



# Our Modern Heritage

Post-war architects designed a modern response to our desert climate.

I was at a recent conference of the National Trust for Historic Preservation where the theme was the “recent past,” a strange term to describe the new generation of modern buildings that have just reached the 50-year threshold of historic eligibility. One doesn’t always think of things “modern” as also historic, but as we proceed through the first decade of the 21st century, the culture that defined our post-World War II lives has reached the age when we can reflect back on its significance from a historical perspective. It seems ironic that the National Trust, itself having achieved historic status, is now promoting the recognition of the same modern buildings that once represented the enemy of preservationists. But the National Trust, and the preservation movement in general, is being populated with a younger generation for whom post-war culture and architecture *is* their heritage and represents that generation’s values, which should be preserved for future generations to understand and interpret. ►

BY R. BROOKS JEFFERY / PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE,  
UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

**ABOVE & RIGHT** Arthur Brown, who had degrees in chemistry and architecture, was a pioneer in climatically responsive architecture. An example of this is the 1963 former Tucson General Hospital, where a simple aluminum shading device on the south-facing window wall doubles as a playful composition of light, shadow and texture.





In 1956, William Wilde designed the College Shop, a former women's dress store that was demolished in 2001. Strongly influenced by the work of German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the building's street façade was a rich composition of black and white marble, glass, terrazzo and limestone under the thin steel line of the roof's edge. The shop expressed the bold elegance of not only the modern movement, but also the fashions once displayed in its windows.

Tucson's architectural heritage, however, has been defined more by references to our Spanish heritage than by any attempts to break away from the romantic nostalgia associated with it. In the early part of the 20th century, when Arizona and other Southwestern states became dependent on a tourist economy, our architecture was designed using styles that reflected the expectations of newcomers and visitors of the romantic Southwest. A standard repertoire of Spanish Colonial, Mission and Pueblo revival styles dominated not only new construction, but also the transformation of existing buildings. One of Tucson's first buildings affected by this transformation was the 1897 brick and stone Romanesque St. Augustine Cathedral on Stone Avenue, which received a Spanish Colonial "makeover" in 1929. We were sold: Southwestern revival styles were seen in our public buildings, residential buildings and even codified in deed restrictions of elite subdivisions of that era. The post-World War II years in Tucson represented a boom of population growth, building construction, subdivision development and city annexation. This era also brought forth a new gen-

eration of architects who rejected the romantic revival styles that defined the pre-war architecture of Tucson for a new modern expression of form, materials and technologies that epitomized the exuberant and affluent post-war American culture.

The modern movement, begun in Europe and transported to the United States in the early 20th century, began to greatly influence American schools of architecture in the 1930s and '40s. In addition to the rejection of historical references, the modernist ideology reflected a freedom from formal spatial compositions, preferring a more dynamic arrangement of spaces that often blurred the definition of indoor and outdoor spaces. Structural systems, utilitarian and prefabricated building materials — formerly hidden behind decorated façades — were now expressed honestly as an aesthetic in their own right.

The transportation of the modern movement to Tucson is credited to three architects: Arthur Brown, Nicholas Sakellar and William Wilde. Each of them was inducted into the College of Fellows of the American Institute of Architects, a lifetime honor ▶



During his partnership with Anderson DeBartolo and Pan, William Wilde designed the original 1974 Tucson Museum of Art, a bold sculptural expression of space and form typical of the Brutalist architectural aesthetic, defined by walls of exposed corrugated concrete.

bestowed for outstanding contributions to the profession of architecture. Each also came from somewhere else and developed his own design vocabulary as he attempted to find appropriate "modern" responses to our climate. In doing so, these early modernists often revealed the inappropriateness of the previous revival styles to cope with the extremes of the desert.

One of the most innovative and inventive architects to practice in Tucson was Arthur Brown (1900-1993). When he arrived to Tucson in 1938, it was a town of 15,000 people, and he quickly developed a reputation for his creative use of new building materials and technologies. In an era defined by a housing shortage and small budgets for public buildings, Brown, like many early American modernists, prided himself on designing creative buildings using inexpensive materials. ►

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**RIGHT ABOVE** Catalina High School, designed by Scholar Sakellar and Fuller, garnered a great deal of publicity when it was built in 1955 and again in 1992 when it took a committee of concerned architects to prevent its demolition. This campus of exposed brick buildings with large expanses of glass used forms and materials not seen before in Tucson, including exposed steel beams and curvilinear roofs and walls.



**RIGHT** The 1964 Wilmot Public Library illustrates Nicholas Sakellar's more sculptural vocabulary with deep overhangs and high clerestory windows that create the illusion of a floating roof plane. These ramada-like forms cover an open floor plan that includes a sunken reading area with two walls of floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a garden that seems to erase the line between exterior and interior spaces.



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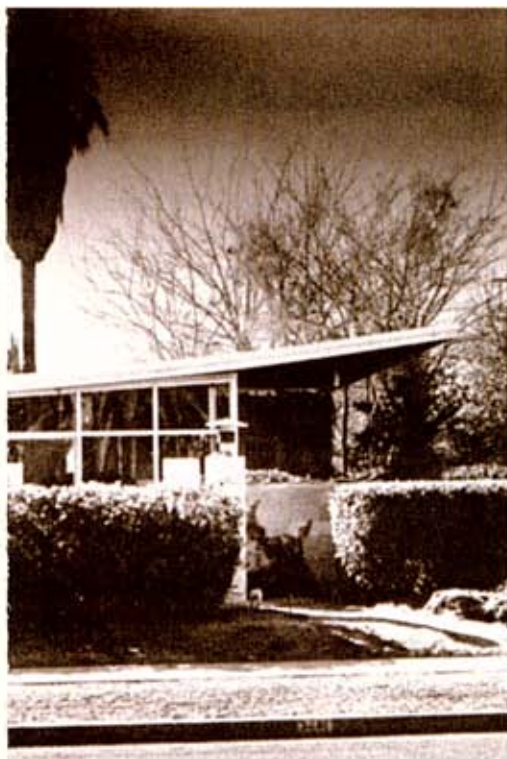
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He was one of the first Tucson architects to get published in national magazines for his modern designs, modular housing prototypes and experiments with prefabricated building materials, many of which earned him design awards. Ideas such as subterranean houses, sub-floor radiant heating, aluminum and foam insulated roof components, revolving patio covers and hyperbolic paraboloid shade structures, established his reputation as a modernist with a sensitivity to Tucson's environment.

Equally innovative was Nicholas Sakellar (1918-1993), a bold designer who pushed the envelope of building forms, textures and materials. Beginning in 1950, he and his firm, Scholar Sakellar and Fuller, won many design awards that put Tucson on the modern architecture map and attracted a new generation of architects who still have an impact on the city today. Sakellar opened his own office in 1956, and by the mid-1960s, he broke away from a more purist modern expression of intersecting planes and began to develop a more sculptural vocabulary, where curvilinear forms and massive cantilevered planes became more prominent. The third of Tucson's modern architectural pioneers was William Wilde



(1904-1984). A native of Ukraine, Wilde fled the Bolshevik Revolution to Western Europe, where he began his architectural training, finally arriving in Tucson in 1946. Though not as prolific as his modern peers, his buildings convey an expression more closely tied to the European roots of modern architecture, but appropriately suited for Tucson's climate, including cantilevered roof planes to provide deep shade and the use of innovative, and often elegant, building materials. Sadly, however, many of the buildings representing Tucson's modern architectural heritage have been demolished, contributing to the slow erasure of the physical artifacts of Tucson's early post-war history. The proposed demolition of Scholar Sakellar and Fuller's Catalina High School in 1992 and last year's demolition of William Wilde's College Shop revealed a lack of understanding and appreciation for Tucson's modern heritage as an equally ►

**ABOVE** In the 1959 McInnes House, Brown experimented with a four-inch insulated, lightweight aluminum hyperbolic paraboloid roof that acted as a single horizontal roof plane, to which was connected vertical planes of glass and concrete block.

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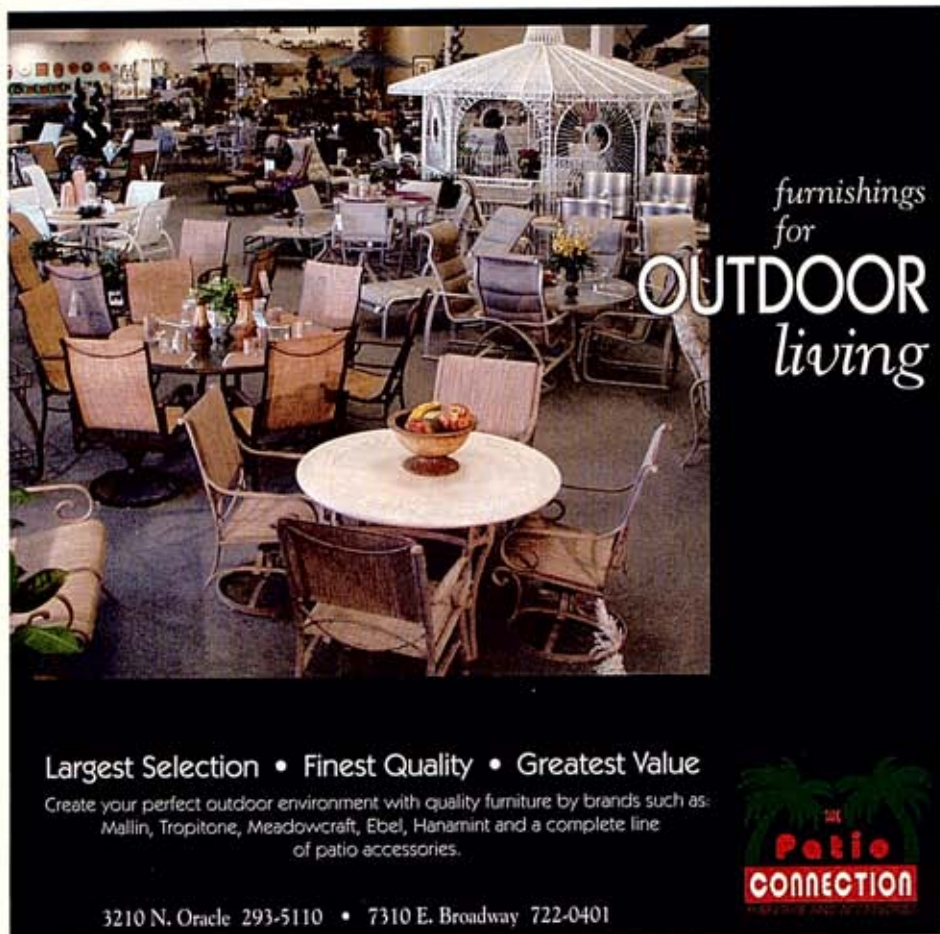
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significant chapter in our architectural history. These buildings, like their stylistically eclectic predecessors, represent the values of the time they were created. These were noble values, full of innovation, bold simplicity, social consciousness and delight. Tucson's modern buildings are especially deemed inappropriate for renovation or adaptive re-use as they are inconsistent with the popularly held belief that Tucson's architectural identity should be a romantic revival of "Southwestern" styles. In some cases, the delicate appearance of concrete, steel and glass buildings has been "deep-fried" in a batter of brown stucco and red tile roofs that transforms the original integrity of the building through an inappropriate pastiche of applied stylistic elements. Like many currently practicing architects, Tucson's modernists were looking for an architectural expression that celebrated the materials and technology of their time while shaping the buildings to meet the functional needs of the client, as well as the harsh demands of the desert. Part of the beauty of our community lies in the fact that our cultural identity is not a homogeneous expression of one culture. Each group and time period has brought the values, ideas and artistic expressions that defined them. The modern movement introduced yet another design ethic that is part of our heritage. We should not abandon these contributions to the rich fabric of Tucson's architectural heritage, but appreciate them for the era, ideals and values they represented, just as we would any other historic building. ☐

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