHTS ON ARCHITECTURE LAS VEGAS, PAST AND FUTURE

BY GEORGE G. TATE, AIA EMERITUS

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Aloysus McDonald, the one legged architect whose office and residence in the 1950s was on south fourth street near what is now becoming the Las Vegas art district, and which is also where architect Leo Borns located his office in the 1960’s and 70’s. Aloysus was really a character in both appearance and personality. As I remember, he was scruffy looking, something like Long John Silver, who got around on a single crutch. I believe he lost his leg as a Canadian soldier in WWI. He spoke with a foggy voice and always seemed to have a cocktail glass in his hand, taking sips between words as he spoke. I had to go to his office to get my application to take the state board exam in 1958. His office was a shambles, with plans scattered everywhere and birds flying around inside. The place smelled like a pool hall, but Aloysus was kindly and took an interest in helping me and other young aspirants get started in the profession.

Speaking of birds in the drafting room, another early character was Ira Marshak. You could always spot his blueprints by the bird droppings from his favorite canary that often sat on his shoulder as he drafted away at his drawing table. His was a one-man office with Mrs. Marshak handling the phone and paperwork in the front office. Most of his work was for Jewish clients, and one of his jobs still standing is a two-story motel downtown just north of Fremont, soon to be razed for some high-rise condo. Ira wore thick horn-rimmed glasses and was always smoking a pipe. He didn’t mix much with the other architects but did attend the AIA luncheons occasionally. We smart-alec, younger guys had a pet name for Ira Marshak: we called him Ira Swamp-hut.

Then there was Elmo Bruner. Originally out of Oklahoma, Elmo typified the individualistic character of Las Vegas in his time. He had a jovial personality, was always in a hurry, knew what was going on everywhere in town, would buzz into someone’s office with a brief message and depart in a rush with his favorite saying, “Well, I got to get on with my rat killin’...”. Elmo had a very unusual office, a Swiss chalet- looking place set back in the big fig trees, on north Fifth Street. There was no concrete walk to the building so you usually had mud or dust on your feet when you got to the building. Mrs. Bruner, whom we called “Mama Bruner”, was a delightful person, perfectly matched to Elmo. She also answered the phone and handled the paperwork in the front office. She must have kept bringing different shoes to work and then leaving them there because when you entered the office the first thing you saw was a pile of old shoes tumbling out from under her desk. Mama Bruner also happened to be a very accomplished artist in her own right and made many of the beautiful renderings of their architectural projects. One such rendering I recall was of the Pueblo Indian style, one story, terminal building for McCarran airport fronting on what is now Las Vegas Boulevard South. Elmo was plagued with a heart condition and so would often run over to his couch and plop down in the middle of a conversation, kind of panting and patting his chest. After Elmo passed away, she continued as a well-known and respected artist and teacher of art in southern Nevada. At the moment, I do not recall where, but she did some rather famous murals in the community.
Another old-timer - one of my contemporaries - Julio Luchessi, is still around and is a goldmine of information about the early days of architecture in southern Nevada. He arrived here several years before me and could probably name a few of the architects I just missed having arrived here in November 1957. By that time, several of the earliest architects had already left the area or passed away.

In those early days - the fifties and early sixties - there were really only two major offices in town: Zick & Sharp, and Jack Miller. Many, many of the architects who came into their prime later started in one of these two offices. I was a product of the Zick and Sharp office. Jack Miller’s office was on South Main street, a two story building, kind of modern looking, with windows in front that came down to the second floor so that when you drive by, you could see the legs of drafting tables and draftsmen at work on the upper floor. This intrigued me, but as I recall, I never was inside that office. I just knew some of the guys who worked there and remember hearing them talk about Jack and a structural engineer by the name of Tom Turner who became his partner. In later years, I had more to do with Tom as we worked together on a building code ordinance for the City. I always respected Tom and believe he had a lot to do with the success of that firm which today is JMA. (from Jack Miller & Associates)

Zick and Sharp’s office was at the time the biggest, with about twelve or thirteen employees. Their office was located on South Main Street near where Main and Las Vegas Blvd. come together at the south end of town. At least it was then. It was a low, one story building with a brick planter and painted block front, with a recessed window that was used to display a rendering of some recent project. This front office was separated from the back portion of the building where the draftsmen worked, so that one had to go outside to get from the front office to the back. In the front were the individual offices of Walter and Harris, a conference room, and a plush office for their secretary, Rhetta – or perhaps, as it turned out, more than just secretary. Harris Sharp kind of ran the back room, but Walter stayed mostly up front, as did Rhetta. There was a clear hierarchy, with Rhetta having the controlling position over all the employees including those in the back room. If, for example, a draftsman needed a new eraser, he would first have to call Rhetta on the intercom and request permission to come up front. Then if he could produce a tiny stub of sufficiently used eraser, Rhetta would go into the vault and get a new one, making a careful record of who got the eraser and on what date. Harris Sharp also dabbed in politics and was elected to the Las Vegas City Commission for several years, serving also for a time as mayor pro-tem.

I had come to Las Vegas straight out of the service. I graduated from the University of Utah in 1955 and served two years in the Army Corps of Engineers. Because both my wife and I were native Nevadans (from White Pine County), we had always wanted to return to Nevada and the only places for one in this line of work were in Reno and Las Vegas. I had heard about the great growth of Vegas even at that time (population about 9,000) and figured this was the place for me. Before coming, I wrote the AIA chapter asking for the name of any architectural firms, and got a reply from their secretary, Julius Gabriel, suggesting either Jack Miller’s or Zick and Sharp’s office. After writing, I received a brief letter from Walter Zick telling me to come and be interviewed, which I did. I started work the day I arrived. My wife and I found an apartment on Cincinnati Street, now the notorious crime and drug neighborhood just a block west of Zick & Sharp’s office. My wife soon found work as a secretary to Reed Whipple, president of First National Bank on the northwest corner of Gas and Fifth Street. (South Fifth Street was later named Las Vegas Blvd South).

My first job at Zick & Sharp’s was working on the Clark County Courthouse on Bridger between Third and Fourth streets. At the time, it was the very latest in innovative architecture and won nationwide acclaim. It is hard to see it nowadays in such rundown condition - or is it still there? I haven’t been downtown lately.
GENERAL COMMENTS ABOUT “ARCHITECTURE PAST” IN LAS VEGAS

Some of the questions that have been asked of those of us older, more or less still living, architects seem to be less about individual personalities like those I have mentioned above and more about the general nature of the time and place. What was Las Vegas like in those days? What was it like to practice then? What were important events and activities of the AIA? How is it all different from today?

Both the city of Las Vegas and the practice of architecture in the early days, say from 1955 to 2005, were very different from today. Mainly in Las Vegas as a growing but still small town, everyone knew each other. Life was simpler. In many ways, life was better. People were friendlier. The community had a character and in my opinion there were more actual interesting characters (save perhaps for people like the present mayor!!). But Las Vegas was more like the unique, self-reliant state of Nevada, not just a little L.A. The hotels, both on the strip and downtown, were more attuned to locals, with hometown eateries and community type activities. Some of my warmest memories were going downtown to Fremont Street to go to a movie, to stroll and window shop, or to parallel park along Fremont and just watch the people. On Friday nights, the kids from Vegas High would cruise up and down... continued on next sidebar...

THOUGHTS ON ARCHITECTURE

At that time Zick and Sharp had an Associate by the name of Ed Hendricks, a very capable and knowledgeable architect who had come from southern California for a divorce and ended up staying — a rather common source of citizens to Las Vegas then as now. The drafting room consisted of rows of tables made up from sawhorses and slab doors. We drafted with tee squares, parallel bars, wooden scales and plastic triangles — not computers. My table was opposite a guy by the name of Eldon “Buster” Ballenger, who other old timers will recognize as probably the most prolific draftsman and producer of beautiful architectural drawings ever. Buster had no desire to become an architect but just continued to crank out fantastic drawings for Zick and Sharp for many, many years. He also had some kind of a western musical group that performed around town on weekends. He passed away just several weeks ago. Another fellow draftsman was Julio Luchessi, mentioned above, who is the father of present day architect, Ray Luchessi. Bob Stringer, a quiet but extremely competent structural engineer, worked right in Zick & Sharp’s office. He took me under his wing and had a lot to do with my special interest in the structural side of architecture. A fellow named Frank Ham handled most of the electrical design work although I don’t think he was a licensed engineer. Harris Sharp, who popped in and out of the drafting room several times a day, couldn’t remember my name so he just called me “box boy” because it was my job to keep the pop machine filled.

It was inevitable that sooner or later, a showdown would come about between Ed and Rhetta. It was obvious neither liked the other and there was an obvious power struggle between the two. The big showdown came on one occasion when both Walter and Harris were out of town. I don’t recall what it was over that day, but first they got into it over the intercom so that the entire drafting room could hear them calling each other snide names, among other things. Whatever it was, Rhetta won out (remember, Rhetta’s position of authority up front). At that, Ed picked up his drafting table (slab door) and stomped out of the office never to return. His departure was to affect me as will be mentioned later. By the way, Rhetta later had an interesting relationship with a local doctor who was also involved in various business enterprises, including several ice cream parlors. Rhetta would often travel with him as he went around to pick up the proceeds from these businesses. On one such occasion, they had a sizable amount of cash on hand and because it was after banking hours, Rhetta suggested they drop it by Zick and Sharp’s office where it would be safe in the company vault. The following day, when the doctor came by to pick it up, Rhetta stated that it represented her fee for services rendered and refused to turn it over. This resulted in a rather well publicized account in the local news and an ensuing lawsuit, which in the end Rhetta won. Following that, Rhetta left the area and I didn’t see her for many years, then to my surprise turned up in Carson City as a secretary for the State Board of Architecture.
During the 1950's, Zick & Sharp received a sizeable commission from the Corps of Engineers to design an entire housing project for Nellis Air Force Base. About the same time a pudgy, middle-aged fellow who claimed to be an engineer came to town looking for work. Because he came directly from the Corps office out of L.A., Zick and Sharp snapped him up and put him in charge of the Nellis project. It didn’t take long for everyone in the office, including Zick & Sharp, to realize that he was a total phony and didn’t have any capabilities at all, so they fired him. It wasn’t the last time they saw him, however, because one day he waltzed back into the office and stated that the Corps of Engineers had hired him back and put him in charge of overseeing the architect on the Nellis project. (What goes around comes around.)

While I have referred to the offices of Jack Miller and Zick & Sharp as the main firms in town, there were several other architects practicing who should not be overlooked. These would include Jack Belcher, who with the financial resources of a fortuitous marriage, bought the yacht once owned by the Hollywood actor, Errol Flynn. This resulted in his leasing the yacht for south sea tours, with him as the captain, and a career that took him away from Las Vegas and architecture forever as far as I know. Another architect of some significance was Julius Gabriel. Julius designed some good schools for the Clark County School District, one that I still often pass on east Desert Inn. He also did most of the original work on VOTEC located on the top of the mesa overlooking Green Valley. A young man who worked in Gabrielle’s office by the name of Jim McDaniels went on to become one of Las Vegas’ premier designers. Jim was my age and took the state board exam the same time I did. He later opened his own office and designed numerous prestigious projects, such as the original UNLV library, the original UNLV Student Union building, the Artemus Ham Concert Hall and many others. Unfortunately, Jim was struck down by cancer at a young age, cutting short a remarkable career.

Just before I arrived on the scene at Zick and Sharp’s, another young draftsman by the name of Gerald Moffitt worked there but had left to do some work on his own for a builder-developer by the name of Bob Bugby. Unbeknown to Zick and Sharp, Ed Hendricks who was still working in their office, often helped Moffitt on the side. When Ed had his big blowup with Rhetta, he left, I’m sure, with the intention of teaming up with Moffitt and establishing a regular firm of their own. Not long after that, I got a call from Ed suggesting I come over and work for them. So the firm of Moffitt and Hendricks was established with a modest office on East Charleston where Gass intersects at an angle. I was their sole employee for some time. One of their clients was an attorney Elwin Leavitt, for whom they designed a new two-story office on Fifth Street just south of Bridger Ave. That building is still there, occupied by one of Leavitt’s attorney descendants. Part of the deal was that Moffitt and Hendricks would occupy part of the second floor. During construction, Ed told me to go over to the construction site of the new building and check out the work. At that time, I was using a motor scooter to get to and from work, so I jumped on my scooter and rode to the construction site. Some of the concrete workers looked with disbelief as I got off my scooter and proceeded to talk to them about the project.

Work at Moffitt and Hendricks was a blast. A real architect’s office, built just as we had designed it – not a makeshift layout like so many other architect’s offices. And Ed and Jerry... What a pair! They argued all day long about things like Ed’s bald head and Jerry’s “birds nest” hair. Ed was meticulous and somewhat uptight. Jerry was relaxed and kind of philosophical about everything. Jerry would do an entire drawing and then notice that he had taped the preprinted sheet upside down. Or he would drive his big Pontiac into the parking lot, neglecting to apply the brakes as he plowed into the air-conditioned units on the ground next to the building. Nothing seemed to bother him when these things happened. It drove Ed nuts. Ed was pretty good at cranking out a preliminary design in just a few hours, then placing the drawing in the drawer so that the client would not think it was so easy and that he was being overcharged. Those were good days in many ways. I enjoyed their weird humor, and really got to like both of them, even though I wasn’t so sure they particularly liked each other. During my time there, my wife and I had an unfortunate experience in that our first infant son had a breathing condition following a tracheotomy that required our constant 24-hour a day care. Taking shifts around the clock took its toll and I appreciated Ed and Jerry’s understanding throughout that six-month period before we finally lost our son.
THOUGHTS ON ARCHITECTURE

As Moffitt and Hendricks grew, we needed a full-time secretary. They hired a young, rather naive girl to sit at the front desk and do what little paperwork was required. One late afternoon, just about quitting time, she left her desk which we could see from the drafting room. Thinking she had gone home Ed and Jerry proceeded to describe something about her in very colorful and uncomplimentary language — liberally sprinkled with words not usually spoken in the presence of a lady. What they didn’t realize was that she had not left but had simply moved to a seat out of sight but closer to the drafting room. When she got up and they saw her, there was lots of throat clearing and mumbling. Today it would be called sexual harassment, but back then it was just an embarrassing moment, later to be laughed about. During this time, Jerry built his first house. When it came time to move in, the washer/dryer wouldn’t fit through the doorway, so Jerry took an axe and battered the opening bigger — quite a recommendation for our highly competent architectural firm. Later Ed took over the DMJM firm that designed the Las Vegas City Hall, and then eventually moved to Denver to manage their international operation, but Jerry stayed in town and is still around. He is an intelligent and articulate person and would be a tremendous source of information about those early days in Las Vegas.

It was in this little drafting room of Moffitt and Hendricks that a rather famous photo was taken. When a firm with just a few people (which was most of the architectural firms in town) sought a larger prestigious project, it was common to “beef up” the office temporarily by bringing in employees from other firms to impress the potential client. On one such occasion, we crowded some fifteen or twenty such shills for a photo of the “office staff”. In the photo were people like Jim McDaniels, Jim Little, Fred Kennedy, Roger Hall, Julius Gabriel, and many others — stacked up all around the tiny room, on top of desks and anywhere they would fit into the picture. That photo which I believe is in the possession of the university should be very valuable as many of those went on to distinguished careers and play important roles in southern Nevada history.

Work especially between jobs was not always that demanding on our little firms, so we usually took a morning and afternoon break to go down the street for a doughnut and cup of coffee (or in my case glass of orange juice). Conversation was usually about the local news of the day and what it would be like to get a real big job. I still have many memories of these interludes and reflect upon how none of us had any idea at the time what changes we would see in Las Vegas in the years to come.

Upon receiving my license in 1960, I gave Ed and Jerry my notice that I was leaving, much to their surprise especially as I announced I was going to open my own office. After the shock of this pronouncement, they gave me their blessing but with a condition: I must find my own replacement.

continued on next sidebar...
Thus it was that I interviewed a rather large, impressive, young man by the name of Dave Welles, a locally grown product, fresh from a job at the Nevada Test Site. Dave worked at Moffitt and Hendricks for several years and then formed a partnership with Fred Kennedy, and eventually then went on to form his own firm which in time became what is now Welles-Pugsley.

In June 1960 I opened my office in a rental space on the northeast corner of Main St. and Bonanza Road. I hired at that time a young high school draftsman who lived near the office. His name was Gary Mohler and his ability as a draftsman was remarkable. Gary stayed with me for years, including those times between school when he went away to the university to study not architecture but finance and accounting. Today he is a multi-millionaire, very well known and involved in many activities in Las Vegas. Another employee was a young man from southern Utah by the name of Tom Dobrusky. Tom later became my partner as we purchased a new one-story office building at 214 Maryland Parkway, in which we occupied the north portion and leased the south portion. By the way, my Nevada license number also happens to be 214, which makes it easy to remember that address. One of our employees at that address was a Cuban immigrant from the Castro takeover, Arturo Cambeiro, brother of Domingo Cambeiro. On one occasion, the radio was playing in the drafting room and the piece of music was a beautiful Cuban ballad. Arturo began to sob and with great tears flowing said, “That song puts me so sad”. Art was very influential and served on several boards and commissions before his untimely death. Using the employees of the firm of Tate and Dobrusky, we actually built with our own hands the second story at that address which now still stands as a lawyer’s office in a slightly declining neighborhood. Our firm started doing some good work, with good solid clients including the Clark County School District. We designed a series of high schools such as Basic, Eldorado, Bonanza, etc. The design of many other high schools since has continued to this day as Tate Snyder Kimsey are still the prime firm for these projects for CCSD. When Tom Dobrusky decided to leave architecture in Las Vegas and go into development in other states, the partnership was dissolved and the building at 214 Maryland Parkway sold. For a short time, I moved in with Welles Kennedy in their office on East Sahara during which time the firm name was Welles, Tate, Kennedy.

During the time Tom Dobrusky and I were together, a funny thing happened on one of our jobs. Our client, Bert Leavitt, had a small one story insurance office on about Seventh Street just north of Charleston Blvd. He hired us to expand his building by adding a second floor and building up to the property line that he said was right where there was an existing fence along the south side. We did a great job and construction moved right ahead. One day, though, when the job was about 90 percent complete, an older gentleman driving a big Cadillac convertible drove up to the site and beckoned us over to talk. He said, “You’ve got a nice building here. Only one problem. You’ve built it three feet onto my property”. When we checked, he was right. What a predicament! We told Bert he had told us where the property line was and he said, “But you shouldn’t have believed me. What do I know about such things?” Well, finally we agreed that we both made a mistake, and then Bert came up with a proposal that turned out to be most fortunate for all concerned. He said that if Tom and I each came up with five thousand dollars, he would come up with the rest and together we would buy the neighbor’s property that included an existing office building. That we did, and from there on the income from the office building paid off the balance and continued to provide a fairly handsome income for many years when Bert passed away and his family bought out our remaining shares.

In the early 1970’s, I once again started my own practice in a new office complex at 1515 East Tropicana. An early employee at that address was a young man from Pennsylvania by the name of Bill Snyder. Bill and his wife Joy and their two little boys arrived at the office and Bill introduced himself, said he was looking for a job. What a fortuitous day, as Bill later became an associate, then partner, and today heads up the firm from which I am now retired, Tate Snyder Kimsey. Bill has always had the highest values, in addition to his great sense of humor and commitment to his community.

Thus it was that I interviewed a rather large, impressive, young man by the name of Dave Welles, a locally grown product, fresh from a job at the Nevada Test Site. Dave worked at Moffitt and Hendricks for several years and then formed a partnership with Fred Kennedy, and eventually then went on to form his own firm which in time became what is now Welles-Pugsley.
While Bill and I are quite different from each other in our background and personalities as anyone who has known both of us would agree, we have meshed perfectly and harmoniously in partnership for over thirty years. There has never been an angry or unpleasant word between us and I have nothing but respect for Bill, as I am sure he has for me. This is probably largely due to the fact that we have always held the same view toward the principles that guide our moral and ethical lives, and the goals we have had in the practice of architecture.

On one occasion in our partnership, I recall suggesting to Bill that we might consider making a campaign contribution to a certain aspiring politician. Bill reminded me that in so doing we could be sending the message that we were trying to gain some special advantage in an upcoming architect firm selection, and that was contrary to what he felt was the right thing to do. I had to agree, and from then on we were very careful never to do anything that could be construed in that direction.

On the morning of 15 April 1975, I awoke to the radio news bulletin that a major fire was raging at 1515 East Tropicana, the address of my office. By the time I got there I could see the burning roof collapse over our office. After a long day of sifting through ashes, our employees Bill Snyder, Cliff Jeffers, P.J., and others decided to salvage whatever we could, order some new tables, and move to my home where we set up shop until other office space could be obtained. At the time we were about 90% complete with the plans for the Alta Ham Fine Arts Building on the UNLV campus. The drawings we had in the office were completely destroyed. I flew to Carson City to meet with Bill Hancock of the Public Works Board to ask for some additional time to re-create the drawings. What I had not expected was an attitude of indifference on Hancock’s part to our dire situation. His concern seemed to be more “legalistic” about our ability to complete our contract. Finally, though, he said, “Well, how much time do you think you need? What should the contract date be set at for completion of plans?” Because, I didn’t have a copy of the original contract (it had burned in the fire), I arbitrarily called out a date. Bill paused a while and then said, “OK”. What I didn’t realize at the time was that under the stress I was experiencing, I actually set another date sooner than the original contract. In any case, we set out to recover as many drawings we could from the engineering consultants who had received progress prints from us, and by working day and night, completed the plans on time, and went on to see the project successfully finished.

Because the fire had destroyed the building we had occupied and would take many months to rebuild, we rented new space in the office complex at 1500 East Flamingo where we stayed for five years when I bought the property at Hacienda and Eastern Avenue and built a 12,000 square foot office building on that site.
We moved into that building on a hot summer day (temperature 116 F) in July and stayed there until I retired and when Bill moved the staff to his new building in Green Valley in Henderson. After retiring, I managed the building at Eastern Avenue until I sold it in 1998. Now I visit the office in Green Valley from time to time and am amazed at the excellent quality of work being done, especially with the use of computers and other tools and capabilities. A few of the old timers who were with us at the Eastern office are still there, but mostly there are the new faces of younger, impressive folks now building their legacy and creating what someone in the future will be asking them to recall in their memoirs.

After looking back at what I have written, many, many names and faces flood back to mind of architects, engineers, and local characters I have not mentioned. As it is, I see I have wandered afield from what I started out to write, having drifted more into a personal nostalgia of the life I experienced as a practicing architect in Las Vegas during the last half of the twentieth century. Perhaps when combined with the recollections of others who lived and worked here during that period, a more accurate and interesting picture will emerge.

**What the Future of Architecture Might Look Like in Las Vegas**

I have in my files some sketches of what a well-known designer in the 1930’s thought automobiles, trains, and buildings would look like in the future. Any time I attempt to predict the future, I am reminded to look at those sketches and hope not to look so much the fool as that designer when observers laugh at my pathetic guesses in predicting the future. But I do have some thoughts. Such as...

Changes that really shape the future have so much to do with technology that just as things commonplace today were completely unbelievable years ago, things in the future will probably be completely different from what we imagine in our wildest dreams today. Most of these are due to technological advancement but also to societal and political changes. I think these changes will have a profound effect on architecture in general, but especially to us here in southern Nevada.

We are particularly liable to certain threats that could disastrously affect what we have come to think of as an unsinkable economy. Some of us older architects remember economic cycles that have hit Las Vegas before. True, they did not last forever and in some ways they kind of reigned in our overheated economy in a beneficial way. For example, local contractor, J.A. Tiberti, once told me that when everything was going like crazy, he lost control of his own business and didn’t know if he was filthy rich or in bankruptcy. At least when business slowed down a little he knew where he stood, and that was worth something. Some of us have experienced these cycles - yes, even here in fabulous Las Vegas - that greatly affected our practices and were painful to many. Realistically, it is likely that there will be such cycles again in the future and it seems only prudent to consider what effect they might have on our seemingly prosperous, Teflon, economy.

Economic cycles have always had a profound effect on architecture, but especially so where the sole industry is entirely dependent on tourism. Look for examples of down cycles in building in Arizona when they overbuilt, or in Texas when they got overextended, and closer to home in California when they got ahead of the economy. Many of our present architects in Las Vegas came here when the market for architectural services dried up in their home state. Imagine what would happen to us if we received a hit by terrorists on one of our major hotels. The fear factor keeping literally millions away would be much worse than the MGM and Hilton fires several decades ago in keeping visitors,
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AIA and the efforts by many individuals to bring credit to the profession. In our earlier “friendlier” days, we were lucky to get just a handful of the local architects out to a monthly luncheon meeting where the biggest item for discussion was how to spend the remaining $50 in the treasury at the end of current president’s term. I am impressed to receive the professional publications put out by Randy Levine and her staff. I am impressed with the work being done by committees dealing with current topics of interest and professional improvement. I am impressed by the activities of the school of architecture on the UNLV campus. I am impressed by the exposure of many of our local architects through such channels as public radio and television. I am impressed by the quality of leadership of AIA officers, both at local and state level. I am pleased to see among the faces in the various offices so many women who are contributing to the recognition of the profession. I even enjoy listening to Dr. Fielden’s dissertations on KNPR, although I sometimes shake my fist and talk back to him when I don’t entirely agree with something he says, but then nod my head in agreement and give him credit for advancing the profession so much with intelligent commentary and observations.

In conclusion, I hope that I can at least be remembered for one contribution to the profession, the creation of an entirely original saying that should adorn the walls of design labs in architecture schools everywhere: “A chair is architecture you can sit on” Hmm....

the life blood, away from Las Vegas. Consider that this is not so far-fetched when you realize, as the hotel owners have, that the terrorists hate everything Las Vegas stands for, and nothing would please them more than to see one of our high-rise towers collapsing like the World Trade Center.

Another threat to our continued local prosperity is in the image problem we face if we go too far in promoting sin city sleaze as our only marketable product. By getting too far ahead of the curve of public acceptance, we risk the action of politicians on the federal level, stepping in with high-handed laws like those that whacked the tobacco industry, citing gambling as a drain on society and public funds. Politicians at the federal level are always looking for new sources of money and legalized gambling is one that has them drooling.

In the past we have always managed to come out of the problems that faced us by reinventing ourselves. Even when the economy appeared to be cycling downward, it usually just flattened out with a slight dip, dropping off those who were not in a position to weather the storm, and then continuing to climb again, setting new heights. But those dips had some devastating effects on many in the building industry here, including some architects.

The biggest and ultimate threat to our continued growth, however, is the limitation of water. Even modern technology cannot brush that aside. Our profession will be called upon even more to design projects that conserve that precious commodity, and to design more energy efficient buildings. Today we throw around terms like “Green Building” and “Sustainability” as if we are experts in this regard, but I do not believe we have scratched the surface in terms of what the future will require of us. (Incidentally, we learned in our architecture classes half a century ago the principles now referred to by these fancy names, only then we called it “architecture”.) We must become more attuned to nature and how to make better use of the resources that are especially limited here in the arid southwest.

Anyone who drives our city streets knows the heavy price we pay in time and frustration for our phenomenal growth. It is getting worse from month to month. New roads and even new lanes added to existing freeways cannot be built fast enough to keep up. What does this have to do with the architecture of future Las Vegas? Everything! Transportation problems always have a tremendous impact on building and on the evolution of cities. We are hearing a lot recently about light rail, guideways, automated busses, elevated rail, and even underground tunneling. It is inevitable that we will see at least some of these forms of transportation taking place, as in fact we are already. But the more we do, the less we will be able to keep up if the growth of the community continues as it is presently occurring. And unfortunately many of these solutions are only temporary in that they may actually exacerbate the problem rather than solve it.
For example, light rail as envisioned from Henderson using existing Union Pacific tracks is just not practical simply because almost everyone out there in a car is traveling from point A to point B, completely unrelated to the rigidly fixed path of the railroad. Very few of these will give up their private transportation system for an expensive system that won’t take them anywhere they want to go. Think about it, dear reader, would you use the light rail to get from your home to your office, or to the many diverse locations you travel to in the course of your day?

In my opinion, the only solution lies in taking more drastic steps in the design of our city – or in this case, cities, which includes outlying areas. Major changes in city and regional planning concepts must be undertaken so that living areas are connected to working areas and to commercial areas, and so on, in such a way that the varying transportation needs of individuals are met by a rapid, convenient, quiet, system that will get them to point A, or point B, or C, or D, or wherever people must travel in a future world if there is to be any quality of life as we as designers might envision it.

Even if such drastic planning action is undertaken, there will be a major problem in the inner sections as they become totally unworkable and undesirable for human habitation. When I was in the service, my wife and I traveled from the west to New York City by car, passing through decaying, inner city slums that even at that time were becoming unlivable. As a westerner, it was eye-opening to me, something I had never experienced before. With the passage of time the Las Vegas we know today may well face such a fate just as those older, eastern cities have unless any plan includes transforming existing areas (think redevelopment of massive areas within present Las Vegas) even as new, planned communities develop beyond that fringe of obsolescence. Without this our Las Vegas and other southwest cities might well be doomed, as we know them, in favor of new cities built away from these failed places. That that fate will not happen is the challenge tomorrow’s architects and planners must be prepared to skillfully and convincingly steer developers and decision makers away from.

Architectural office practice as such will continue to see sweeping technological changes with communications, methods of producing plans, methods of construction, etc., all changing beyond our present imagination. Each office will have many more integrated services pertaining to the social side of design, the inclusion of interiors, lighting, energy and engineering systems, landscape, business management, etc., etc. The one surprise I believe that we might see would be just the opposite. That is in a return to the simpler, less technologically driven approach to design. The huge technical organizations might well find their small office counterparts (like the old Ira Marshak and his wife in 1960 Las Vegas) catching the imagination of the decision makers of the future. The public might very well turn away from shiny, chrome plated technology, to seek the simpler life of Thoreau at his Walden Pond. This has occurred before in architectural history. The future cities might very well not be the Los Angeles’s or the Las Vegas’s, but in new smaller communities like Caliente, Nevada or Cedar City, Utah. Only time will tell, but I have a strong feeling that many of these small towns will be the cities of tomorrow. The challenge of the profession is to capture that balance with nature and integrate it into the sleek, soaring towers, with spaceships hovering about, as in the Jetsons’ world so that it is in fact a better place to live.

Years ago when I was an architectural student, we had a visit from the prestigious Frank Lloyd Wright. We had set up the common area displaying the best work of the students, hoping to get some helpful comments from this famous architect. We even set up a place for him to sit and a microphone to use as he spoke to the students. True to form, he strode into the building, refused to go near the microphone, and for a while wandered around the room, pointing out several misspelled words on the student’s work. When he did finally address us he rambled on about organic architecture – I think. He was mesmerizing to us young students, but I didn’t really know what he was talking about, except for one statement he made that has stuck with me all these years. He said a future generation, not ours but a generation of architects beyond ours, would bring into being the greatest period of architecture the world has ever known. Obviously that kind of left us out, but if there was any truth to his prediction, I believe we can say that at least we paved the way for that future generation and the greatest architecture the world has ever known.

Now the ball is in the court of you younger guys and gals. Like Frank Lloyd Wright, I expect great things from you!