Arthur Brown was a pioneer of solar design, but he was more than that. Brown grew up, trained, and practiced in an era that gave value to the economic use of space, materials, and energy.

Born in 1900 in Tarkio, Missouri, Brown graduated with a degree in chemistry in 1925 from a local college and earned an architecture degree in 1927 from Ohio State University. After marrying Caroline Munn, he moved to Chicago in 1929 and worked for the prominent firm of David Adler. During this time, Chicago was the heady epicenter of an architectural transformation in the United States, moving away from the Classical Revival styles toward the modern innovations in architectural forms and materials that reflected the technological advances and aesthetic creativity prevalent at the time.

The Depression hit Chicago, like other cities, very hard. Brown was unemployed for 14 months and was forced to apply his artistic talents to odd jobs, finally landing work with the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition, for which he designed auxiliary buildings and signage.

In 1936, Brown came to Tucson and found work with Richard Morse, with whom he established a partnership that lasted until 1941, when Morse enlisted in the Navy. Brown then opened his own architectural practice which he maintained until he retired in 1991, spending the last 20 years in partnership with his son, Gordon. By his death in 1993, he had designed more than 1,000 commercial and residential projects in Arizona.

Brown rejected revival styles in Tucson as dishonest and challenged himself to design “without style.” Steeped in the economic realities of the Depression and World War II, many of his Tucson buildings reflect a design ethic grounded in an honest expression of utilitarian efficiency. Buildings such as the First Christian Church (1948), Tucson General Hospital (1963, now demolished), The University of Arizona’s Franklin Building (1960, now demolished), and the university’s “hyphenated” residence halls—Graham-Greenlee (1954), Manzanita-Mohave (1956), and Kaibab-Huachuca (1957)—incorporate a vocabulary of simple rectangular volumes, usually surrounding courtyards, ribbon windows, mortared-seashore brick, and exposed concrete structural elements. The only additives were his signature shading devices that provided climatic and visual relief.

Brown’s response to climate included solar design principles common today, but not in the 1940s. He oriented his buildings for optimal solar exposure, and in 1961 he became the first Arizona architect to be invested in the American Institute of Architects (AIA) College of Fellows, one of the highest honors bestowed on an American architect.

Brown was also a true gentleman, willing to risk his own profit to preserve his relationship with a client. He practiced at a time when it was considered unethical for architects to solicit work, relying instead on reputation and clients’ recommendations. His career reflected an ethic that honored an architecture of economy, an honest and gentle wisdom born of utility. He continues to inspire others with his use of design as a vehicle to address social and environmental issues, not just to satisfy an aesthetic or nostalgic fall.