

WHILE MANY OF THE STATE'S BUILDINGS FOLLOW THE LINES OF VICTORIAN ARCHITECTURE, A LESSER-KNOWN COLLECTION IS DEEPLY ROOTED IN THE 1950s

# MONTANA'S 'MAD MEN' DAYS

BY CAROL BRADLEY

When Bill Cowen bought Courtesy Pontiac Buick in Lewistown in 1978, he inherited a George Jetson-style showroom complete with glass windows that tilted inward beneath an aluminum facade. "It was kind of a unique building," Cowen recalled recently. "I didn't think of it really as historic."

But over time, historic is exactly what Cowen's building has become. A new survey commissioned by Montana's Historic Preservation Office hails the former Jones Motors Building, built in 1949, as one of the best examples of mid-

century architecture in the state.

"Modern architecture" is the all-encompassing phrase used to describe buildings constructed after World War II that rely on natural materials and colors to create interesting patterns and contexts. State Historic Preservation Officer Mark Baumler is the first to admit this chapter generates a preponderance of head-scratching and not a great deal of appreciation. Think more along the lines of TV's "Mad Men" set than the ornamental grandiosities of the past.

"It is a tough transition for folks to go from ▶



This page: Little Western Life Building in Helena. | Photo by Dylan H. Brown. Facing page: The Country Club Towers in Great Falls. | Photo by Larry Beckner









This page, clockwise from top left: Bennett Motors building in Great Falls. Sullivan Hall on the University of Great Falls campus. The UGF Student Center. Facing page: The Bus Depot in Great Falls. | Photos by Larry Beckner

Victorian, turn-of-the-century buildings to these form-follows-function, concrete, in many ways boxes, and see the same qualities of style and line and period in them," Baumler says, "and that's really what this study was an attempt to do."

To help showcase the buildings' legacy, Pete Brown, a historic architecture specialist who works with Baumler, hired consultant Diana Painter of Spokane to help zero in on the period from 1945 to 1965, an era when Montana's population was booming and demand raged for new schools, hospitals, churches, shopping centers and more. Federal money from the Preserve America program was used to fund the study. To rein in the

costs, the preservationists concentrated on a half dozen or so locales: Billings, Bozeman, Butte, Great Falls, Havre, Helena, Lewistown and Warm Springs.

The search for good examples revealed a couple of drawbacks. First, Montana lacked the lucrative clients who could have commissioned the bigger, more ambitious buildings that can be found on the West Coast or back East. Moreover, the state's climate wasn't exactly conducive to experimentation: The single-pane glazing popular in the 1950s might have succeeded at breaking the wind, but it would have been ice-cold to the touch.

Nevertheless, Brown and Painter were



able to identify a respectable list of worthy buildings.

There is the modern post and beam Student Union Building at Montana State University-Northern's campus in Havre (designed by Max E. Kuhr & Associates in 1960); the modern vernacular Cogswell Building on the State Capitol Complex in Helena (Victor H. Walsh, 1965); and the modern-marina style of the Safeway Grocery in Butte (architect unknown, 1963).

Some of the surveyed buildings sport flat roofs and curved walls that suggest forward movement: the Great Falls bus station (McIver & Cohagen Architects, 1947); Bennett Motors in Great Falls (Melvin A. Nelson, 1948) and the Cloyd Funeral Home in Lewistown, a former movie theater, (architect unknown, 1950) are all good examples of this form, known as streamline moderne. And the Petroleum Building on the Montana Tech campus in Butte (J.G. Link & Co. 1953/57) is an excellent example of Public Works Administration moderne, a style characterized by a former symmetry, limited ornamentation and a spare use of fine materials.

Despite its diminutive size, the Little Western Life Building at 600 North Park Avenue, Helena, designed by Morrison-Maierle & Associates in 1961, "pulls out all the stops on modern architecture," Brown says. Among its features: multiple colors of brick, ceramic tile, enameled metal panels, a concrete screen block that creates patterns, highly polished marble, exposed aggregate and plenty of glass.

And Painter was delighted to discover the University of Great Falls, an entire campus of modern architecture, with an emphasis on curtain-wall construction, a then-new practice that concealed a building's structural wall behind an exterior skin of glass or something equally showy. UGF's campus was designed not piecemeal, but as a whole by the local firm Page & Werner in 1959-60. The survey includes all 12 original buildings.

"There's a couple of cool things about that campus," Painter says. "When you walk down that main quad, there's the theater and how it relates to the art building and the main quad. And the Student Union Building is suspended out over space. It's pretty subtle; it doesn't ▶

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MARK BAUMLER,  
STATE HISTORIC  
PRESERVATION  
OFFICER

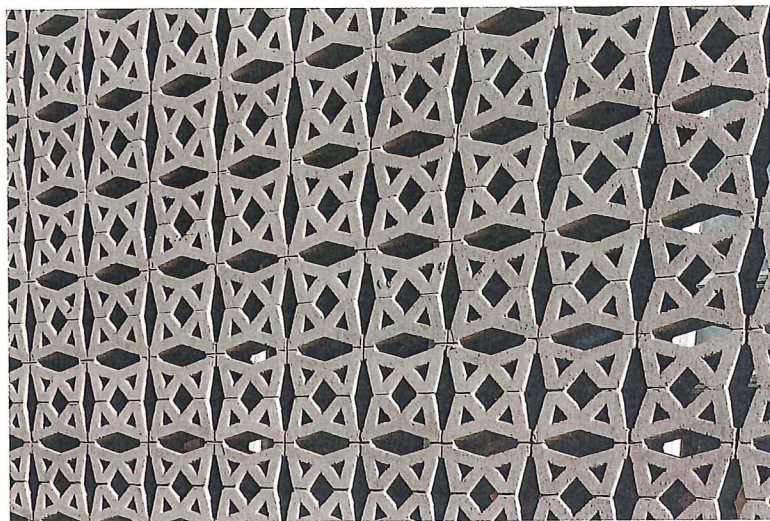


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'IF SOMEBODY UNDERSTANDS THE IDEAS BEHIND SOMETHING, THEY'LL SEE IT IN DIFFERENT WAYS. IF YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT ARCHITECTURE IS TRYING TO DO, YOU LOOK AT IT IN A VERY ONE-DIMENSIONAL WAY.'

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HISTORIC ARCHITECTURE SPECIALIST



Modern architecture detailings on the outside of the art building on the University of Great Falls campus. | Photo by Larry Beckner.

hit you in the face. But if you study it and know what it's about and appreciate the material and construction methods, it really grows on you."

Across the Missouri River in Great Falls is Country Club Towers, an 11-story concrete and stucco condo building designed in 1955-56 by Shanley and Shanley. The building's flat roof and three-sided penthouse, designed for use as a community room for residents, took its influence from the international style. It was the state's first high-rise.

"Imagine, in the mid-1950s you're driving down the street and you see this stark white tower—what kind of impression that would have made," Brown says. "There was nothing like it in Montana."

In Bozeman, the round footprint and laminated wood ribs surrounded by plate glass make the former Billion car dealership building (Oswald Berg Jr., 1968) at the corner of West Main Street and North 19th Street an exceptional example of the Google style of modern architecture. Named after an iconic coffee shop in Los Angeles, Google refers to car-oriented architecture—"like building a giant sign meant to catch your eye," Painter says. "Once you start to see them they're everywhere."

But the most eclectic building in the study is the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Elementary School in Butte. Designed by J.G. Link & Co. and built in 1958-59, the school rises three stories, a floor at a time, on a hill overlooking the neighborhood, where the school's primary color exterior and zig-zag roofline are impossible to miss. "Awesome and well-loved," Painter notes.

The consultant was struck by the number of old-school Montana architects, like John Link and George Shanley, who spent decades designing traditional buildings only to embrace a whole new philosophy.

"If somebody understands the ideas behind something, they'll see it in different ways," Painter says. "If you don't

understand what architecture is trying to do, you look at it in a very one-dimensional way."

Not all modern architecture deserves to be studied or even necessarily saved. Baumler confesses: "There's a couple I still don't quite get. But national preservation isn't about preserving only the pretty, it's about preserving things that represent a period in history and breakthrough in master design characteristics in architecture."

His office expects to nominate a few of the buildings for the National Register of Historic Places; a nomination for the curtain-walled Walt Sullivan building next to the state Capitol in Helena is already pending. And it's entirely likely the state will hold a workshop for city and county planners to help them recognize the buildings' value.

A little education can't come too soon. At the Montana State Hospital in Warm Springs, two first-rate examples of modern architecture now languish. The glass-walled Food Center (Norman J. Hamill, 1960) has been demolished and the Modern Neo-Expressionist Receiving Hospital (Van Teylingen, Knight & Van Teylingen, 1957-59) sits empty and is deteriorating.

In Bozeman, the old Billion auto dealership has been sold to CVS and is scheduled to be demolished, and in Butte, the school district is replacing the windows and the brightly colored enamel panels of the Kennedy School to save on heating costs.

Even those inward-tilting windows at Courtesy Chevrolet in Lewistown are no more. Cowen replaced them in 1999 after a tornado blew through, sending shattered glass 50 feet. "When we redid it, we made the windows smaller to make it more efficient," Cowen explained. "They used to be 9 feet tall and 7 feet wide. Now they're about 7 by 5 and they hang vertically." **M**

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