O'NEIL FORD
ARCHITECT

A Catalog of the Works
of O'Neil Ford in
Denton, Texas

City of Denton
Historic Landmark Commission

1992
Denton, Texas
O'NEIL FORD IN DENTON

O'Neil Ford is arguably the most prominent architect to have come from Texas. In his long and distinguished career, he achieved both popular and critical success, yet retained a strong life-long link to his hometown of Denton.

Born Otha Neil Ford in Pink Hill, Texas in 1905, he moved to Denton in 1917 after the death of his father. His mother, Mrs. L.B. Ford, kept boarders in their home at 304 W. Avenue “D", just west of the campus of North Texas State Teachers College (now the University of North Texas). A graduate of Denton High School, Ford attended N.T.S.T.C. for two years, studying English and physics. Financial problems forced him to withdraw from college, but he continued his studies through a correspondence course while working at Dyche's Corner, a hamburger stand at the corner of Avenue “A” and Hickory Streets.

In 1926, Ford took a position as an assistant to Dallas architect David Williams. His first work with Williams was drafting for the old First Presbyterian Church on South Elm Street (demolished in 1965). The first residence he designed was built in 1929 on North Bell Avenue. In this period, Ford designed an open air theater for the campus of N.T.S.T.C., and two structures that were never built, a 130 foot memorial tower and a student center.
Ford and his partner Arch Swank designed several residences in Denton in the late 1930s, but the high point of their Denton work in this period was the design and construction of the Little Chapel in the Woods on the campus of the College of Industrial Arts (now Texas Women's University). It was the Chapel, completed in 1939, which would propel Ford into a position of national prominence. Eleanor Roosevelt spoke to a crowd of 4,000 at the dedication on November 1, 1939.

His list of achievements is considerable. In 1960 Ford was made a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. He was appointed to the National Council of the Arts by President Johnson and in 1974 would be declared a "National Historic Landmark" by the Council, the only individual ever so honored.

This correspondence school architect from Denton would lecture at Harvard, at Cambridge, become a Professor of Architecture at the University of Virginia and have a chair in architecture named after him at the University of Texas at Austin.

Among his best known works were the Little Chapel in the Woods, Trinity University in San Antonio, Skidmore College in New York, the Denton Municipal Building, the Tower of the Americas in San Antonio, the Bell Tower at the University of Dallas, and Texas Instruments buildings in Dallas, Italy, France and England.

Late in his career, Ford would recall the influences of his days in Denton and credit his pursuit of the creative life with his fascination with the Denton County Courthouse. Ford would say, "I used to just stand there, wondering how they ever got it up ... I was in Denton just the other day ... so I went over to look at the courthouse again and still don't know how they ever did that blasted, blessed thing."

O'Neil Ford died on July 20, 1982 in San Antonio, Texas.

Mike Cochran, Chairman
Historic Landmark Commission

1. 1819 N. Bell Avenue

Built in 1929, this structure was the first residence designed by O'Neil Ford. It was built for Mary Marshall, chairman of the Art Department of the College of Industrial Arts, while he worked as an assistant in the office of Dallas architect David Williams. Many distinctive Ford touches can be seen in this early example of his work. This home is a recorded Denton Historic Landmark.

2. 220 Marietta Street

Built in 1939 for Miss Anne Alford, this O'Neil Ford-Arch Swank design featured expansive screened-in porches with cantilevered cement floors on the second story, and a standing seam metal roof. This 1940 photograph shows the house as it was originally built, before the porches were enclosed.
3. 1712 Highland Park Road

Designed by O'Neil Ford and Arch Swank in 1939 for Miss Lillian Parrill and her two sisters, this home was originally located at the corner of Avenue "D" and Chestnut Street. When the house was featured in the April 1940 issue of Pencil Points magazine (now Progressive Architecture), the photo caption noted the oiled hemlock siding, the steel casement windows and its $6,500 price tag. This residence was moved to its present location in 1967 to make way for expansion of the University of North Texas.

PLAN OF THE PARRILL HOUSE FROM PENCIL POINTS MAGAZINE, FEBRUARY, 1940

4. 2280 W. Oak

The Jack Johnson house was designed by Ford and Swank in 1938. Although the large front and back porches have been enclosed, many of the original interior details, such as the site-built interior doors and high profile window-stop, give this house the feel of an early Texas ranch house.

5. 1408 Country Club Road, Argyle

The Roland and Authella Ford Hersh house was designed by O'Neil Ford for his sister and built in 1963. Built of Mexican brick, this home features intricately carved entry doors by brother Lynn Ford, and whimsical ceramic light fixtures by long-time Ford associate Tom Stell.
6. First Christian Church
1203 N. Fulton
The First Christian Church was designed by O'Neil Ford and Howard Wong and completed in 1939. The concrete roof is a hyperbolic paraboloid (a favorite Ford technique engineered by Felix Candela) supported by ten concrete columns. The resulting roof sections represent the fingers of hands extended upwards in prayer. Of note is the unique marble and steel communion table, a gift from the architect to the members of the church. The intricately carved doors are by Lynn Ford.

7. Little Chapel in the Woods
Texas Woman’s University
The Little Chapel in the Woods was designed by O'Neil Ford and Arch Swank and built with unskilled labor in 1939. This National Youth Administration project brought national attention to the work of O'Neil Ford. Under the direction of Dorothy Antoinette LaSelle, hundreds of students produced stained glass windows, light fixtures, intricate mosaics, and the massive hand carved doors of this elegant building. Eleanor Roosevelt spoke at the dedication of the Little Chapel in 1939. Ford later called that project the most outstanding because of the participation of the students and the NYA laborers. In 1985, the Texas Society of Architects voted the Chapel one of the twenty most architecturally significant buildings in Texas. The Chapel is recorded in the National Register of Historic Places and is a Texas Historical Landmark.
MUNICIPAL STRUCTURES

O'NEIL FORD, WORKING WITH ROLAND LANEY AND OTHERS, WAS
RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DESIGN OF FIVE PROJECTS FOR
THE CITY OF DENTON FROM 1963 TO 1968.

8. Denton Municipal Building

Situated around a tranquil sunken courtyard, the Denton City Hall
serves as example for many popular Ford themes. Doors carved by Lynn
Ford, the ceramic light fixtures by Beau Mood, the redwood lattice-work
supported by concrete columns, and the Saltillo tile floors can be found in
many other Ford designed buildings. Built in 1967, the city hall was
designed to allow for upward expansion of up to four stories.

PROPOSED EXPANSION PLANS FOR DENTON MUNICIPAL BUILDING - 1967

9. Municipal Swimming Pool

Designed by Ford, Roland Laney and Carolyn Peterson, in 1965, the
popular Denton Municipal Swimming Pool follows many of the stylistic
themes of the City Hall. Ford didn't want the pool to become another
rectangle of concrete surrounded by chain-link fence, so he utilized the
berm concept to create an amphitheater-like space where swimmers might
relax in comfort.

10. Air Terminal

Denton Municipal Airport

The air terminal was designed by Ford and Roland Laney in 1967.
11. Emily Fowler Public Library
The core of the Emily Fowler Public Library was designed by Wyatt C. Hedrick and completed in 1949. The first major addition to this building was designed by Ford in 1969. To accommodate Ford's plans for the library, Oakland Street was relocated to its present position. In 1990, Ford's firm designed the addition to the library, which includes the atrium garden area. One feature of note is the stacked tile wall at the front of the building. On permanent exhibit in the new section of the library is a wall display of chip-carvings by Lynn Ford from the collection of Authella Ford Hersh.

12. Denton Civic Center
The Civic Center was built in 1966 as a multi-purpose community center. The intricate system of cables and pipes that support the roof are based on the design of the bicycle's hubbed wheel. This prestressed cable-suspension system frees the large interior space from internal supports. The carved front doors were built by Lynn Ford.
13. Selwyn School Complex — 3333 W. University

In the mid-sixties, Ford designed several buildings for Selwyn School and helped to develop a master plan for the campus. The Preston House, a girls' dorm, was built in 1965; the Kramer Science Building and the Moody Dining Hall, in 1966.

14. Fairhaven Retirement Home
2400 N. Bell

Ford, Arch Swank, and Roland Laney designed this retirement home from 1963 to 1965.

15. The Gazebo
U.N.T. Campus - Hickory and Avenue "A"

The Gazebo at U.N.T., designed by Ford and constructed with assistance from Evers Hardware Store, was a gift to the school by the Class of 1928. Until 1967, this campus landmark housed a massive concrete-block water fountain. Lynn Ford participated in the construction of this project, and his mark can be seen in the carved timbers of the hub-spoke rafters.
The Roland and Authella Ford House #1
304 W. Avenue “D”

Built on the site of Ford’s boyhood home (now on the U.N.T. campus), the Hersh House was designed in 1939 by Ford and Arch Swank. Labeled “Chicken Coop Gothic” by Ford, it was described by S.B. Zisman in *Pencil Points* magazine (April, 1940) as “The first real Texas house of the present movement.” This house was demolished in 1965 to make way for expansion of U.N.T.

Open Air Theater - U.N.T. Campus

The Open Air Theater was designed by Ford in 1928. At the dedication Ford was described as the “unpaid architect of the College”. This theater was demolished in the 1960s.

Memorial Tower - U.N.T. Campus

In 1928, Ford designed an impressive 130 ft. Memorial Tower for the N.T.S.T.C. (U.N.T.) campus. This tower was to serve as a memorial to the ex-students who had served in World War I. The proposed tower was to have been built, “fittingly of Texas limestone, and of a very distinctive design — of a true Texas type, a mixture of Spanish and American architecture.” One enthusiastic supporter, Dr. J. L. Kingsbury, said that the Tower would, “win academic immortality for the College.” Fund-raising efforts failed during the Depression and the structure was never built.
This pamphlet owes much to many people. It is not possible to name all those that have helped, but some names must be mentioned. Without the considerable assistance of Roland Lamer, Arch Swank, Ms. Toni LaSelle, Cyntha Bell, Nita Thurman, Bill Farmer, Ron Forsythe, Richard Himmel of the U.N.T. Archives, the Blagg-Huay Library, Special Collections, Carolyn Peterson of Ford, Powell & Carson, Mary Carolyn George, the City of Denton Historic Landmark Commission and the City of Denton Planning Department, this project would not have been possible.

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