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Cast in Concrete

Brilliant, bold and enough to break the mold, architect Max Strang remembers Gene Leedy.

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By Phil Lederer

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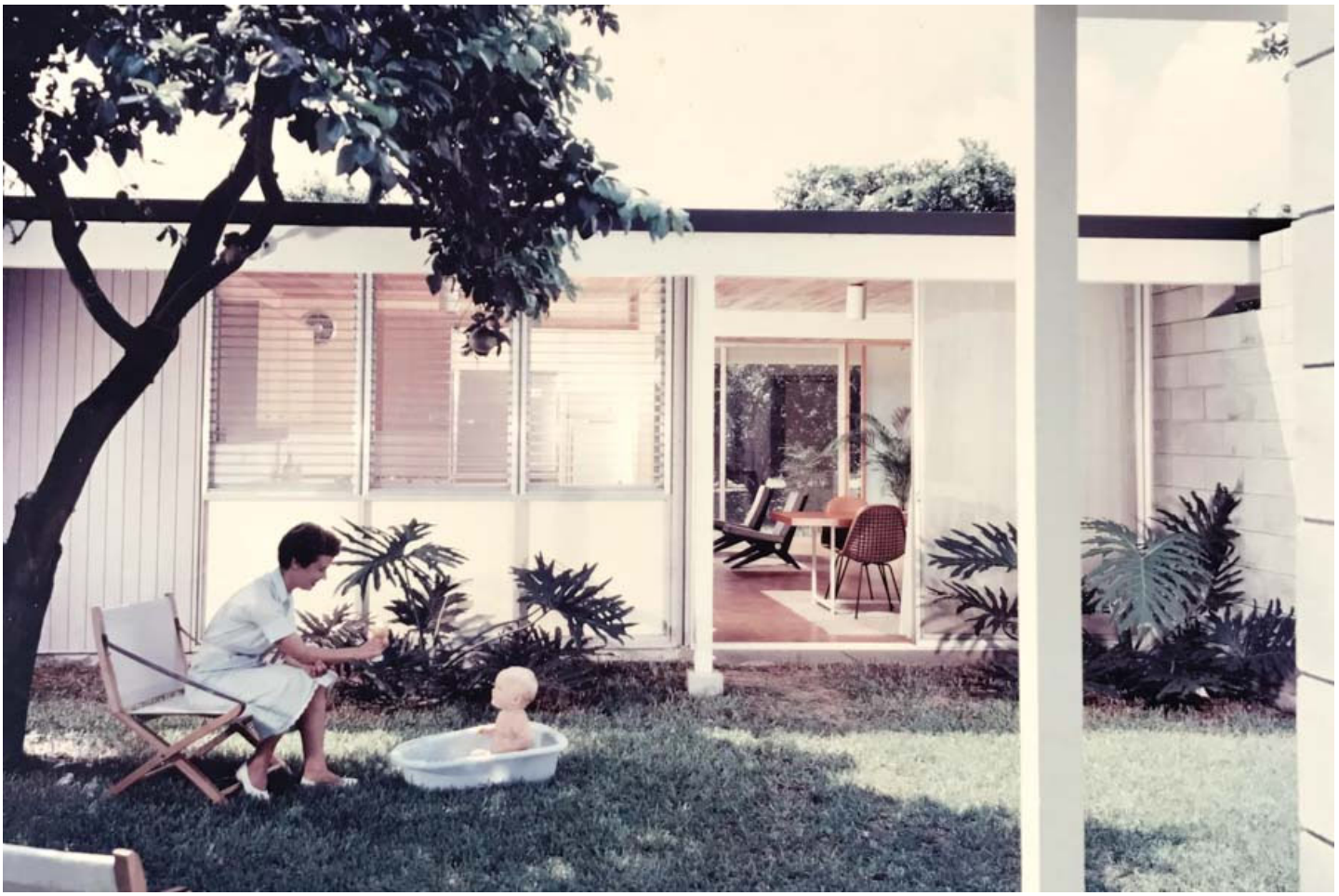
Though primarily known today for his work transforming the Florida city of Winter Haven, where he designed City Hall, the Chamber of Commerce building and more than a dozen other notable commercial and residential projects, Gene Leedy's architectural contributions to Sarasota's singular built environment remain difficult to overstate. A founder of the Sarasota School of Architecture, Leedy worked alongside the likes of Paul Rudolph and Victor Lundy, trailblazing an architectural philosophy in-line with and as distinct as the Floridian landscape surrounding. In light of his November passing, just a week before the passing of Sarasota colleague Edward 'Tim' Seibert, *SRQ* sat down with Max Strang, founding principal of Strang Design and Leedy protégé, to talk innovation, ideals and winning over Winter Haven.

You grew up in a Leedy house, right? Max Strang: He designed the house for my parents and my four older siblings, probably in ‘68, ‘69, and I was born in ‘70. In fact, Gene Leedy takes responsibility for my birth. He told my mom that she was going to get pregnant as soon as she moved into the house, because it was such a great house.



Was Leedy's architecture something you appreciated at the time? That's a complicated answer. I grew up in this amazing house, built of pre-stressed concrete, double-tees and exposed block and glass. So, for me that was normal. And, you go down to Winter Haven and he built half the town. He built the City Hall, the Garden Club, the Country Club, the doctor's offices, friends' houses. Growing up in Winter Haven, you expected this great architecture. It wasn't until I moved away that I realized how great it really was.

Did this put you on the path to becoming an architect? When I was a kid, I never said I wanted to be an architect. But, subconsciously, it got into my system. I went to the University of Florida and bounced around a few majors, and it wasn't until I stumbled across the architecture building there that it all clicked. "Wait a second, architecture."

Was Leedy someone you talked to about that path? Even before that. My family and Gene Leedy were neighbors on Casey Key growing up. So, I couldn't even escape when we left Winter Haven; we'd come to Casey Key and he'd be there. I remember him telling great stories, and as a kid he'd drag me and his son up to the Syd Solomon House—and we met Syd Solomon going through that studio. It was crazy. That was very impressionable, especially on a kid.

Now an architect yourself, how do you see Leedy's work? He was a bold innovator. The guts to take those 70-foot pre-stressed stands and then turn them into a house? He took this industrial material and made it very homey. He took these concrete components and elements that were used to build bridges and warehouses or industrial buildings, and he made them warm and cozy and a pleasure to live inside. He was the first to do that. That innovation was his biggest contribution, although Paul Rudolph would say that his best work was one of these little courtyard homes that he did in Winter Haven.

Did he bring the same industrial touch to those courtyard homes? Eventually, he did, but his very first ones, and this is the exact same time frame that the Sanderling Cabanas were being built, '53, '54. He designed the spec homes in Winter Haven, called the Craney Spec Houses and he lived in one until the day he died—65 years. They're just little jewels. Little courtyard jewels. Very similar to the Paul Rudolph designs that were in the mid-'50s going on here.

Why Winter Haven? He recognized that he needed to get out of Paul Rudolph's shadow pretty early. Or else he would forever be destined to be an apprentice of Paul Rudolph's. He chose Winter Haven and the impact he made on that one town is enormous. In the '50s, when he decided to move there, it was this beautiful little citrus town, all these orange groves and clear lakes. Winter Haven is such a conservative little town and somehow he got all these conservative bankers and population in general to do these radical structures.

That's an extraordinary feat unto itself.

How did he do that? He would always dress very conservatively. He said he would go into these banker meetings and developer meetings and dress conservatively but wow them with radical architecture. They didn't know what was coming. They just went along.

How would you describe his place within the Sarasota School of Architecture? He's pretty much the one that invented the term. He knew there was something special going on here. He had the art of self-promotion, Gene, and he knew that this movement should have a name. Thank God that he did.

What is the place of that movement now? It's being deeply appreciated now, with 60 years of hindsight. It's much more deeply appreciated and cherished. But there are two things going on with the Sarasota School of Architecture now. One, it's being discovered for the first time by a lot of people that had no idea about it. Two, there are some firms today that are advancing the same principles and drawing a lot of inspiration from that movement. Our firm included. We're happy to carry on those ideals.

What ideals are those? One is this enduring intrigue of modernism and exploration of modernism. A lot of it is rooted in structural expression. Indoor/outdoor connection is another big one. Ongoing experimentation. Trying to push materials in different ways. And, underscoring the entire movement was just a great understanding of space. You're not living inside a house, you're living inside a space.

Do you have any favorite Leedy structures? Ironically, I can't nostalgically say it's my own house that I grew up in. Those small courtyard homes are clearly some of my favorites. They're pending Natural Historic Designation right now. Another great one is the Dormon House.

What about the Dormon House? That was one of his first real explorations with jumping to that industrial material. The concrete double-tees in a three-story house by a lake. It has a raw beauty to it. You have to, maybe, squint hard to appreciate some of his work—because some of it is not for the faint of heart—but that comes with his willingness to push the boundaries.

Can generations to come get to know a little bit about Leedy, the person, through his work? Absolutely. The boldness of his personality comes through in the boldness of his structures. He evolved this very signature, identifiable style and it was bold, like him.

What lessons do you still carry on in your firm today? I remember he was very insistent to keep the building simple. Don't try and do everything you know in one building. When you keep it simpler, it's a much more timeless result. That was true then and it's true now.

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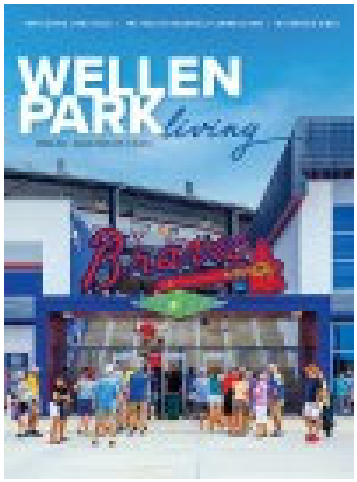

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