

Ronald L. Molen

Ronald Lowery Molen was born and educated in Indiana, attending Indiana University and the University of Utah, graduating in 1958. His architect's license was awarded in 1964 in Idaho and 1966 in Utah. Working as a designer for several years in the office of Glen Ashton Lloyd, Molen organized his own practice in 1964 where he designed hundreds of buildings in Utah, Idaho, Colorado (Grand Junction), Virginia, Maryland, and California. His projects have been published in numerous magazines and journals including features on Westshire and Village 2 in Family Circle, Sunset, and Better Homes & Gardens.

The success of Molen's residential designs is achieved by the continuity created in materials, scale, and site design. Within each design, past styles and forms are translated into the present. High ideals for large gathering spaces and separate private space were popularized by Frank Lloyd Wright. Molen joined these spaces together innovatively for "open, free and spontaneous space" believing that "a true family house offers a vital, imaginative, productive environment...a place for creative family living." Surrounding people with natural materials meant providing freedom, whereas in other developments technological progress to use extruded products (vinyl, aluminum, rubber) meant restriction. The challenge to Molen, and frequent teammate Vern Hardman of Research Homes, was to provide all this at an affordable cost for all Americans.



Ron Molen's commercial work includes several prominent buildings in Salt Lake City including the Salt Lake Hilton Hotel (originally the Sheraton, 150 W 500 S), State of Utah Board of Education Building (250 E 500 S), Envirowest Office Building (205 W 700 S), Mony Plaza (SE corner 400 E 500 S), and American Plaza (SE corner 200 S. West Temple). The common thread through these designs includes the prominent use of brick, ribbons of windows both vertically and horizontally, and subtle details such as accented corners with curves and rounded towers near the entrances, windows and entrances inset into brick recesses, arched windows, and a simple mix of wood with brick. By integrating these materials and details into the design, many of these commercial buildings

present a solid, heavy mass to the street and have retained their original design. His institutional work includes the design of and LDS Chapel in Pleasant View and additions and remodeling for Bonneville High School in Ogden.

Ron was a long-time member of the American Institute of Architects, Utah Chapter and served on the Board for the state's Institute of Fine Arts. Retiring from private practice in 1990, his experience in design ranged from residential to commercial, industrial, and educational facilities. For over 25 years, Ron Molen personally designed all the structures that left his office. From Westshire, Sherwood Hills, and the sixteen individual houses he designed for his family, Molen has created a signature style and aesthetic that is both recognizable and desirable today.

Upon retiring, Ron took up writing and published several novels including My New Life, The Bishop, Four and Counting, The Bridge, and The Campaign. However, his earliest writing came in 1974 with House, Plus Environment, detailing his philosophy of designing communities of excellence. He also helped found the Gun Violence Prevention Center of Utah. Turning his focus to painting, his artistic work portrays the beauty of Utah's natural environment and landscape.

Westshire

Through the late 1940s, growth in Granger and Hunter Townships was severely restricted by a lack of water. Several subdivisions at this time had wells for drinking water and septic systems for waste. Westshire's development was facilitated by a resident's vote in January 1953 that approved installation of local water and sewer lines starting in October 1957. The entry of Hercules into the aerospace industry in 1958 accelerated development for the 4,500 people that would work there by 1963.



On the "east side of West Valley City," a new neighborhood called Westshire emerged starting in 1962. Due to a lack of funds at the outset, architect Ron Molen and builder Vern Hardman of Research Homes, began with a small plat for building a few houses. As it was built and sold, they started another plat, and through 6-8 plats over a decade, Westshire was completed. Creating its own boom in population for this area of Granger Township also secured Westshire its own LDS Ward and Meetinghouse for many years. Designed by Tom Losser in the office of Glen Ashton Lloyd, the Westshire entrance "gates" are a signature element today.

Fifteen designs were created by Molen for the subdivision numbering over 160 houses. With appeal to the middle class, houses began at \$10,000 but near the end of development were \$45,000 on the upper end. The early houses cost nearly \$10,000 to build. A high water table from nearby springs necessitated above-ground building, ruling out the inclusion of basements in almost every house.

While some designs were built once and others nearly twenty times, each house has unique characteristics such as lofts, hidden storage spaces, and atriums. Character-defining features of Molen-designed houses include hand built, wood, light sconces on the exterior, rough sawn cedar used as exterior sheathing as well as interior décor,



highly decorative front doors, and flat roofs. The center of homes in Westshire often features a sunken pit with benches focused around the hearth, giving the family an intimate gathering space. Molen also changed the traditional orientation of public space for Westshire houses, moving the primary focus to the back yard rather than to the street with large windows, prominent decks or patios, and the inclusion of at least twelve swimming pools in the neighborhood.



There was experimentation with materials as well as standard designs. One house built of 80% concrete, won the team the Grand International Award, Rocky Mountain Region, for the use of concrete. In the midst of construction, the team discovered that pre-fabricating some elements of houses in their shop would cut construction time and building cost, yet provide the same appearance and quality. The pre-fab system was later named Modcom.

This is exactly the type of neighborhood that architect Ronald L. Molen set out to design and build. Not wanting to design the typical subdivision, Molen wanted to create a stimulating place for raising families with a modern appearance that would be competitive on the housing market.

Today, Westshire draws attention as one of the few unique neighborhoods in Salt Lake Valley built completely in the modern style. Residents take pride in the interesting design of their houses, retaining their original look and feel. Beyond their building stewardship, neighbors have formed a tight-knit community that has an annual pancake breakfast and occasional ice cream socials.

To keep up with happenings in Westshire, visit www.westshire.info and subscribe to the newsletter.