

The Santa Fe Station in Lawrence, KS: Its Cultural Context, Modern Design, and Significance

The Santa Fe Station, located at 413 E 7th Street in Lawrence, Kansas was built in 1955. It was designed by Warren Corman and the late Warren Jones, both graduates from the University of Kansas. The station is an excellent example of “Midwestern Modern” architecture that captured the American imagination in the 1950s. It is a splendid representation of the great cultural change that transformed American life after World War II. As a passenger station, it is one of the best of its type in the Midwest, because it carries out the principles of modernism so thoroughly. It has changed very little on the exterior, and retains almost of all its original interior appointments, furniture, and materials as well. In addition to its high architectural significance, this passenger station is well situated in the historic setting of East Lawrence, is close to the central commercial district of Lawrence, and is a working AMTRAK station with potential for increased passenger rail traffic.

The idea and meaning of Midwestern Modern architecture is largely unexamined. It was just one of many strands of modern culture that make up the complex architectural history of mid-20th century America. In that period of robust confidence that engulfed the United States after World War II, to be “modern” was to be sleek, fast, efficient, technologically advanced, scientifically-driven, and released from the strictures of history. In cars and trains, modern meant fins, dual colors, dramatic lines in chrome, and powerful engines. In architecture, modern meant a straight-forward, utilitarian elegance created by honest expression of structure and materials without obvious historical references to encumber the facades or interiors. It was not so much a style originally as a set of principles that together had highly recognizable stylistic qualities. Modernism meant a building designed largely from the inside out with a clear, flowing, functional plan expressed clearly by the exterior massing and composition. It meant a building easy to maintain, rid of all bric-a-brac. Eventually it came to mean steel and glass boxes, but overall, modern meant an architecture that expressed a sense of the new.

Modern ideas, bolstered by new materials such as plastic and aluminum and inventive uses of old materials such as glass, were also pervasive in industrial design and in the production of a vast range of many consumer products available to a young, eager, mobile, middle-class public. Millions of G.I.’s with college degrees and their baby booming families, and many others left farms and small communities for positions in the burgeoning urban industrial and professional workforce. They had jobs and money to purchase a new way of life, which really meant new identities and futures in new places, new living standards in new houses with new gadgets, new cars, and the freedom to use comfortable (air-conditioned), fast and convenient transportation conveyances, such as the train and airplane. They pursued the modern idea of leisure time.

The kids above all rode the modern tsunami as it swept out the past, taking advantage of and spreading the value of new design, music, and technology, especially television and automobiles. Black and white television, even with only a few test channels during the

day, changed how people lived their daily lives and eventually helped to eliminate old traditional ideas of community that had prevailed for centuries. Every kid in the mid-1950s could name just about every new car that came out by year and model. The apotheosis of a seemingly endless parade of new amazing cars was the 1955 Chevrolet with its cream top and turquoise bottom. The picture window, asbestos siding, sleek furniture with new cool colors, the transistor radio, 45 speed records, Elvis Priestly, Buddy Holly, jitterbugging across the floor with blue suede shoes—just one dazzling revolutionary thing after another came along at dizzying speed. Millions of kids were in the middle of it, and that meant modernism was an inevitable reality for almost everyone else.

These post-war babies were also educated in thousands of new low slung, horizontally oriented, public schools of brick and ribbons of window walls erected all across the country in the 1950s into the mid-1960s. A number of architecture firms, such as Tom Williamson's in Topeka where Warren Corman worked in the early 1960s, designed these types of schools "all over Kansas, Iowa, and Oklahoma" and "99% of our work was schools."¹ Lawrence High School, built in 1954, is a good example of these "Midwest modern" schools, which were built to enhance the psychological and physical well-being of the largest generation of school children in U.S. history. Midwest modern architecture, which had with a very different architectural character, feeling, and purpose than the mostly nostalgic school architecture built before World War II, helped to form the modern consciousness of 79 million baby boomers. As images of a future that was increasingly image-conscious, these schools also offered the advantageous actualities of the new era in the everyday life of children and their teachers. After more than 50 years, most of these Midwest modern schools are in service of their communities and are often the only schools the boomers and their progeny have ever known.

Midwest modern primary and secondary schools were a significant part of a large fabric of modern architecture that was expressed in other building types, such as banks, commercial buildings such as automobile dealerships, service stations, movie theaters, many residences, National Guard armories, and industrial plants. Many of these buildings are still represented in Lawrence, Lawrence's historic downtown boasted 17 dealerships at one time, and those built in the 1950s, usually along Vermont Street, still exhibit their modernism. A good example is the University Ford Sales building, now Local Burger, located at 714 Vermont which was built in 1948. The glass rectangular sales room for shiny new Ford sedans edges out to the curb for good drive-by views and well in front of the masonry service and garage building complex behind. Buddy Gallagher Motors at 634 Massachusetts had a continuous ribbon window façade and a sweeping sign announcing its Desoto and Plymouth cars. Jayhawk Motors, now empty, was built in the 1950s at the other end of Vermont Street, as was the Capitol Federal Bank building at 1046 Vermont which was built in 1953. The bank has both a walk-in and drive-in facilities, a very cool service at the time and designed with the drive-in restaurant in mind. Two modern service stations downtown were Bridge Standard Service at 601 Massachusetts and Motor In at 827 Vermont. In North Lawrence Coles IGA and Pence

¹Dennis Domer, Interview with Warren Corman, September 5, 2008. Transcript by Tom Harper.

IGA, both sleek new food centers built in 1953 with brick veneer walls, flat roofs, big ribbon windows, cantilevered canopies that sheltered shoppers, and polygonal marquis, offered a wide variety of new packages in a carefully considered interior that was designed to promote and enhance the consumer experience.

In an architecture nearly identical to these grocery stores, the state built National Guard armories all over Kansas during the 1950s, two of which can be found in Lawrence. Both are unmistakably Midwest modern with their brick facades, flat roofs, and strategically allocated fenestration to take maximum advantage of the benefits of sun and light. Architects in the State Architect's Office were thoroughly trained in modernism, including Warren Corman who worked in that office from 1950 to 1957. These state architects and their work became important purveyors of modernism into small communities in far-off small Kansas towns, where these buildings were admired and celebrated as not only places where young men join the service part-time, make some extra money, take a couple of weeks full-time duty each summer, and look smart in uniform. These buildings also became important community centers as the National Guard has slowly centralized its operations in fewer places and turned their old armories over to communities.

The most notable Midwest modern church of the period is the 1959 Ecumenical Christian Ministries Center near the University of Kansas, which is on the National Register of Historic Places and was designed by William Kiene and Jack Bradley of Topeka. Kiene and Bradley had opened their office in 1953, after having graduated from the University of Kansas in 1950 with Warren Corman. Besides, their schooling, they all had World War II combat experience in common and that bonded them. The ECM building was only one of many modern buildings Kiene and Bradley designed in Kansas throughout their long careers.²

Lawrence also has a large number of modern residences, the earliest of which was designed in 1936 by George Beal, the "radical thinker" in the architecture school at the University of Kansas. Though the architecture school had turned to modernism as early as 1922, Beal's apprenticeship with Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin in 1934 was a pivotal moment for the school and Midwest modern residential design in Lawrence. Two years after that summer at Spring Green with Wright, a December 2, 1936, Daily Journal World article called Beal's house for Mr. and Mrs. Burt Chewing at 1510 Stratford a "New American Home," whose outstanding feature "is that the interior design of the house was worked out first and the exterior was designed to conform. The house is electrical in almost every detail." This power was necessary for all the new convenient appliances and heating system. The plan in which "no room will have to serve as a hallway" and one space flows into another were much touted features as were the corner windows, the dining room/living room arrangement designed "to increase the fireside circle," indirect lighting, full insulation, and "California stucco" interior wall finishes. Beal's own modern house, built in 1950-51 at 1624 Indiana, was designed in his words to be "a collector of sun rays." The house included corner windows, broad overhanging eaves, an outdoor/indoor living room, large glass openings to the south, a completely

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paneled interior, built-in closets and storage areas. Following Beal's lead, many faculty and students in the school of architecture undertook numerous modern designs west and south of the campus in the 1950s and 1960s. The most important and prolific among them were John C. Morley, Tom Geraughty, and Verner Smith who were all faculty at the school, and Dana Dowd and Robert Hess who graduated from the school in the early 1950s. Their work certainly followed the principles of modernism and they exhibit many similarities, such as asymmetrical and abstract façade compositions, horizontal lines, a close relationship to the site, the expressive use of natural materials, extensive built-ins, flowing interior spaces with a masonry hearth as centers, flat, built-up roofs, strategic and multiple use of ribbon windows, casement windows, small kitchens, and main entries hidden in full view.

Warren Corman and Warren Jones, who would design the Santa Fe passenger station in 1955, graduated from the university's architecture program in 1950 and 1948 respectively, when modernism in the Midwest was on the ascendancy. The faculty's design philosophy during their period of study was completely modern, and Jones and Corman were very influenced by it. Corman was "I really loved the organic architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright," which he thoroughly studied and whose lectures they attended on his frequent trips to Lawrence and Kansas on his way from Taliesin to Taliesin West.³ But the modern architecture milieu of Marvin Hall that appeared so exciting and fresh to Jones and Corman during their student days had been long in the making. KU's architecture program was established in 1912 under the leadership of Goldwin Goldsmith who worked for the legendary Stanford White of the preeminent firm of McKim, Mead, and White in New York City. McKim and White both went to the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, which Goldsmith also attended after he graduated from Columbia University. Goldsmith's students at KU won many honors, and by 1922 the program "was listed among the top schools by the Beaux Arts Institute of Design."⁴

But, according to Curtis Besinger, the program began to turn away from the Beaux Arts to a modern architecture with the appointment of Joseph Kellogg, who graduated from Cornell and did not believe that the institute's "programmes" were "appropriate design exercises for students preparing to practice architecture in Kansas."⁵ With George Beal's appointment upon Goldsmith's departure in 1928, the tendency away from the Beaux Arts model toward the modern aesthetic developed into a total commitment to modern thinking as Beal became increasingly connected in the 1930s to Wright and his organic architecture. Beal apprenticed at Taliesin in 1934, and Wright gave a lecture at KU's all-university convocation on January 15, 1935, titled "Taliesin, an Experiment in American Culture."⁶ On a tour of the architecture program, Wright visited Beal's design studio in which a student by the name of Curtis Besinger showed a watercolor drawing of a natatorium. Wright was very complimentary. Three years later, after Beal and Besinger visited Taliensin in the summer of 1939, Besinger entered Wright's Fellowship and

³ Domer Interview with Corman.

⁴ Stephen Grabow, "Excellence from the Start: One Hundred Years of Architectural Education at Kansas," www.sadp.ku.edu/school/overview/history.

⁵ Curtis Besinger, *Working with Mr. Wright*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 1.

⁶ Besinger, 3.

remained as a senior associate until he returned to the University of Kansas to teach architecture from 1955 to 1984.⁷ Besinger designed prairie school houses in Iowa and Aspen, Colorado during these years but his greatest influence was in the school's design studios and on the faculty over the 30 years he taught there.⁸ The period of Wrightian architecture at KU has faded now into the past but for more than 50 years from 1934 up to Besinger's death in 1999, the school of architecture at the University of Kansas had direct connections to Mr. Wright, his fellowship, and to his foundation. KU's school of architecture was not alone in its strong bias in favor of modern architecture. By the early 1950s, all of the once Beaux Arts schools over the prairie plains, including Iowa State University, the University of Nebraska, Kansas State University, the University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma State University, the University of Texas, and Texas A & M University, had gone modern.

Wright was already long an American icon by the time Corman and Jones were students, and probably the most noticeable architect of the first half of the 20th century. Wright had designed highly publicized projects all over the world and particularly throughout the Midwest before by the end of World War I. Owing in part to his relationship with Governor Allen, his friendship with the well-known editor William Allen White in Emporia, Wright, and in general his ability to attract publicity, Wright was also a known figure in Kansas. In 1917, Wright completed Henry J. Allen house, the last house of Wright's Prairie School period, which became one of Wichita's most prominent examples of 20th century modern architecture.⁹ Wright also did typical "Wrightian" drawings for an early Usonian house in Wichita for Mr. and Mrs. C. H. Hoult but it was never built.¹⁰ Wright greatly admired William Allen White, had an extensive correspondence with him, and contracted to renovate his house in Emporia, though this contract was never fulfilled. In Kansas City, Wright's Sondern House and the Kansas City Community Christian Church, both built in 1940, are two other examples of Wright's work not far from Lawrence that drew the attention of young architecture students.¹¹ Chicago and Oak Park were not far away either and easily reachable by train, though the library of the University of Kansas was full of books by and about Wright by the end of World War II. Having learned about Wright so frequently at KU and attended Wright's lectures in 1947 or 1948, Jones and Corman loved the principles and practices of this renowned prairie architect and his particular brand of modernism.

They also became quite familiar with other related branches of modernism, such as the architecture of LeCorbusier, and the architecture that emanated from the Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany and eventually was carried in the late 1930s to Chicago by Ludwig

⁷ "Curtis Besinger Retires," KU Architect, The University of Kansas School of Architecture and Urban Design, Vol. 3, No. 2, (Summer 1984), 3, 8.

⁸ Richard Guy Wilson and Sidney K. Robinson, The Prairie School in Iowa. Ames: The University of Iowa Press, 1977, 88, 118.

⁹ William Allin Storrer, The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright: A Complete Catalog. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982, 205.

¹⁰ Pamela D. Kingsbury, Frank Lloyd Wright and Wichita: The First Usonian Design. Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum, 1992.

¹¹ Storrer, 279-280.

Mies van der Rohe.¹² Mies, an internationally known architect, sat up the famous modern architecture school at the Armour Institute, now the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), as a kind of new Bauhaus in the United States. Many of the original faculty of the German Bauhaus followed Mies to Chicago. Compared to Wright's active organicism, Mies's architecture was made considerably more serene with his reduction of architecture to the minimal necessities, the rationalization of structure, the accentuation of constructional details, and an elegant use of glass and steel that together exuded a very urbane art. One of the most elegant and influential examples of this kind of Midwest modern architecture was the famous Farnsworth House Mies designed and built near Chicago between 1945 and 1950.¹³

Wright liked Mies, and Mies's generation of architects considered Wright the father of modern architecture. Born in the 1880s, Gropius, Mies, and LeCorbusier were all young architects who worked for Peter Behrens in Berlin when Wright offered the famous exhibition of his work in 1909. Every one of them claimed to have seen the exhibition, whether they did or not, and publications that accompanied that exhibition were much coveted by the Germans. Wright was well known for denigrating the work of other architects but he liked Mies' work, and Mies was one of the few architects that Wright could compliment, however indirectly.¹⁴ They had a lot in common, as Wright could see. They were both very interested in the expressing the structure of architecture, and they used materials honestly. Both of their work exhibited the inside-outside space created by broad overhangs or overlapping roofs. They both believed in an industrialized architecture.

Since the modern principles of design used by these two famous men were not that different, they had many common followers and admirers, and there were hundreds of architects who tried to bridge whatever differences there were throughout the Midwest. One of the most notable of those who bridged the two branches of Midwest modern architecture was Alfred Caldwell, a protégé of Mies and the prairie school landscape architect Jens Jensen, a great admirer of Wright, and influential professor at IIT. Caldwell was able to develop in the late 1940s into the 1960s an architecture that met Wright and Mies halfway, encumbering the practices and expressions of both. His drawings were usually Wrightian in stylistic terms but his buildings were less busy than Wright's, because like Mies, Caldwell eliminated everything that was unnecessary to the constructional character of the architecture. But Caldwell was also a landscape architecture totally committed to the prairie school landscape ideas of Jens Jensen and to Wright's insistence on careful site considerations. His architecture with its Wrightian and Miesian influences was almost always accompanied by drawings in which Caldwell paid extreme attention to the building site and its natural setting. He attempted to enhance setting in accordance with prairie school principles.¹⁵ An architectural middle ground between the two giant modernists from Chicago was negotiated by hundreds of other

¹² Dennis Domer, Interview with Warren Corman, September 5, 2008. Transcript by Tom Harper.

¹³ Charles Jencks, Modern Movements in Architecture. New York: Anchor Books, 1973, 103-104.

¹⁴ Besinger, 23.

¹⁵ Dennis Domer, editor. Alfred Caldwell: The Life and Work of a Prairie School Architect. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

architects throughout the mid- 20th century in the Midwest. Through repetition and learning what worked and what didn't work, these architectural negotiations created a repertoire of parts, details, materials, processes of building, and images of modernism that yielded a clear, recognizable architectural statement. With their clients these architects through hundreds of buildings devised a distinctive architecture that stems from a definable body of thought and was produced during a specific period in modern architectural history. Young architects like Warren Corman and Warren Jones, both graduates of KU, made numerous significant contributions to the development of Midwest modern architecture in Kansas.

According to Warren Corman, it was impossible for Warren Jones or him to imagine anything other than a modern design to replace the old 1883 Georgian Santa Fe Railroad Station, even though their big boss in Chicago, Charlie Cloverly, had demanded a traditional design. Corman remembers that they decided defiantly that "We can't design a building like they had here before. We're not going to do it; we're going to design the most modern thing we can come with which is a flat roof. In those days flat roofs were perfect. Cold tar pitch and every summer it would seal itself. It would never leak."¹⁶ On a trip to Chicago, Corman presented the modern design to Cloverly, who readily accepted but berated Corman for his incompetent drawing of a large locomotive in front of building, a tactic Corman used to distract Cloverly from looking at the building's design. Corman was relieved that his ploy worked but that is unlikely. Much more likely is that Cloverly accepted it, not because he didn't know what the building was like, but because he had already approved and built four very similar modern replacement stations in Arkansas City, Hutchinson, Atchison, and Topeka. Furthermore, Eleanor Ford, Cloverly's assistant, was thoroughly delighted with the design, and she had authority to make architectural decisions for the Santa Fe. To make her contribution, she picked the light green draperies for the interior of the Lawrence passenger station, and ordered new drafting machines for Jones and Corman. That was fine with Jones and Corman because the new drafting machines always made straight lines, simplifying and speeding up their work considerably. The light green she selected was the "in-color," too!¹⁷ Cloverly may have preferred traditional architecture over modern but his competitors, Rock Island and Missouri Pacific, were building new modern stations in Goodland, McPherson, Pratt, and Hutchinson.¹⁸ A traditional architecture for the Lawrence passenger station would have projected an image that did not befit a progressive railroad company in 1955. By that time, the culture of modern architecture was so pervasive in the Midwest and convincing to almost everyone that both young and old architects had fully accepted it. Corman and Jones had nothing to worry about. It was impossible for Cloverly to have imagined anything but modern when Corman came to call.

What Cloverly saw was the perspective Warren Jones had made of a passenger station which was plainly modern inside and out. Like Wright often did, Jones used vertical hatching to delineate the background for his building which was composed of three intersecting rectangles of light brown brick, limestone, and glass that are attached end-to-

¹⁶ Domer Interview with Corman.

¹⁷ Domer Interview with Corman, 31-32.

¹⁸ H. Roger Grant, Kansas Depots. Topeka: The Kansas State Historical Society, 1990.

end and tied together with sweeping, overlapping, flat built-up tar and gravel roofs made over steel decks held by I beams. The horizontality of the roofs is emphasized by a wide aluminum cornice and broad receiving canopies that shelter passengers, baggage, and freight. The overall composition of the front elevation is asymmetrical and dynamic, expressing not only the movement of people and machines along the railroad lines but generally a “modern” idea of time, place, and relativity. The architects avoided applied ornamentation, allowing the building to express its own art through clear structural and constructed systems, the beauty of materials, elemental composition, and functional detailing.

The building’s plan is strongly reinforced three-dimensionally by its massing and by the use of materials. The largest rectangle is emphasized by a raised roof and two facades of glass that enclose an elegant passenger waiting room 27’ by 38’ on the interior. The large indoor-outdoor space created under a 12’ canopy, held up by light green metal pipe columns, interacts with the interior through the two glass walls, expanding the sense of its size and contributing to the sense of a flowing, uninterrupted interior. The streamlined glass walls bring light from the southwest and northwest into the interior which glows through the glass at night, making the waiting room always obvious to anyone approaching the building.

The waiting room mass is clearly separated from the smaller baggage and freight service mass, another rectangle formed by masonry walls that step back from the waiting room. These two rectangles are further separated by the cut stone wall at the main door way, which also has an articulated roof to indicate a way into the passenger station. The smaller rectangle of brick provides ticketing, bathrooms, janitorial, boiler room, baggage, and administrative services. The third rectangle, that connects the waiting room with the freight and baggage section, is the service corridor, which set back to same plane as the waiting room but without the wide overhang and behind the plane of the freight office.

To enter the interior from the street side and exit the interior track side, passengers walked through polished aluminum double doors into vestibules that buffered the interior from outside conditions. The vestibules opened into a large open space with a polished cream color terrazzo floor with black pebbles, a plain brick wall, and two Geyser glass walls held in place by extruded bar aluminum and curtained with long light green drapery to shut out the heat or light. The unique glass ventilators associate with the windows of the shiny new passenger trains stopping at the station. The interior has an atmosphere of calm, confidence, professionalism, and simple elegance that modern travelers of the 1950s expected to experience. The 5/8” terrazzo floor with black flecks and brass divider strips on 3’ centers contributes a solid, dignified, and easy to clean floor for the much used waiting space. The waiting room has straightforward chairs and stools formed with bended metal rods. The light fixtures, clock, and bulletin board are polished aluminum. There is an acoustical tile ceiling overhead. In one corner of the waiting room is a telephone booth of obscured glass and aluminum bar framing.

At the edge of the passage way of the waiting room and at the head of the service corridor is the ticket office with its prominent ticket counter. A plain glass and wood base fronts

the office the passage way wall and a corrugated glass and wood base side wall fill out the ticket office on the service corridor side. This corrugated glass is repeated on one of the side walls of the agent's office. Inside the ticket office is a beautifully milled ticket agent's counter with specific drawers for every ticketing purpose. The counter is 5/16" plywood covered with a heavy linoleum top and trimmed with stainless steel. Nothing could be more functional than this ticket office counter and nothing could be more modern in design.

There is no applied ornamentation anywhere in the waiting room or ticket room, and certainly not in the service corridor with its terrazzo floor that leads to the bathrooms, janitorial closet, boiler room, agent's office, baggage room, and freight office. In most cases, concrete floor suffices in these rooms, but the bathrooms which have quarry tile floors. The corrugated glass in the service corridor indicates the importance of the agent's office behind it.

Jones and Corman's drawings for this building's design include all structural systems, constructional systems, materials, and manufacturing requirements. They detail very clearly the essence of modern architectural style. Ultimately, the architectural ideas and sources behind this building stem from the modern cultural hearth of Chicago that was operating at the end of the 19th century and into the early 20th century. These architectural ideas spread through the work of Wright and Mies and penetrated deep into the hinterlands. They found a particular resonance in Lawrence, which was very receptive to modern architecture because of the program in architecture at the University of Kansas. It had been hotbed of modern architecture since the late 1920s, and students and faculty from that hotbed designed dozens of modern projects in Lawrence and throughout the Midwest from 1950 to 1965. The Santa Fe passenger station is one of the best examples of Midwest modern architecture in Lawrence from that period and along the Santa Fe line from Kansas City to Los Angeles. This station has high design integrity because it is mostly intact, and it continues to be usable as a very attractive operating passenger station for AMTRAK.