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SPOKANE

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MID-CENTURY SPOKANE

Appreciating a new era of historic preservation

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To say that Spokane had an unusual amount of architectural design talent residing, working, and building in the mid-part of the 20th century would be an understatement. It isn't a secret that Spokane is home to many remarkable mid-century architectural masterpieces, however, the question as to how they came to be in this rather conservative, mid-sized Western city had not been sufficiently answered. In 2016, the Spokane Historic Landmarks Commission and Historic Preservation Office applied for a grant from the Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation to explore our mid-century architecture, its designers, and perhaps answer the question of "why Spokane?"

In the most simplistic of terms, World War II was the economic boost Spokane had been waiting for. The city had gone through its share of boom and bust; weathered the doubling of the population from 1900 to 1910; endured the 1918 flu epidemic that claimed over 1000 victims; created an electric interurban train system, which allowed for increased travel and recreational opportunities; and survived the Great Depression and a 25% unemployment rate in the city. With New Deal relief programs like the Works Progress Administration, the Public Works Administration, and the Civilian Conservation Corps, Washington State began to

move away from a resource-based economy to one in which manufacturing rose to prominence.

With the rise of Nazi Germany came intellectual refugees, among them prominent Modernists Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and, of particular importance to Spokane, Walter Gropius. Gropius founded the Bauhaus design school in 1919 in Germany with curriculum that included practical instruction in the handling of materials as well as formal instruction in nature, plane geometry, volumes, colors, and composition. Gropius served as director of the Bauhaus until 1928; facing an increasingly unstable political climate in Germany — which ultimately contributed to the closing of the school in 1933 — he fled the country in 1934, landing first in Britain before arriving in the United States four years later. Bauhaus principles found a more receptive audience in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Gropius took on leadership of the Harvard Graduate School of Design. There, from 1937 to 1952, he taught the likes of Philip Johnson and I.M. Pei, as well as three of Spokane's most influential Modern architects: Royal McClure, Bruce Walker, and Bill Trogdon.

In the mid-1950s, the influence of European Modernists like Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius began to spread. Richard Neutra appeared



on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1949 as "one of the world's half-dozen top modern architects." In Spokane, architects Kenneth Brooks and Bruce Walker teamed up for the design of 1959 Washington Water Power's (WWP) Central Service Facility and Headquarters (now Avista Utilities), a sign that Modernism was no longer the sole purview of New York or Chicago or Los Angeles.

As mentioned, three of Gropius' students helped popularize the Modern Style in Spokane in the 1950s: Royal McClure, Bill Trogdon, and Bruce Walker. And in the work of Brooks, who worked for the firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill in New York before opening a practice in Spokane, can clearly be seen Miesian tenets. There was a more direct European influence as well: Moritz Kundig's Swiss education included six years of Latin, five of French, four of English, and one of Italian, along with German literature, history, math, and sciences — and that was before he even entered college. Kundig earned an architecture degree from the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich, a school that boasts Albert Einstein as one of its alums.

It wasn't long before the architectural press began to pay attention to what was happening in Spokane. "Your work is excellent," reads a telegram from John Entenza, editor of *Arts & Architecture*, to Royal McClure. Appearing in Entenza's magazine meant more than a publishing credential — it meant that McClure's ideas had the implicit approval of an editorial board that included the likes of Charles Eames, Richard Neutra, and Eero Saarinen. Other magazines, like *Sunset*, *House Beautiful*, and *Time* were also noticing Spokane's Modernists — a testament not only to their talents, but also to their reach.

Joining McClure (John F. Kennedy Pavilion, Unitarian Church, Cornelius House), Walker (WWP Headquarters, Farm Credit Bank, Wesley J. Fleming House), Brooks (WWP Headquarters; First Church of Christ, Scientist; Vern W. Johnson Residence), Trogdon (Salvation Army Headquarters),



Upper: The 1959 five-story Washington Water Power (WWP) Central Services Company Headquarters building (now Avista Utilities) was designed as part of a suburban-style campus that provided for everything from the corporate offices to the construction yard for the WWP, the largest public utility in the Pacific Northwest in its day.

Lower: The split-entry Cornelius House was designed by the firm McClure & Adkison in the Contemporary Style — a name adopted in the post-war era for modern, high-style houses.

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and Kundig (Spokane Civic Theatre, Matthews House) were architects whose names might not be as widely known, but made their mark on Spokane's architectural fabric. These additional architects include: Warren Heylman (Parkade, Wells House); John McGough (Farm Credit Bank as Walker & McGough); Frank Yoshio Toribara (Tombari Dental Clinic); Caroll Martell (Sacred Heart Catholic Church); Carl Vantyne (Fairmont Sunset Chapel and Mausoleum); James "Kim" Barnard (Barnard House); and Tom Adkison (Expo '74 site plan), amongst others.

Spokane was home to several nationally recognized Modernists. The only Richard Neutra-designed building in the entire state is in Spokane, along with what the American Institute of Architects deemed one of the five best buildings constructed in the U.S. in 1959: the Washington Water Power Central Service Facility & Headquarters (now Avista Utilities). The range of these architects' output is extraordinary: in the midst of a park-like setting on the city's South Hill is a study in Miesian restraint (Bruce Walker - Joel E. Ferris II House), while just six miles to the northwest is a swooping, soaring marvel of structural engineering (Funk, Murray & Johnson - St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church). Over a period of about 25 years, these architects changed the face of the city — and, along with it, its very personality. Their legacy can still be felt, not only in the projects they left behind, but also in the firms they founded that continue to practice today.



About the project

The Spokane Historic Preservation Office received pass-through federal funds from the Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation and hired design firm, Helveticka who teamed with Architectural Historian Diana Painter of Painter Preservation to complete the survey of 53 properties as well as the context study of mid-century modern design in Spokane. A steering committee made up of Landmarks Commissioners, architects, and preservation and museum professionals was convened to whittle down the possibilities of properties to survey in this first round of inventory work. We exclusively selected properties that had not been listed on any historic registers or had been inventoried in the past. We also picked three areas of focus: residential, commercial, and institutional. Our goal was to find a wide variety of properties spread across the city as well as both architect-designed and more vernacular resources.

Helveticka also created a website for the project — midcenturyspokane.org — and gave us content for a “mid-century a week” promotion that encompassed all of 2017. Adding up our Facebook numbers for our mid-century posts means that we have reached over 275,500 people — some might have already been mid-century architecture fans, but we bet that there are a good number of people who haven't thought much about that style of architecture, and we hope that we've created some new-found appreciation of the resources.

For us, the ultimate goal of the project was to build a preservation ethic for Spokane's mid-century buildings — while at the same time educating our citizens about those architects who put their stamp on our neighborhoods, downtown, and retail centers throughout the city. 🏡

Upper left: Designed by Warren Cummings Heylman & Partners, the 1967 Parkade Plaza Parking Garage is in the style of New Formalism. Read more about the Parkade on page 21.

Upper right: The Fairmount Sunset Mausoleum designed by Carl W. Vantyne was completed in 1965 and is characterized by its thin-shell concrete structure with folded plate construction. The “folded plate” refers to the zig-zag shape of the roof, which is formed by joining pre-cast “V” or “W” shapes to create a three-dimensional spatial structure.

Lower left: The St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church represents a masterful integration of art and architecture by the firm of Funk, Murray and Johnson, Spokane artist Harold Balazs, and French stained glass artist Gabriel Loire of Chartres. The roof of the church is a hyperbolic paraboloid made of reinforced, thin-shell concrete and developed as a way to economically span large spaces without columns or other internal supports.

Lower right: Decidedly Wrightian in character, the 1954 Norman E. and Dorothy Wells house was designed by Warren Cummings Heylman. The house was given a Spokane Chapter American Institute of Architects award in 1960.