

# ARCHITECTS of Influence

BY R. BROOKS JEFFERY

## ROY PLACE

Whenever Tucsonans are asked to choose their favorite buildings, the Pima County Courthouse, designed by Roy Place, consistently shares top billing with Mission San Xavier del Bac. Place's architectural fingerprints are all over the Tucson landscape, from The University of Arizona and Tucson Magnet High School campuses to buildings that have shaped how Tucson's cultural identity evolved in the early 20th century.



Caption about the Pima County Courthouse to go here.

Roy Place was born in San Diego in 1887. At age 23, he joined the prominent architectural firm of Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge, which—among other architectural achievements—was responsible for the signature Romanesque Revival buildings at Stanford University. By 1917 Place was working for San Diego architect J. B. “Jack” Lyman, who had just won a design competition for The University of Arizona’s Mines and

Engineering (now Engineering) Building. Lyman assigned Place to complete design revisions and act as construction manager, initiating a profound and enduring relationship with The University of Arizona.

Lyman and Place formed a partnership in 1919 that created more than 20 buildings in Tucson in five years. These buildings, including the university’s Steward Observatory, University Library (now Arizona State Museum), Bear Down Gymnasium, and Tucson High Magnet School’s original building, expressed a variety of Classical, Renaissance, and Romanesque stylistic references on a scale not seen in Tucson before.

Of these early Place buildings, the current Arizona State Museum stands out on The University of Arizona campus and led to his appointment as the campus’ chief architect. The symmetrical building was modeled after McKim, Mead, and White’s landmark Boston Public Library, which symbolically and physically elevated the act of reading—and by association, education—by placing the public reading room on the second floor. This requires museum visitors to ascend a grand marble stairway and enter the two-story reading space sunlit by tall arched windows along the south wall, lined with mahogany bookshelves, and capped with a decorated beamed ceiling. It is truly one of Tucson’s most elegant public interior spaces.

This building also marks the crystallization of Place’s emerging architectural vocabulary that

became the signature of his University of Arizona buildings: brick as a unifying element, masterful detailing, craftsmanship, and ornament, including a glazed terra-cotta frieze of opened books on the south facade.

From 1924 until 1940 Place worked as a sole principal and was Tucson’s most prolific architect of public buildings. Place’s most significant buildings during this period include the Sam Hughes School, Pioneer Hotel (now significantly re-modeled), Pima County Courthouse, Veteran’s Hospital, and Benedictine Sanctuary. These buildings all represent a shift toward the increasingly popular Spanish Colonial Revival style.

Nowhere is this style better illustrated than in the Pima County Courthouse and its use of religious building forms and ornament to define a prominent civic building. Moorish overtones, typical of this style, are also present, including the use of decorative ceramic tile throughout. The dome’s multicolored mosaic form has become a Tucson icon.

Roy Place also experimented with other popular styles, including Art Deco and Streamline Moderne, both of which can be found at the Tucson Magnet High School campus—in the gymnasium and vocational-education buildings respectively. These structures represent a stylistic evolution from his earlier Classical Revival main building.

Caption about the Tucson High Magnet School to go here.



But architecture was not Roy Place’s single passion. Place purchased two cattle ranches south of Tucson, fell in love with ranching, and passed that passion on to his children. By the 1940s, with his son Meade managing the daily operations of the ranches, he began to divide his time equally between his cattle and architecture businesses. He was also active in professional and civic organizations, including acting as the first president of the Arizona Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

Roy Place was respected for his modesty, fairness, and cooperative nature. His success, according to his daughter-in-law, was due to his business philosophy. “He’d rather give up a project than step on anyone’s toes to get it.”

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Caption about the Arizona State Museum to go here.

In 1940, when his other son, Lew, joined the firm—renamed Place & Place—he shifted the architectural signature yet again, reflecting the changing stylistic influences of the post-World War II period. After Roy Place’s death in 1950, Lew Place took over the architectural firm, designing prominent Tucson buildings using a Modern architectural vocabulary.

Tucson owes a great deal of its identity to Roy Place, who articulated a stylistic vocabulary for Tucson’s aspiring public institutions at a time of architec-



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tural disunity. Beyond the ability to transmit a strong cultural identity, Roy Place’s architecture also exhibits a level of craft rarely seen and continues to inspire practicing and emerging design professionals to make their work human in scale and detail.

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