

Designing close to home

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While the boxy wooden office building on the corner of East Franklin and South 31st avenues has housed the Close Associates for 55 years, the story of the architectural firm began 15 years before the building was constructed and extends into the neighborhoods of Bridgeland, where the business has firmly left its mark. In 1938, architects Winston Close and Elizabeth Scheu (Win and Lisl to those who knew them, and for our purposes) started the firm Close and Scheu. The business later became Elizabeth and Winston Close and, finally, Close Associates, which this year is celebrating its 70th year. It's a legacy that began with the Closes and is still growing under the watch of their protégé, Gar Hargens.

The founders

Win and Lisl met while studying for their master's degrees at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The founding of the firm was not their only union in 1938 — the two got married, as well.

Win became a professor of architecture at the University of Minnesota, and he later held the position of campus advisory architect from 1950 to 1971. Win was largely responsible for the planning of the school's West Bank campus. He also led design work on the Washington Avenue bridge, though his plans included a much grander bridge — with a moving sidewalk and shops on the top walkway — than was actually built.

During those years, Lisl ran the couple's architectural firm. One of only a few female architects in the country during the early part of her career, Lisl designed her first home for three University of Minnesota professors in 1938. The house, at 252 Bedford St. in Prospect Park, cost just \$7,643 to design and construct. (Fifty years later, an article in *With Respect to Architecture* stated that the house, with its flat roof and blue concrete sidewalk, "was so shocking in Minneapolis in 1938 that it was facetiously credited for giving a passerby a heart attack!") In the decade that followed, Lisl designed several other houses in the neighborhood, including ones at 222 Melbourne Ave. SE and 19 & 21 Barton Ave. SE.

Never one to fill the traditional woman's role of her day, Lisl, in past interviews, has attributed her accomplishments as an architect to having a good housekeeper. Ironically, that help around the house might have influenced her designs; the Close's youngest son Bob, a Minneapolis-based landscape architect, said some who have bought Close-designed homes have criticized the functionality of one room in particular: the kitchen. "They were her weakness," said Bob, "because she was never in one."

The disciple

In 1968, aspiring architect Gar Hargens traveled cross-country to attend graduate school at the University of Minnesota. That fall, at the suggestion of the late Ralph Rapson — one of his professors at the School of Architecture — Hargens took a part-time internship at Close. He's remained at the firm ever since and is now the principal architect.

"Having been here with them for so long, I really believe I'm a disciple of theirs," Hargens said about his mentors. "I'm proud of them and what they've stood for."

For the first few years that Hargens was at the firm, Lisl was on her own, directing a staff that varied in size from six to a dozen employees. Though Hargens describes Lisl as a slight Viennese woman, he said she had the potential to intimidate at times. "[I've] seen 250-pound superintendents quake when she was unhappy," he said, chuckling.

But his boss had a soft side, too. Asked by Hargens toward the end of her career what the most important thing was to her in her practice, Lisl answered, "That we made a lot of friends." Hargens said this caught him off-guard, "because she was always so vehement about architectural principles."

The Close trademark

Both Roy and Bob Close said their parents' designs took on certain trademark characteristics. Roy said their work features a "real attention to light and shadow," as well as a relative absence of interior walls. Their use of natural materials — from redwood to homasote — was also a signature trait. Hargens said there was a sort of "egalitarian-ness about their designs, even though, later on, they were designing for the rich and the famous."

Since Hargens has been at the firm, Close Associates' Bridgeland designs have included a remodel of Prospect Park United Methodist Church, work on parts of the University of Minnesota Medical Center-Fairview and the interior work on the historic renovation of the Pratt School building.

But of all their Bridgeland designs, Hargens says the Close's pride and joy was undoubtedly Ferguson Hall, the music school at the University of Minnesota. As musicians — Lisl was a cellist, Win a violist — their unique perspective and enthusiasm for the project was remarkable and left the project's selection committee "beaming," he said. Roy agreed.

"The opportunity to do that building was really important to them," he said.

Over the years, the Closes won numerous awards for their designs both in and out of Bridgeland. In 1969, the two were elected to the College of Fellows of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and in 2002, Lisl was awarded the Minnesota AIA Gold Medal for Lifetime Achievement.

resides in a Minneapolis nursing home and is in good physical health, though she has senile dementia which affects her cognitive abilities, Roy recently said. She celebrated her 96th birthday earlier this year.

Different styles, same mission

Despite his different architectural style, Bob and Roy Close said Hargens “was definitely influenced” by their parents. Like Win and Lisl before him, Bob said Hargens has a knack for understanding clients’ needs. Hargens said he’s learned the right questions to ask from designing living spaces, and attention to detail in smaller projects like residential designs has made Close’s larger projects better.

Gail Graham, who oversaw the construction of the Seward Co-op’s current building at 2111 E. Franklin Ave. more than a decade ago, said she was impressed with Hargen’s ability to deliver on the Co-op’s vision. “There’s always challenges working with architects,” Graham said. “They always have great ideas, and some of them cost too much, so you have to talk them back down to the ground along with you. I found Gar was able to create a vision and deliver a project ... that kept us to our budget, and that was unique.” (Hargens also designed the Co-op’s future home, just a few blocks east of his Seward office.)

Since taking over the business from the Closes, Hargens said one of his biggest changes has been a departure from solely modernist architecture. He has also taken on more renovations in recent years, including additions to the Closes’ own designs. “I love those projects where we’re taking what Win and Lisl started, and adding to it,” he said.

Toward the end of Lisl’s tenure, Hargens talked her into doing a couple projects with peaked roofs. “She was kicking and screaming the whole way,” Hargens recalled, admiring his mentor’s staunch dedication to modernist architecture.

The Hargens legacy

To say Hargens’ impact on Bridgeland in recent years has been substantial would be an understatement. In addition to the Seward Co-op projects and Pratt School, other projects have included Dartmouth Place townhomes between I-94 and Stadium Village; Metro Place, a combination of shops and condominiums on East Franklin Avenue; the Ronald McDonald House at 621 SE Oak St.; and several private homes and home renovations in the Marcy-Holmes, Prospect Park and Longfellow neighborhoods. Additionally, Close Associates was commissioned four different times to renovate Dania Hall — the historic Cedar-Riverside community center. Nearing completion in 2000, however, the building and the project were lost to a devastating fire. Hargens calls it the project he “mourns the most.”

Hargens attributes the reason for so many Close Associates designs in Bridgeland to the friendships his former colleagues developed throughout their careers. “Architecture is largely a result of relationships,” he said.

While Close Associates celebrates a 70-year milestone this year, its owner just reached a landmark of his own. Hargens celebrated his 65th birthday not long ago, and though it’s an age most often associated with retirement, he’ll be the first to tell you he’s not planning to leave the business anytime soon.

The topic of retirement begs the question of the fate of Close Associates when Hargens does decide to leave — a prospect further complicated by the fact that he has been a solo practitioner for the last 15 years, hiring out for each of his projects based on the specific need and expertise each individual job requires. While Hargens seemed to dodge the question, the Close sons appeared confident that their parents’ legacy is more than just the name. “While it would be nice to see the name carry on, it probably wouldn’t be a high priority for my parents,” Bob Close said.