

The Insider

Excellence by design

Veteran architect
Gar Hargens looks
back — and forward

BY JEREMY STRATTON

Special to Finance & Commerce

At the age of 16, Gar Hargens found himself transfixed by the studio of his father's friend, an architect. The man told him how tough the business was — long hours, little pay — but the seed was sown.

A few years and an English degree later, Hargens' grandfather was similarly discouraging, recommending he follow the "Wallace Stevens example" and keep his occupation as a bank examiner while pursuing architecture in the off hours as an avocation.

Undeterred, Hargens followed his interest to the University of Minnesota, where Ralph Rapson was heading the school of architecture and a movement of midcentury modernist architecture that included Elizabeth (Lisl) and Winston (Win) Close, for whom Hargens would work as protégé and partner, eventually taking over the firm in 1988, 50 years after its founding.

Today, he has built on — sometimes literally — their legacy and cemented his own as president and sole architect at Close Associates in Minneapolis.

His work includes the award-winning

restoration of a mansion built in 1902 on St. Paul's Summit Avenue by James J. Hill, the new Seward Co-op in Minneapolis, and a list of unique and signature residential homes.

Hargens' style pays homage to the Closes' — the flat roofs and long, overhanging eaves; the compact, modular design — and he tries to carry on their adherence to natural lighting, view, economy, compact spaces and affordability.

Though steeped in the Close legacy, Hargens came out of graduate school to help lead a movement of increased collaboration among the previously insulated architectural disciplines, he said — a change from the era of his predecessors. After graduating, he led studios to encourage such collaboration.

Hargens also feels he has opened the firm to different styles through collaboration with the client.

"I think the architect has an obligation ... to be able to come up with something that is true to his principle but satisfies the client," he said.

The results are singular designs that bear the Hargens signature, like the soaring, eagle's-wing-like roofs of the rural Red Wing Hedin home, or the bold but efficient Eigenfeld house in St. Paul — three bedrooms and 1,640 square feet built in 2000 for just \$180,000.

What's old is new

Hargens is also a champion of historic preservation, something that wasn't pop-



Architect Gar Hargens stands in front of one of his most difficult successes, the Seward Co-op in Minneapolis. Problems included a property-line dispute, unexpected building conditions and city requirements. "This one almost killed me," he said, "and it was certainly a huge financial loss, but I'm very proud of it." (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

ular in the mid-20th century. His designs range from "seamless" additions — like his current work on the historic 1880 Guthrie House in St. Paul — to complementary additions, updated with a Hargens flair.

What might have been his greatest restoration, Dania Hall, went up in flames in 2000. The renovation was fully designed and 80 percent completed.

"We were this close," said Hargens, who counts the project, though doomed, as part of the Close legacy. He mourns the building's lost features, like the fourth-floor ballroom and the balcony made of curved, laminated beams.

He remembers getting stark consolation, after the tearing-out of a different project, from the late Rapson, who saw his own Pillsbury House and Guthrie Theater demolished during his lifetime.

"It's a tough business," said Rapson, echoing advice from Hargens' early days.

Hargens has found success in difficulty, as well, most recently with the new Seward Co-op.

"This one almost killed me," he said, "and it was certainly a huge financial loss, but I'm very proud of it."

Problems included a property-line dispute, unexpected building conditions and city requirements. It was the tragic death of fellow architect Mike Schrock — a partner on the project who had officed with Hargens for 15 years — that was the biggest blow, personally and professionally.

Now in the midst of the green building

movement, Hargens sees a lot of age-old design practices at play. "It's great to see it getting all this publicity, but it's not new," said Hargens.

He listed past Close Associates projects with "green" elements like passive solar, from the Closes' 1938 "Skywater" earth-shelter cabin to his Harriet Tubman shelter, built 20 years ago as part of an NSP energy assets program — a forerunner of LEED, said Hargens.

Both he and the Closes "firmly believed in flat roofs," which allow superior water control. "We had to fight for them in Minnesota," he said. "Now everybody's green-roofing."

Hargens embraces new developments and technologies along with the tried-and-true, such as strides in geothermal heating and cooling, which he is currently incorporating into a small house in Minneapolis.

That said, he questions adding green features just for the sake of LEED points, which are sometimes unnecessary and amount only to bragging rights. He offered to make a plaque for one client that read: "Designed accord-

ing to LEED principles."

"And that ... tenth of your budget can [instead] go into the building," he offered.

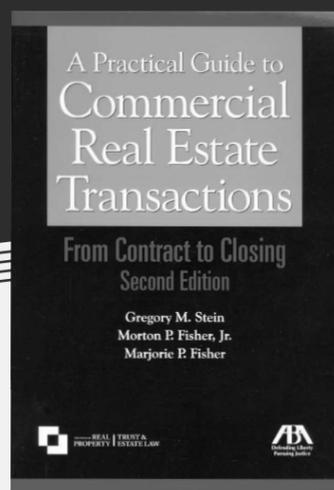
Even after four decades of work at Close Associates (Hargens passed 65 recently but has no plans to retire), the architect's wife, Missy Staples Thompson, reminded him yet again how tough it can be to truly succeed in architecture.

"Gar," she joked, "architects don't get good until they're 80, at least."

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— Architect Gar Hargens

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