

Hilltop in 1952

Photo courtesy of the Anoka County  
Historical Society

MINNESOTA CHAPTER  
OF THE SOCIETY OF  
ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS

# MNNSA/H

WITH RESPECT TO ARCHITECTURE | SEPTEMBER 2020



Gebhard  
Award WINNERS

7-8-52  
Norway pool  
210-003

## Gebhard winners bring little-known stories of architectural history to light



Top left: The Arlington Hills Library circa 1925  
Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Bottom left: House on Montrose designed by Emma Brunson, 1936  
Photo by Rolf Anderson

Right: The Metropolitan Building in the early 1900s  
Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

**Trailer parks, a reinvented library, an unrecognized female architect, and a lost Minneapolis landmark** are the easily overlooked subjects of fascinating stories about Minnesota’s built environment. Each was explored by one of this year’s four recipients of the Gebhard Award,

MNSAH’s biennial recognition of Minnesota architectural history as published in books and articles.

Emma Brunson, an architect who left her mark on many St. Paul neighborhoods from 1924 to 1940, has been largely unrecognized until now. Diane Trout-Oertel tells her story in “Emma F. Brunson: The First Woman Registered as an Architect in Minnesota,” published in 2017 in *Ramsey County History* and Gebhard Award winner for articles. “To date, nearly twenty homes designed by Brunson have been documented,” writes Trout-Oertel. “That all but one of them are still in service today is a measure of their success.” Brunson’s interiors feature hardwood floors, generous woodwork, and built-in components such as mail slots, telephone niches, and laundry chutes. “Although designed for an earlier lifestyle, her houses continue to meet the needs of current owners and are still valued for their warm character and practical floorplans,” writes Trout-Oertel.

The story of Hilltop, a small city at the southern tip of Anoka County, is the focus of “The Trailer Park that Became a City,” by Eduard Krakhmalnikov, published in *Minnesota History* in 2018. “Hilltop’s story is one of taking a stand – the periphery protecting itself against suburban sprawl,” writes Krakhmalnikov. “Today, the 250 mobile homes in Hilltop are reminders of an American built environment whose heritage is in peril, a story that has at best only been intermittently examined.” The article received an honorable mention.

*Metropolitan Dreams*, by Larry Millett, the Gebhard Award winner for books, celebrates the architecture of the Metropolitan Building and condemns its urban-renewal destruction, characterized by Millett as “perhaps the most inexcusable act of civic vandalism in the history of Minneapolis.” In a *StarTribune* article, Millett

says the building “occupies a unique place in the history of Minneapolis. It bookended the city’s first great period of growth in the 1880s, when the building went up, and urban renewal and freeway building era of the mid-1950s to mid-1960s, when it came down.” The book was published by the University of Minnesota Press.

A neighborhood library’s history, which paints a rich picture of life in St. Paul since its beginning, is the subject of *Reinventing the People’s Library*, by Greg Gaut. It received an honorable mention for books. More than another narrative about the architecture of a “Carnegie library,” the book gives a primer on St. Paul immigration history, background on public libraries in Minnesota, and a story of community involvement and cohesion. Now repurposed as the East Side Freedom Library, which was also the publisher of Gaut’s book, it collects and preserves sources on labor, African-American and immigration history, and provides a space where people can share their stories. The East Side Freedom Library is “one of those places where the future is being created on a strong foundation of the past,” writes Gaut.

This year marks the twelfth presentation of the Gebhard Awards. Named in honor of the late David Stanley Gebhard, distinguished Minnesota-born architectural historian, the award recognizes the outstanding books and articles on Minnesota’s built environment published in the preceding two years. Four books and twelve articles were submitted and reviewed by three judges — Historian Emily Ganzel; Alan Lathrop, Retired Curator, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities; and Historian Barbara Mitchell Howard. MNSAH would like to thank the judges for their time and effort, and congratulate the winners.

MARTHA DOUGLAS



### BOOKS

#### Award Recipient

*Metropolitan Dreams*  
By Larry Millett  
University of Minnesota Press, 2018

#### Honorable Mention

*Reinventing the People’s Library*  
By Greg Gaut  
East Side Freedom Library, 2019

### ARTICLES

#### Award Recipient

“Emma F. Brunson: The First Woman Registered as an Architect in Minnesota”  
By Diane Trout-Oertel  
*Ramsey County History*, Fall 2017

#### Honorable Mention

“The Trailer Park that Became a City: Hilltop and the Importance of Mobile Home Parks as Endangered Historic Places”  
By Eduard Krakhmalnikov  
*Minnesota History*, Winter 2017-18

lost



# Legendary Homes of Lake Minnetonka

**MNSAH's 2010 annual meeting** featured author Bette Hammel and photographer Karen Melvin speaking about their new book, *Legendary Homes of Lake Minnetonka*. As a follow-up to their keynote talk, MNSAH's 2010 fall tour included six of the homes showcased in the book.

The homes on the MNSAH tour ranged from a Victorian designed by William Channing Whitney to a modernist house by Ralph Rapson. Of the homes toured by MNSAH, the Hunt-Wall House and the Piper-Hawley-Wright House have been demolished.



Built in 1926, the Piper-Hawley-Wright House was known as Meadow Knoll. The house was a quintessential Lake Minnetonka summer home. The sprawling shingle clad house was sited atop a hillside with expansive views of Wayzata Bay. Sections of the house were only one room deep, allowing for cross breezes to cool the home.

Those who attended the MNSAH tour will recall Meadow Knoll's gracious hostess, Rosita (Zita) Hawley Wright, who lived in the house for nearly 70 years. After Zita moved into a senior living facility, Meadow Knoll was placed on the market. She was dismayed to learn that the realtors advertised her home as a tear-down. Zita passed away on December 29, 2019 at the age of 94.

The Hunt-Wall House has also been demolished. Built in 1930 and designed by architects Frank Joseph Forster and R. H. Gallimore, the house was a remarkable Normandy-inspired period revival design. When entering the cobblestone paved courtyard, one felt transported to France. The house featured a steep tiled roof, a corner tower, dormers, and leaded-glass windows. Our hosts for the MNSAH tour were Fred and Alice Wall, who spent years developing spectacular landscaping around the house. The landscape was also lost when the house was demolished.

Three additional homes featured in *Legendary Homes of Lake Minnetonka* have also been demolished. These include the Northrup-Jorgenson House, an 1894 Greek Revival style residence designed by William Channing Whitney; the 1919 Pillsbury-Jundt House

Left bottom: MNSAH members on the steps of Meadow Knoll with Zita Hawley Wright standing in the first row center  
Photo courtesy of Rolf Anderson

Left top: Pillsbury-Jundt House

Right top to bottom:

Hunt-Wall House

Dayton-Burnet House

Northrup-Jorgenson House

Piper-Hawley-Wright House

All photos ©Karen Melvin Photography

designed by east coast architect Harrie T. Lindeberg and perhaps one of the most celebrated homes ever constructed on Lake Minnetonka; and the Dayton-Burnet House built in 1970 and designed by Romaldo Giurgola with landscaping by Dan Kiley, a noted modernist landscape architect who worked with such well-known architects as Eero Saarinen.

Unfortunately, tear-downs are nothing new to Lake Minnetonka. Previous losses include the Little House by Frank Lloyd Wright, the Decker House by Purcell and Elmslie, and the Pillsbury House by Ralph Rapson, constructed in 1962 for another member of the Pillsbury family.

Preservationists realize that not everything can be saved, and there will always be some recycling of buildings. And some homes may be so precisely designed for the specific needs of the original owner that it may be difficult to find a new owner. Yet, when considering the five homes featured in this article, it is notable that all were large homes in very good if not pristine condition. In fact, several had been renovated in recent years. In at least one case it appears a developer purchased a property with the intent to subdivide the land. But in other cases it appears the new owner simply did not value the historic architecture and was intent on new construction. It is also sobering to note that the price of several of the Lake Minnetonka tear-downs has exceeded 10 million dollars.

Cities large and small throughout Minnesota have enacted ordinances to proactively identify and protect the historic properties in their

communities. But effective preservation policies have been largely lacking in the Lake Minnetonka area. Excelsior is one exception, where the city has successfully preserved their historic main street and is attempting to stem the tide of tear-downs in their community. And while the issue of tear-downs is not limited to Lake Minnetonka, the issue has become particularly compelling in that area. Even minimal regulations could be very helpful. For example, when it became known that the Pillsbury House was to be demolished, Orono city officials said they had no choice but to issue the demolition permit; it couldn't even be delayed to see if a buyer might come forward at the eleventh hour to save the house.

Bette Hammel and Karen Melvin are understandably dismayed by the tear-downs. Bette commented that she is concerned every time she sees a "for sale" sign on the lake. Karen identified a related issue where development is being allowed on long-established green space.

The MNSAH Advocacy Committee has been discussing ways in which to call attention to this disturbing loss of historic architecture and landscape, and to also develop strategies to encourage communities to proactively recognize and protect their historic resources.

**ROLF ANDERSON**



## MNSAH Annual Meeting

Watch for email announcements about the virtual MNSAH Annual Meeting that will take place in the fall.

As we all try to adjust to the challenging days that we face, your MNSAH board of directors continues to work at conducting its organizational business in our new environment. Here are some highlights from recent months.

In May, several MNSAH board members attended a virtual meeting of the local chapters of the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH). The meeting provided the local chapters with an opportunity to compare notes about their activities and to discuss any issues they might be encountering. The SAH national organization has been very supportive of the local chapters by providing training sessions on making the transition to the virtual environment. These sessions have been very valuable to MNSAH as we plan for online events and our first virtual annual meeting.

We hope you've had an opportunity to attend some of the virtual programs we have been able to make available to you. We were particularly pleased to be able to offer John Guenther's presentation on "The Forgotten Architectural Legacy of Harvey Ellis." At the end of his talk on Ellis, John referenced the important work of our own Eileen Manning Michels, whose life and career are celebrated in a separate article in this issue.

The MNSAH Advocacy Committee reports that the consultation process concerning the Phelps Mill in Otter Tail County has yet to begin. MNSAH will participate as a "consulting party" in discussions concerning the future of this historic site.

The Modern Masters Committee is working to make additional interviews available, and the board is also working on revising the design and printing processes for our written communications.

Finally, MNSAH will continue to seek out virtual opportunities for you to experience important architecture until the time when we can resume in-person events.

**ROLF ANDERSON**  
PRESIDENT

### MNSAH provides input on SHPO statewide preservation plan

MNSAH board members met in February in response to a request from the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) for input on developing the new Statewide Historic Preservation Plan for 2020-2030. SHPO is soliciting public input from citizens and stakeholders, including MNSAH.

In the meeting, members reviewed the current

preservation plan, and discussed future preservation needs. A written summary of findings submitted to SHPO highlighted the following observations and recommendations.

- Goals in the current plan seem all-encompassing, but were they manageable? How successful has SHPO implementation been? Going forward, goals need prioritization accompanied by implementation plans.
- To meet future preservation needs, SHPO staff and funding must be increased. Current levels are inadequate to provide the necessary leadership to implement the many goals of an ambitious preservation plan.
- Additional resources are necessary for broad educational efforts addressing both the general public and elected officials about the value of historic preservation.
- SHPO should examine its relationship with Certified Local Governments (CLGs), the SHPO-affiliated community preservation programs. Local elected officials at times seem unaware of their own preservation programs, allowing violations of historic district guidelines and even demolitions of historic properties.
- The statewide nonprofit organization that often led

Victoria Young  
Photo courtesy University of  
St. Thomas



**"I am an architectural historian - it's my life work and gives me a great joy."**

– VICTORIA YOUNG

advocacy efforts in Minnesota in the past appears to be changing its focus and orientation, leaving a gap in advocacy leadership outside SHPO, a public agency. How should this evolving advocacy leadership gap be filled?

Find more information about SHPO's current planning effort at: [mn.gov/admin/shpo/planning/statewide-plan-new/](http://mn.gov/admin/shpo/planning/statewide-plan-new/)

### Victoria Young Elected SAH President

Our own Victoria Young has been elected President of the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH), MNSAH's parent organization. Victoria is a former board member and past-President of MNSAH.

"I am an architectural historian – it's my life work and gives me a great joy. Being President of the Society of Architectural Historians, the 2,500-member international professional organization that supports us all in the field, is a dream come true," Victoria stated.

Victoria became an SAH board member in 2011 and most recently served as First Vice President. She also served as Chair for the 2020 SAH annual international conference. This past spring she faced the daunting challenge of transforming

the entire meeting into a virtual conference on very short notice due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The virtual attendees agreed it was a remarkable success.

Victoria is a Professor and Chair of the Art History Department at the University of St. Thomas. A respected author of works such as 2014's *Saint John's Abbey Church: Marcel Breuer and the Creation of a Modern Sacred Space*, she has also had an impact on the St. Thomas campus as a key member of the campus master planning committee. In 2019 Victoria was named St. Thomas' Professor of the Year.

Congratulations Victoria!

### Eileen Manning Michels, 1926-2020

MNSAH is sad to report the death of noted architectural historian Eileen Manning Michels, who passed away on May 7, 2020. MNSAH owes a particular debt of gratitude to Eileen as she was one of the co-founders of our organization in 1973.

Eileen received her B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota. She taught at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, the University of Wisconsin in River Falls, Stanford University in Palo Alto, and the University of Wisconsin

in Milwaukee. In 1978, she established the Art History Department at the University of St. Thomas. She retired from teaching at St. Thomas in 1992 as professor emerita.

Eileen had long been active in the national Society of Architectural Historians (SAH), serving as a board member, officer, and chair of the 1984 national conference held in Minnesota. She was named an SAH Fellow in 2012.

A strong advocate for historic preservation, Eileen was also a member of the Minnesota State Review Board and the St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission.

Known for her diligent research, Eileen was the author of *A Landmark Reclaimed*, a history of the Old Federal Courts Building in St. Paul and its preservation as Landmark Center. Yet, her most notable work was *Reconfiguring Harvey Ellis*, which was a culmination of decades of research. The book is the only work that details all aspects of the work of Harvey Ellis as well as his position and achievements in the American Arts and Crafts movement.

Eileen was married to architect Joseph Michels, who passed away in 2019. She is survived by their son, James.

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The East Side Freedom Library after opening in 2014  
Photo by Steve Boland