

“Never was anyone more committed to architecture. Nick was professional to the core and practiced architecture under an enormous moral imperative. If Nick had practiced any place other than the Southwest, he would not have had the opportunity to develop architecture so filled with conviction and intuition.”

~Jim Gresham, FAIA, architect

NICHOLAS SAKELLAR

Nicholas “Nick” Sakellar, FAIA, contributed significantly to the transportation of modern architecture in the desert Southwest. His 40 years of professional practice in Southern Arizona fostered more than 250 architectural commissions whose modern designs were renowned for their use of efficient building materials and fluid sense of structure. His sensitivity to the climatic extremes of the Southwestern desert created appropriate design expressions that are still revered today.



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Arizona Trust (above). Francisco Grande (right).

Born in 1918 to first-generation Greek immigrants in Kendallville, Indiana, and raised in Oberlin, Ohio, Sakellar excelled in drawing throughout school and was persuaded to further his education in architecture. After graduating from the University of

SAKELLAR’S AWARD-WINNING, MODERNIST EXPRESSION BROUGHT NATIONAL ATTENTION TO TUCSON.

Michigan with an architecture degree in 1941, he served in the US Air Corps during World War II, flying missions over “the hump”: from India across the Himalayas to China.

After the war, Sakellar worked for the architecture firm Mellenbrook, Foley & Scott, near Cleveland, where he met his wife, Phyllis, who also trained as an architect. The Sakellars’ introduction to Tucson came on their 1948 honeymoon, after which they “didn’t have the heart to go back to Cleveland.” Tucson’s architectural expression, which had previously been defined by the revival of historic styles, was being transformed by postwar growth and the arrival of a handful of architects trained in the design principles of the modern movement.

In 1950, Sakellar’s talents as a designer were incorporated into the newly established firm of Scholer, Sakellar, and Fuller. Emerson Scholer handled marketing, and Sakellar was the creative designer whose architectural ideas and enchanting renderings convinced clients they were on the cutting edge of modern design, and Santry Fuller transformed

ARCHITECTS OF INFLUENCE



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Wilmot Library (above).
Catalina High School cafeteria.



the design ideas into legal construction documents.


In 1955, the firm won design awards from the Western Mountain Regional Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) for three projects, including the Tucson Clinic (now Tucson Medical Associates). In the same year, Scholer, Sakellar, and Fuller began designing their largest and most controversial project, Catalina High School. The vast campus incorporated materials and forms not seen before in Tucson, including exposed structural steel and concrete, wide spans of glass, and curvilinear walls and roof forms. This innovative, award-winning, modernist expression brought national attention to Tucson and attracted many of today's generation of modern architects to begin their careers with the firm. Although threatened with demolition in 1992 due to state school-building renewal funding policies, Catalina High School remains one of the most dynamic landmarks of this fruitful period of modern design in Tucson.

In 1956, Sakellar left the firm to open his own office, Nicholas Sakellar & Associates, and designed a number of prominent projects, including the high-rise Tucson House, Wilmot Public Library, and Cholla High School. Of these projects, Wilmot Public Library, which won an AIA design award in 1966, continues to be one of the most popular and well-recognized buildings in Tucson. Its deep overhangs and clerestory windows create the illusion of floating roof planes, emphasizing the building's low horizontal position on the desert. These ramadalike roof forms permit the interior space to flow with minimal structural support and extend the uninterrupted views through floor-to-ceiling windows to the exterior garden space.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, Sakellar broke away from his earlier building vocabulary of intersecting planes and began to develop a more sculptural vocabulary. In projects such as the Arizona Trust Building (now Community Partnership- Arizona), curvilinear forms began to define the building's entire

shape, with massive cantilevered shapes stretching the perception of structural stability. His buildings, however, are unmistakably marked by large spaces designed to feel intimate and personal.

Sakellar's use of innovative structural technologies and sculptural forms is also evident in projects designed outside of Tucson, including the high-rise Francisco Grande Resort Hotel in Casa Grande, and the master-planned communities in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas for the Horizon Development Company.

Practicing in an era where self-promotion was seen as unprofessional, Sakellar never sought out awards or accolades for his later work. It was only at the end of his career that he was recognized for his tremendous design contributions to the architectural profession. In 1982, Sakellar received the Arizona Architects Gold Medal, and in 1986, was invested into the College of Fellows, one of the highest honors bestowed on an American architect. Sakellar's legacy includes a generation of architects who came to Tucson because of his reputation for design: Kirby Lockard, FAIA; James Gresham, FAIA; James Merry; Richard Hanson; and John Mascarella. Though Nicholas died in 1993, his son Dino Sakellar, who joined the firm in 1981, has developed his own reputation for design excellence and continues the tradition of modern design in the desert. 

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