

LES STECHESEN, MANITOBA ARCHITECT

"I am a torn individual, on one hand I'd like to do more; on the other I'd like to say I've done enough."

This outlook comes from Leslie J. Stechesen who, at 46, has been an architect for half of his life. Should he cease his practice today, Stechesen would be remembered for many changes to the Winnipeg cityscape and for the milestone community centre of Leaf Rapids. What then is the story behind this Manitoba architect?

Les Stechesen is not a native to Manitoba; he was born at Fort William, Ontario in 1934. His father was a carpenter, building houses and working at a lumber yard and mill plant. He had two uncles also involved in construction and one uncle played a significant role in motivating the young Leslie towards a career in architecture. "Uncle Stechesen" had studied architecture in the 1930's at the University of Toronto but had withdrawn from the programme owing to poor health. Discussions about architecture with his uncle and a general enthusiasm towards building that he acquired through helping his father resulted in Leslie applying directly to an architecture school after completing his secondary education.

The decision to attend the University of Manitoba and not an Ontario College was made following a high school guidance night where a guest architect affirmed that Manitoba had the best programme in Canada. The school was certainly at a high point in its history. The dean, J.A. Russell, a product of Harvard, had set the course toward the modern movement in architecture. Russell was also successful in attracting good academics from Boston and M.I.T. The influence of Gropius was strong at the school and it took a lead in Canada for the international modern style of building.

Immediately prior to deciding upon studying architecture, Stechesen considered Interior Design. It would mean a shorter course and secondly, he was intensely interested by interiors. Although he chose architecture he has found that his interest in interior planning has had a key influence on his work. In fact, Stechesen argues that some architects fail with the insides of their buildings because they design from the exterior.

While studying at the University of Manitoba Stechesen came under the influence of several professors, the most noteworthy being James A. Donahue. Stechesen reflects that Donahue's intense commitment to reducing things to their simplest

while maintaining sensitivity to proportion and detail to add the elements together has been a singular persuasion on his own work. Additionally, Donahue's concern for the use of natural materials is also felt by Stechesen. While living in Thunder Bay, Stechesen had grown to appreciate the beauty of nature, even as he enjoyed buildings he developed a deep concern to achieve a proper intermingling of the city with nature.

At the architecture school Stechesen made close friendships with Jack Cook and Jeff Barge, both of whom were positive factors in his development. Jack Cook is now in Arizona after working with Bruce Goff for several years. Jeff Barge presently teaches at Boston. Barge was a bright and sensitive student always restive and always up-to-date on architectural developments. Leslie made some field trips with his peers. Notable was a trip to Chicago where he found Frank Lloyd Wright's work very stimulating, and two years after graduation, accompanied by Barge, he conducted a serious architecture study trip from London to Istanbul.

The summer breaks were spent in Thunder Bay at the lumber yard making windows and doors. This closeness to wood gave him a fondness for the use of that material and a knowledge of how to work with it.

At graduation Stechesen chose to work not in Ontario but in Winnipeg. Through Jeff Barge he secured a position with Waisman - Ross. Four months later he left for Libling - Michener. At Waisman - Ross, Stechesen did not have the freedom to do the things he wanted to do. At Libling - Michener he found that freedom and harmonious mixture of personalities that would provide him fifteen years of satisfying practice there.

In the late 1950's Libling - Michener's architecture stood out. Although it seems simple in retrospect it was indeed new and significant for its time. Schools, for example, were still being designed using 1930's formulas which stated amongst other criteria, that ceilings were to be twelve feet to allow natural light half way into a twenty-four foot long room. Gymnasiums were on the longest side which was parallel to the building. Stechesen wanted to do things differently and at Libling - Michener he was given the chance.

By 1959, Stechesen was Head of Design at Libling - Michener. In addition to increased design responsibilities Libling - Michener offered a wide variety of work from developments to institutions. The opportunity to execute a diversity of design with a spectrum of clients and thirdly, to be able to follow through for a number of years on

each job gave Stechesen a complete grasp of how his designs worked and their various merits or weaknesses.

By 1965, it was time for a break and Stechesen proceeded on graduate study in London for a year. Stechesen's work at Libling - Michener was now reaching a plateau. His Southwood Village, 1967, won a National Design Award and the Manitoba Teachers Society Headquarters Building, 1966, won the Manitoba Association of Architects Award for Excellence.

In 1971, Leslie Stechesen left Libling - Michener. Although he was offered a partnership he felt he needed a change. Originally he intended to go to British Columbia with Waisman who was planning to set up a practice there. But in a seemingly out-of-the-blue occurrence the Manitoba New Democratic Party Government offered Stechesen the Town Centre project for Leaf Rapids. This job carried with it the requirement to set up his own office. Leaf Rapids took three years to complete after which he continued on his own. George Fredrickson joined him first and was followed by Alec Katz. Stechesen continues to be primarily concerned with design with Fredrickson balancing the operation by organizing the completion of working drawings.

Subsequent to Leaf Rapids, Stechesen won a 1974 Award of Excellence from the Manitoba Design Institute for his "Cabin Unit 3" commissioned by the Department of Tourism. The Courtyard building, renovated in 1977, received a Heritage Canada Annual Award.

The fledgling firm blossomed under N.D.P. sponsored projects and with \$30 million worth of work on the books all looked rosy. Then disaster, the government was defeated and replaced by a budget cutting Conservative regime. An Auto-Pac Headquarters, a hospital and public housing projects were shelved. For six months the partnership did nothing and during the next two years it almost folded.

Presently, Stechesen has been awarded a \$3 million Air Command Centre for Canadian Forces Base Winnipeg and the hospital project has been revived. His office now runs with three architects, a specifications writer and three draftsmen.

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Stechesen's buildings have earned him many distinctions from Massey Medals to National Design Awards. Yet there is such a great variance in their styles that identification of his work is difficult. This fact is certainly a result of his design philosophy which dictates that no one

style can be continued throughout a life time's work nor can it be applied to all problems. Stechesen reacts and adapts to the situation and to each individual project on its own terms. By examining some of his most important buildings one can see how his design principles hold true.

The Grosvenor House Apartments, built in 1962, used pre-cast concrete to give it a striking architectural expression unique but homogenous to its setting. The under-building parking was a solution to the limits of lot size and reflects a skill Stechesen learned from Michener, to make the best design within the budget available. The Grosvenor House was a 1964 Massey Medal Competition finalist. Stechesen notes that proof of its success is simple, "the tenants don't move out."

St. Paul's High School afforded the opportunity to work closely with the Jesuit Fathers. Reacting to the serene discipline of Jesuit Life, Stechesen recalled a European monastery he had seen which seemed to typify that lifestyle. Within a tight budget characteristic of 1964, he employed proportion and regularity coupled with a beautiful woods-like landscaping to achieve that serene mood. The relationship of the Fathers to the school was further strengthened by connecting their residence to the classroom block. St. Paul's High School won a 1967 Massey Silver Medal.

St. John Brebeuf Church was a solution to the situations of time and space. Stechesen responded to neighbouring building heights, the corner location and to the change in Roman Catholic relationship of clergy and parish. He chose the curve form because it held a softness that people would respond to. Using a spiral concept he created two entrances and brought worshippers in on two curving spires. The spiraling effect was further heightened by the symbolic use of light at the altar. The congregation was brought closer to the priest and the traditional railing "barriers" were removed.

Village West was Stechesen's first townhouse design and in fact the first such development for Winnipeg. Although Toronto had similar projects completed there were few precedents and for Stechesen, Village West was a significant learning experience. The lessons were applied two years later in the 1967 Southwood Village. This National Design Award winner was able to provide privacy within a multi-family environment. Stechesen is socialist in nature, being concerned about people and the quality of their environment. To help in his understanding of their needs he has worked with a Tenants' Participation Programme which contributed to the design process.

Southwood Village is a pedestrian centered complex of 98 units linked by winding, interlocking walkways. Automobiles are carefully removed to an underground park. The Village cedar "siding" exemplifies Stechesen's affinity for natural and lasting materials of wood, concrete and steel. To a great part Southwood Village brings together Stechesen's key goals in architecture; harmonious combination of city to nature, emphasis on simplicity, attention to detail and use of natural materials.

If any building demonstrates the flexibility of Stechesen's handling of a client's needs, it is the Manitoba Teachers' Society Building. The concrete window mullions of the Teachers' Headquarters projects the strong identifiable image that the client desired. The building also satisfied a requirement for maximum interior space by eliminating interior columns in the office and auditorium.

Perhaps the ultimate step in Stechesen's career was the Leaf Rapids Town Centre, a project he found dynamic and one of which he remains proud and excited. The Town Centre has been described by Robert Gretton, of The Canadian Architect, as a "brilliant answer to society's searching demands".

The Town Centre's exterior is simple and plain while the interior acts as an oasis of life. The concept was to bring the community together to gain less costly public facilities as well as optimum social interaction.

Leaf Rapids is a true case of Stechesen's philosophy of total influence and response to a situation. In this case, a small community 450 miles north of Winnipeg and subject to temperature extremes of 35° to -49° C. The complex accommodates leasable commercial space, a 40 room hotel, council facilities, federal offices, a health centre, theatre, gymnasium and a kindergarten to grade 12 school.

Stechesen worked with representatives of all user groups, experts on education, shopping and hotel facilities as well as government officials. The ability to synthesize a many faceted client is witness to a valid role and position of the architect in building today's environment.

The 220,000 square foot, \$8.5 million Centre is based on a quadrant plan. A cross chaped circulation route unites the sections. This interior street forms a "town square" or meeting place at its centre. The complex slopes to the east allowing low angled winter light to enter its heart. The use of natural light, wood siding, plants

and brightly coloured furniture is continued throughout the building.

Leaf Rapids is an integration of commercial interests, public facilities and local government and as such, it fosters social development. Joint use arrangements have been formally agreed upon, such as the use of hotel beds to augment the health centre. These accords affect all aspects of life within the complex and a Town Centre Committee was formed comprising of representatives from the Merchants Association, school, recreation centre, health centre, hotel, Leaf Rapids Corporation and the local government district. The leadership shown initially by the architect has been transferred to the local authorities. This joint co-operation initiated in the design stage must be continued during the Centre's operation to allow it to reach the fullest of its potential.

Stechesen has not had another project of such magnitude. His design for the Manitoba Housing and Renewal Corporation's Senior Citizen's Home encompassed some of his concerns for the quality of life. The residence sits obliquely on a corner lot with maximum front facing windows and exposure to the sun.

Another interest area for Les Stechesen has been the renovation of older buildings. A first step in this direction may have been his proposal to incorporate the Empire Hotel castiron facade with a development of the Canadian National Railway's East Yards. The hotel front was to become an integral and enhancing part of the new structure. The historically significant portion of the edifice would be saved while the structurally unsound interior would be removed.

Stechesen's interests in the refit of old buildings reached a summit with the renovation of a 1912 commercial structure. The Courtyard, located within walking distance of downtown Winnipeg, provided a covered interior space and balcony circulation route for boutiques, restaurants and offices.

The project cost \$23.50 per square foot and Stechesen states, did not make money. However, the Courtyard has been immensely satisfying to him as he became his own client for the first time and was able to address himself to a tremendous degree of detail. The Courtyard features Mexican tile to add warmth and colour to floors while interior brick walls were stripped and sandblasted. Austrian bentwood chairs, a fountain, plants and a fig tree complement the atmosphere. Stechesen has continued renovation work with the Brian Melnychenko Gallery and Philipp Adam Salon. These

smaller projects allow him a break from larger jobs which can be very tiring.

The Air Command Headquarters will be a large project. In order to formulate his design Stechesen will have to respond to its individual requirements of energy conservation, open flat site, operational role and sense of identity as the focus for the Canadian Forces Air Element.

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Looking to the future Stechesen points out the heavy hand that politics can play in an architect's life. A philosophy of "you take what you can get" is often necessary to survive. The N.D.P. government had been particularly helpful to young architects and in fact was responsible for Stechesen's own practice. The change in government proved fatal to many young firms and almost caused the end of Stechesen's. The Liberal leanings of a partner have now resulted in the Air Command Building being awarded to Stechesen. The support of political parties by architects through direct donations appears the only way to win big government jobs. "Is this right and just?" asks Stechesen. Whatever the answer, there appears to be no end in sight for the patronization in what most Canadians contend is free enterprise.

Secondly, Stechesen emphasizes that architects must concern themselves more with energy conservation. In the 1950's there was no importance on energy and now it has risen to a place of pre-eminence. Should architects fail to keep abreast of technology they will lose jobs to engineers. Architecture schools as well as practicing architects must react to this challenge.

Stechesen foresees a period of fewer new buildings and more retrofit or making good of what now exists. The Courtyard remains, to Stechesen, a satisfying solution that has exciting applications elsewhere.

In regard to his own architectural endeavors Stechesen would like to produce a Manitoba regional accomplishment. Something that comes from Manitoba and that belongs in Manitoba. Stechesen maintains that the Leaf Rapids concept can be applied in many small communities of Manitoba but requires the co-operation and open mindedness on the part of local authorities and citizens. Bringing people together and reducing cost of services are still problems that need to be addressed throughout the province.

On the other side of the coin Stechesen exhibits a desire to avoid the "big" job and step back a few paces to not doing architecture but something new, more modest but still design related. Trying to promote a bigger practice carries with it the chance for traumatic collapse that he does not want to endure for a second time.

Leslie Stechesen may state openly that he yearns for the rest of a more sedate existence but his commitment to finding a regional design that places man, his urban life and nature in harmony belies that fact that we will be seeing much more of him and his work.

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