

DOUGLAS B. SYDNOR: HISTORIC BUILDINGS DEFINE OUR SPIRIT

THE ARIZONA PRESERVATION ARCHITECTS

BY DAVID M. BROWN

Triangle Building, circa 1962, Ralph Haver, AIA, Scottsdale. Courtesy Scottsdale Historical Society

For Douglas Sydnor, FAIA, worthy historic buildings are our village elders. They tell us about sculpted spaces. They tell us about crafting community and ourselves. Distinguished in their graying, they offer new insights into our shared future.

*Douglas Sydnor, FAIA,
March 2017.
Courtesy Doug Sydnor*



Kiva Craft Center, circa 1956, T.S. Montgomery, Scottsdale, Arizona. Courtesy Scottsdale Library

The prominent Valley architect established Scottsdale-based Douglas Sydnor Architect + Associates in 1993. He has practiced exclusively in Arizona for 40-plus years, completing 225 commissions, and his work has received more than 60 professional design awards and been extensively published. The American Institute of Architects, for example, awarded him its Arizona Architects Medal in 1992.

“The firm tries to maintain a healthy mix of new work with a continuing commitment to celebrating our architectural heritage through historic preservation and adaptive-reuse projects — particularly in Scottsdale’s downtown,” explains Sydnor, the founding chairman of the Scottsdale Historic Preservation Commission. “We have attempted to physically save historic architecture and also develop a broader awareness of its being threatened.”

Among his current adaptive-reuse projects in Scottsdale is restoring and contemporizing the 1955/56 **Kiva Craft Center** on Fifth Avenue in Old Town designed by Thomas Stuart ‘T.S.’ Montgomery. Originally called Craftsman Court, the landmark center helped propel young Scottsdale into national prominence as a Native-American-crafts-focused city.

“For decades, Doug has proven his commitment to the architectural heritage of Arizona and Scottsdale as a passionate proponent of historic preservation,” says Don W. Ryden, AIA, a Phoenix architect who is collaborating with Sydnor on the Kiva Craft Center project and the proposed renovation of the Kimsey Building, also on Indian School Road downtown. “He has led his own campaign to develop community awareness and understanding of Arizona’s built environment, especially regarding post-WWII Modernism.”

Ryden adds that Sydnor, as chairman of the AIA AZ Architectural Archives Committee, has also helped to conserve the working drawings and renderings by mid-20th-century Arizona architects. “These threatened intellectual resources reflect both the art and the craft of architects before computer-aided drafting,” he explains. “If significant historic buildings must fall to the wrecking ball, perhaps the efforts of architectural historians like Doug may, at least, save the original drawings of the places that defined a community’s spirit.”

A FATHERLY FOUNDATION

Sydnor’s commitment to the architectural heritage of the Valley derives from his father, Reginald ‘Reg’ Gene Sydnor, AIA (1928–2004), an exemplar of 20th-century Phoenix

architecture. He and his contemporaries helped create the robust today's design environment: Lescher & Mahoney; Ed Varney and Robert Sexton, FAIA, his former partners; Al Beadle; Fred Weaver and Dick Drover; Bennie Gonzales; Ralph Haver; and Blaine Drake.

A West Virginia native who came to the Valley after the Second World War, the elder Sydnor was active with Edward L. Varney Associates, A.I.A., Phoenix, from 1955 to 1965. He became a partner in 1965 with Varney Sexton Sydnor Architects until 1980.

During 42 years of practice, 'Reg' Sydnor ("Redge") completed 250 projects in Arizona, Washington and California, predominantly healthcare and commercial. These include the 1957 Motorola Governmental Electronics Plant, Scottsdale (with Edward L. Varney Associates) and the 1981 St. Joseph's Hospital Medical Center Additions and Renovations (with Varney Sexton Sydnor Architects). The firm also completed six Valley homes, beginning with the 1966 Sydnor Residence in today's Paradise Valley.

"While growing up in Phoenix, I witnessed numerous architecturally significant structures being demolished unnecessarily, and this continues to this day," says Sydnor, who has written books on Arizona historic architecture including *Plugger: The Architecture of Reginald Sydnor* (2011). A 50-year Scottsdale resident, he has been a columnist for the Scottsdale *Republic* and writes on historic architecture for the bimonthly *Arizona Contractor & Community Magazine*.

Those buildings were sometimes bladed and then sat for a decade before being developed. "Obviously, there were no imminent pressures to improve the property in the first place, but the community may have lost a historic jewel in the process," he adds.

Some of these jewels are the 1923 Scottsdale High School, Lescher & Mahoney Architects, Scottsdale; the 1931 Fox West Coast Theater, S. Charles Lee, Phoenix; 1945 Palms Theater, Lescher and Mahoney Architects with William L.

Pereira, FAIA, Phoenix; 1966 Cine Capri Theater, Henry George Greene with Haver, Nunn, & Jensen, Phoenix; and the 1968 Guaranty Bank, Jacob John Schotanus, Jr., AIA, Scottsdale.

As a young man, Sydnor realized that in many cases if the property owner or developer had wanted to save an historic structure, there would always have been a way to accomplish that while redeveloping the property to meet zoning ordinances and market demands.

Because he has experienced these losses, his résumé also includes service on 200-plus boards, commissions, committees and design charrettes furthering historic preservation in the Valley.

"In his nearly 50 years of volunteer leadership, Doug has advocated for the arts, Scottsdale history and historic preservation, libraries, community leadership education, architectural professional development/standards and business issues," says long-time friend and collaborator, Joan Fudala, community historian in the city of Scottsdale. "He continues to be the 'go to' guy to get things done in Scottsdale."

The two, for example, co-hosted the **Scottsdale Heritage Connection** Salon Lecture Series, 2017–2019, on historic architecture, arts, schools and housing.

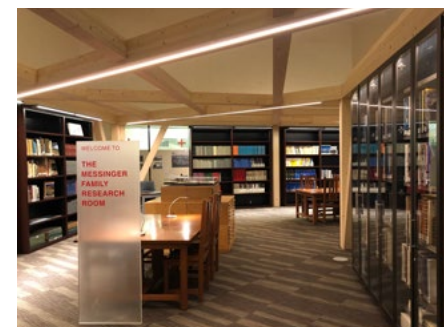
"The Phoenix area is a relatively young community with not the largest inventory of important historic structures," Sydnor says, "so we need to step up and preserve the best of what remains for current and future generations to learn from it, respect it, cherish it, and, hopefully, protect it."

BALANCING THEN AND NOW

Born in Bremerton, Washington, Sydnor moved with his parents to the Valley in the 1950s and graduated from Saguaro High School in Scottsdale. He received a bachelor's in Architecture at Arizona State University in Tempe and later a master's in Architecture at Harvard University, where he learned from architects such as Jerzy



Scottsdale Artists School Renovation (former Scottsdale Grammar School), circa 2000, Scottsdale. Courtesy Douglas Sydnor Architect and Associates, Inc.



ABOVE: Scottsdale Grammar School, circa 1928, Lescher & Mahoney Architects, Scottsdale. Courtesy Scottsdale Historical Society
BELOW: Scottsdale Heritage Connection, Scottsdale Civic Center Library, completed 2019. Courtesy Studio Asap

Softan, a Le Corbusier associate and Richard Meier, also a Corbu admirer, as well as abstract-expressionist painter, Helen Frankenthaler.

From 1977 to 1980, he worked for Varney Sexton Sydnor Architects, in Phoenix. From 1980 to 1989, he collaborated with his father at their Sydnor Architects, P.C., also in Phoenix. He opened his firm when his father retired.

On his own, Sydnor has delivered historic preservation projects as well as award-winning new-builds such as the 1998 Scottsdale Community College Applied Sciences, 2009 City of Scottsdale Appaloosa Branch Library and the 2016 Barry and Peggy Goldwater Library and Archives Study.

"Doug has an uncanny ability to balance contemporary design with appropriate historic preservation," Fudala says. "This delicate balancing act has allowed his clients and his community to benefit from his sensitivity for the past as well as his vision for the future."

In early 1993, for example, as Sydnor was opening his firm, he was project architect with the DLR Group of Phoenix on the **Scottsdale Artists School Rehabilitation**, an adaptive reuse of the **Scottsdale Grammar School No. 2**, 3720 North Marshall Way. Lescher & Mahoney Architects, the distinguished Phoenix-based predecessor firm of DLR Group, designed the building in 1928.

For the 16,016-square-foot Spanish Colonial Revival one-story, the team refinished the interior and exterior as well as created five large art studios, a reception area, gift shop, public restrooms, gallery, visual arts library, administration and staff lounge.

"This program adapted extremely well to the existing floor plan, as an earlier tenant had removed most of the interior partitions, and the original north and east classroom wings bathed the new studios with a wonderful diffused daylighting by which to paint and sculpt," Sydnor explains.

To replace some of the original clay roof tiles, the team visited a south Phoenix bone yard and discovered a few



Maracay Corporation, 1997 (former Valley National Bank, 1967)
 ABOVE: Courtesy Scottsdale Historical Society
 BELOW: Photo Mark Boisclair Photography

The Kimsey (formerly Triangle Building, 1962)
 ABOVE: Courtesy Doug Sydnor
 BELOW: Courtesy Modern Phoenix and Scott Sandler

palettes that had been salvaged from the partially razed 1930 Good Shepherd School for Girls and Church in Phoenix.

The building was placed on the Scottsdale Historic Register May 23, 2000.

A few miles north, the 1967 **Valley National Bank**, 4821 N. Scottsdale Road, was one of 40-plus Valley National Bank branches in the Phoenix metropolitan area designed by Weaver and Drover Architects of Phoenix (now DWL Architects) during the 1950s through the 1970s.

The 22,000-square foot building included three levels with the main banking floor above the street level, a mezzanine in the high-ceilinged public lobby and a basement that could become a bomb shelter — a poignant Cold War memory. Political pressure from officials and community members helped ensure that this Native American-influenced architectural building was not lost, Sydnor says.

Among the renovations his firm completed were internalizing

some breezeways and adding spaces to optimize street presence for future retailers. Fronting Scottsdale Road, some precast architectural concrete panels were kept intact; others were removed to open up the project’s center section.

In 1997, the team completed the project on the buildings’ 30th anniversary. Today, Postino’s Restaurant, Design Within Reach, Sachi Salon and other retail tenants continue to make the original bank a continuing community investment.

KIVA & KIMSEY

Two current downtown Scottsdale projects are the adaptive reuses of the **Kiva Craft Center and the Kimsey Building**.

Artist and educator Lloyd Kiva New created the 31,000-square-foot Kiva Center; the seven one- and two-story artisan suites, built of CMUs and wood, opened from 1955 to 1958.

Architect Montgomery designed the lower scaled Ranch-styled modern retail structures around a centralized

courtyard with a water fountain, shade trees, indigenous landscaping and seating. Breezeways between the structures lead visitors to the courtyard.

A Native American from Oklahoma, New asked artists to create on-site, where visitors watched and purchased crafts. These included leather handbags, dresses, gold and silver jewelry, custom dyed fabrics, perfume, custom clothing, mosaics, glass art, sculpture and pottery.

Sydnor will complete site improvements in the breezeways and courtyard with new landscaping, shade trees, seating, a reflecting water feature with custom mosaic glass tile, a multi-use plaza and integrated public art such as a mural.

An “Art Garden” environment will offer a cool microclimate, an urban oasis, and celebrate the original purpose of creating and selling artistic crafts. “We hope to embed artifacts in the new concrete slabs at the original-tenant-suite entries that were the types of crafts created in that suite,” Sydnor explains. “In this way, the center will tell the fascinating and rich story about the original activities here, beginning in 1958.”

Kiva Craft Center has been on the Scottsdale Historic Register since 2002, and Sydnor and the owner, Sunbrella Properties, will be applying for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places once the revitalization is completed this fall.

A few blocks away, the partnership of Gensler + Sydnor is pursuing city approval to rehabilitate the Kimsey Building, designed in 1962 by Haver and Nunn Architects. Of the 14 Haver buildings in Scottsdale, five have unfortunately been lost.

The developer, PEG Companies of Provo, Utah, is proposing a 480,000-square foot mixed-use project on 3.3 acres. The original Kimsey Building will offer residential amenities on the first level and six second-level townhouse units with high-pitched ceilings. A new structure, with below-grade

parking, will have 230 residential rentals and a 168-room boutique hotel. Completion is expected in late 2024.

The project will repair and respect the original building envelope and offer new structures with step-back forms, landscaped terraces, wrap-around balconies and cantilevered shading devices. Also planned is a gallery focusing on the 110-year Kimsey family legacy, Haver, and possibly the greater context of Midcentury-modern architecture in Scottsdale.

“Integrating the 1962 Kimsey Building in this larger mixed-use project is a wonderful and unique opportunity to demonstrate how to balance saving our architectural heritage while addressing the current market demands for urban residential and hospitality uses,” Sydnor says, noting that the project is probably the first of its type to adaptively reuse a structure in a larger new development in Scottsdale. He adds that the team is pursuing various entitlements and hopes to gain the approvals by April.

The buildings remind all of us about our stewardship role as a community.

“The most dynamic towns and cities have managed to hold onto the full spectrum of their architectural heritage, which has provided for a healthy rich mix of structures for all to enjoy,” Sydnor says.

“Much of the architecture in the past was constructed with very durable materials and in an amazing thoughtful, crafted manner that we simply could not begin to recreate or afford today. Those hand-crafting skills, patience and funding are no longer with us. And once a building is lost, it is gone forever.”

This is the first in a continuing series on contemporary Arizona architects working to preserve our built heritage. (david@azwriter.com). 