

# ARCHITECTS of Influence

BY R. BROOKS JEFFERY

## ARTHUR BROWN



Long before “sustainability” and “green” were part of our lexicon, Arthur Brown was designing, inventing, and building new ways to respond to the climatic conditions of the desert that were both modern and timeless.



The Ball/Paylore house featured movable corrugated-aluminum shade screens on a track around the patio.

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 1923 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 popular 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



The Rosenberg residence features a Trombe wall, with southern-facing floor-to-ceiling windows.

courtyards, ribbon windows, mortar-washed 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,

designed subterranean houses that took advantage of thermal mass, and incorporated subfloor radiant heating systems, insulated roof components, deep overhangs, fixed and movable shade systems, and other energy-conscious techniques decades ahead of regional and national trends. In the Rosenberg Residence (1946), he designed an early variation of what became known as a Trombe wall. The southern-facing floor-to-ceiling window facade allows the light from the low winter sun to penetrate through a narrow corridor living area and fall onto the floor and opposite wall, which act as thermal mass. After the floor and thick wall here gain solar exposure throughout the winter day, they radiate heat back out to the adjacent spaces during the night.

Brown’s Rose Elementary School (1948, now demolished) was the first passive-solar school in the country. Here the sloped aluminum roof had channels where air would heat up during the day and naturally flow to the top of the roof form. Then, depending on the season, this passively heated air was either distributed into the classroom in the winter or vented out the top to keep the interior cool during warm days.

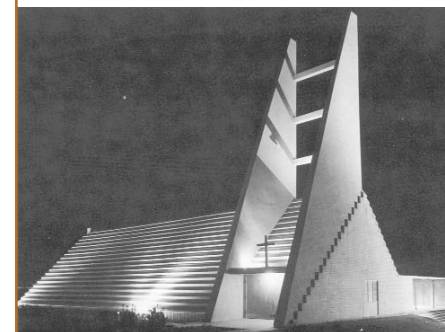
In a perfect example of a passive house and active occupants, the south-facing glass walls of the Ball/Paylore House (1952) are shaded by movable aluminum awnings, called “sky shades,” on a track at the outer edge of the semicircular exterior patio slab. These lightweight awnings can slide along the track to shade different parts of the house at different times of the day and year.

Brown’s design ingenuity made him Tucson’s most published architect until only recently. Articles about his work span five decades in books and journals ranging in topic from low-cost housing to climatically appropriate subdivisions and in breadth from *Progressive Architecture* to *Time* magazine. His award-winning designs share the pages with such modern notables as Richard Neutra, Walter Gropius, and Marcel Breuer. He received both national and regional awards for his work,

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 fad.

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Faith Lutheran Church

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### SEE FOR YOURSELF

Check out some of the remaining buildings crafted by Arthur Brown.

**First Christian Church (1948)**  
740 E. Speedway Blvd., between Euclid and 1st Avenues

**Faith Lutheran Church (1950–1951)**  
3925 E. 5th St., between Alvernon Way and Columbus Boulevard

**The McInnes House (1959)**  
2917 E. 3rd St., just southeast of Himmel Park, between Stewart and Bentley Avenues 🏠