Sarasota

LEEDY CERTIFIED

Architecture Sarasota Honors Gene Leedy With an Exhibit and Tour

Architect Max Strang will guide a tour of Leedy's architecture and share intimate stories about his time with the legendary architect.

By Kim Doleatto • March 24, 2022

The Solomon Residence & Studio, on Big Pass on Siesta Key.

IMAGE: COURTESY OF SOLOMON ARCHIVE

Gene Leedy, a founding father of the Sarasota School of Architecture, led a long and decorated career in midcentury modern architecture and beyond. He'll be celebrated with a weekend tour of his work which will also kick off a three-week-long Leedy-focused exhibition. The event is led by Architecture Sarasota, a nonprofit dedicated to preserving the Sarasota School of Architecture style.

Although the bulk of Leedy's work is in Winter Haven, Florida, where, in 1954, he moved his practice, Leedy started his career in Sarasota and left a lasting legacy.

Gene Leedy

IMAGE: POTTHAST STUDIO

At just 16 years old, he enrolled at the University of Florida and graduated with a degree in architecture. He then moved to Sarasota and worked under the tutelage of Paul Rudolph, an internationally acclaimed architect and a founder of the Sarasota School of Architecture style that emerged in the 1940s. Also called Sarasota Modern, the style is known for its Florida-sensitive design that often incorporates what were at the time avant-garde elements, like sliding floor-to-ceiling glass doors, roof overhangs to increase shade and expansive living areas that encouraged air circulation before many homes had air conditioning. It was a mindset that nurtured innovations in engineering, displayed in Leedy's approach to his projects.

Syd Solomon was an abstract painter, and the home served as the site of Sarasota's "beach culturati," a subtropical salon where artists, writers, intellectuals, scientists and playwrights gathered. "That house became the location of Sarasota's brain trust and shows how great architecture can create a platform for creativity," says Russell. "It did what great architecture always does—inspires new ways of thinking, being and living."

Philip Guston, Kurt Vonnegut, Betty Friedan, Jacques Cousteau, Elia Kazan, Joy Williams and others flocked to the artists' colony, which had grown out of the work of A. Everett "Chick" Austin, Phillip Hiss and Solomon. Their efforts at the Ringling Museum, and in establishing New College of Florida's Institute of Fine Art, cemented Sarasota as an epicenter of art, education, design and innovation.

Among Leedy's notable former employees are architects Lawrence Scarpa and Max Strang, whose firm, Strang Design, collaborated on *The Gene Leedy Influence*, an official selection in the 2022 Architecture, Design & Art Film Festival that will be shown at the exhibit. Strang will also guide the weekend tour in Sarasota and Winter Haven, and share stories of his time with Leedy, who passed away in 2018.

He's best known for his use of precast concrete and double-T shaped beams, at the time engineering marvels that allowed for strong, lofty, large spaces like the 9,000-square-foot president's residence at the University of South Florida in Tampa he designed in 1990. Leedy applied the same new wave of thinking when it came to his residential works.

"He designed modular and scalable homes that could easily be added to, so a couple could have a starter home that could grow. Some of his houses are still on Drexel Avenue in Winter Haven," says Architecture Sarasota executive director Anne-Marie Russell. "Many still don't have air conditioning because they worked so well with his passive system for shading and cooling."

In Sarasota, Leedy designed Brentwood Elementary School in 1958, the House for Contemporary Builders in 1950 and two residential projects. One of them, the Solomon Residence & Studio, on Big Pass on Siesta Key, was built in 1970 and will be highlighted at the exhibition.

Opening events for the Gene Leedy Weekend include a VIP exhibition opening on Thursday, March 31, at Architecture Sarasota, and a VIP cocktail reception on Friday, April 1, at the Leedy home in Winter Haven. A tour of Leedy-designed civic and residential structures will take place on Saturday, April 2, also in Winter Haven. On Sunday, April 3, the weekend celebration moves back to Sarasota, where a symposium devoted to Leedy will be held at Architecture Sarasota's McCulloch Pavilion.

The Gene Leedy exhibition runs from April 7 to May 29 and kicks off with Gene Leedy Weekend from March 31 to April 3. Learn more or buy tickets here.

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