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Five cool things about the 'Mid-Century Modern' exhibit

BY NANCY STETSON

nstetson@floridaweekly.com

OWENS

"All of a sudden, they broke all the rules of traditional architecture," is how architect [Joyce Owens](#) explains the Mid-Century Modern style, or, as she calls it, "McMo."

The country had just come out of [World War II](#), a time of great turmoil and austerity when money was tight and materials in short supply. As the economy improved in the post-war years, we became more prosperous.

Many new materials and technologies developed during the war began being used in everyday life, including in things like buildings and furniture.

"Instead of loadbearing walls, you had columns, and post-and-beam construction," which meant that buildings then had "big spaces you could fill with glass," [Ms. Owens](#) says. "And we had the technology to create big sheets of glass instead of tiny

window panes."

So buildings grew more spacious, and design more daring.

"We could do what we wanted with the roofs, with the walls," she says.

Suddenly, all the old rules were thrown out.

This could also be seen in graphic design, fashion and furniture.

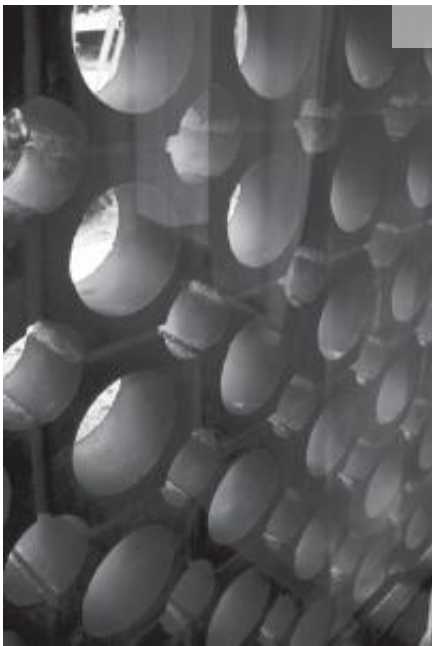
Ms. Owens loves Mid-Century Modernism, the period from the mid-1940s until the early '60s, so much that she curated an exhibit about it, focusing on the architecture of [Southwest Florida](#). "Mid-Century Modern in Southwest Florida: Learning from Modern: A Celebration of Mid-Century Design" is at the [Southwest Florida Museum of History](#) in downtown [Fort Myers](#) through [Jan. 14](#).



The Lee County [Administration Building](#), designed in [1960](#), is a local example of Mid-Century Modern architecture. JOSHUA COLT FISHER / [COURTESY PHOTOS](#)

Here are five cool things about the McMo exhibition.

1. Like some of the buildings highlighted in the show she curated, Ms. Owens herself is a hidden gem in Southwest Florida. Not many locals know that clients of her [London](#) practice included [Boris Johnson](#), the current mayor of London; the late fashion design guru Isabella Blow, whose London home Ms. Owens and her business partner renovated; and the late designer [Alexander McQueen](#), for whom they designed two homes and his central London flagship store. (A recent retrospective of [Mr. McQueen's](#) fashions at [New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) was the hottest ticket in town, and wound up being one of the museum's [Top 10](#) visited shows.)



Above and Right, Up close example of Mid-Century Modern features.

A licensed professional architect since 1989, Ms. Owens was the [2010](#) president of the local AIA chapter and in addition to the AIA is a member of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Her London practice was named one of the 13 Emerging Architectural Practices in the U.K. by [Architectural Review](#), and in [2006](#) she won a local AIA Excellence in Architecture Award award for [Canterbury School in Fort Myers](#), a project she worked on with BSSW Architects.

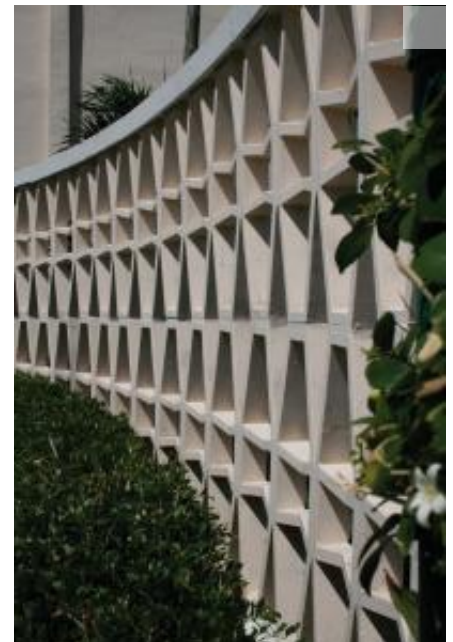
Earlier this month, she received the prestigious W.R. Frizzell [Medal of Honor](#) and, for work on a [Captiva Island](#) guest house, a [Merit Award](#) for Built Architecture – Restorations and Additions, both from [AIA Florida Southwest](#).

2. Mid-Century Modern architects thought outside the box.

Ms. Owens explains it this way: When asked to draw a house, most kids will draw a square with a triangle on top for a roof, then little windows and a door smack in the middle. Many houses up until the mid-1940s looked that way: square, boxy.

But after World War II, new technology and materials allowed houses to break out of the box, literally.

This exhibit includes images and information about a round church (St. [Hilary's Episcopal Church](#)) in



[Fort Myers](#), an octagonal house that once existed in [Naples](#) and the "Centipede House" that used to exist in the [Vanderbilt Beach](#) area of Naples (it was also called the "Lazy M" house, because its outline looked like a capital M that couldn't quite stand up).



Fort Myers [Fire Station No. 1](#) was built in [1949](#).

The old rules of architecture no longer applied, and the result was fresh, exciting buildings.

Another example of thinking outside the box: The Colonial Boulevard [United Presbyterian Church](#), a drive-in house of worship built by George Bail in [1965 in Fort Myers](#). The church was torn down when the [Midpoint Bridge](#) was constructed.

3. Examples of Mid-Century Modern can be seen all over

Southwest Florida. Sure, you have to go to the Southwest Florida Museum of History to see the exhibit, but after you've done so, you can walk or drive around and see examples of this innovative architectural style.

For example, a block or so away from the museum on [Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.](#) is Fort Myers Fire Station No. 1, which was built in [1949](#).

The Lee County Administration Building, designed in 1960 by Gundersen Wilson Architects, was inspired by Mies Van de Rohe's [Seagram Building](#) in New York City. According to Ms. Owens, its long, shallow floor plan assured natural cross ventilation, and a "horizontal, trellis-like" screen let natural sunlight in but also acted as a sunshade. (People complained that the building was "too modern" and didn't appreciate its design; some thought the architects had forgotten to remove the scaffolding.)

Others complained about the 1965 design of St. Hilary's church, saying it looked like a cow barn and silo. A derisive letter to the minister called it "dumb" and "crazy-looking," and asked if they were going to start services by saying "How now brown cow" and end prayer with "MOO" instead of "Amen."

The exhibit has examples of Mid-Century architecture from [Sarasota](#) through Fort Myers and Naples all the way south to [Keewaydin Island](#). (There's a separate room focusing on the early work of [Paul Rudolph](#), who was the godfather of the region's Mid-Century architecture in Sarasota. Called the [Sarasota School of Architecture](#), the style was very specific to the climate of Southwest Florida.)

Other examples in Fort Myers: [Bishop Verot High School](#), The Lee County Bank drive-in facility, First Harbour Towers and the Walker guest house on [Sanibel Island](#).

4. The exhibit isn't limited to architecture; it also includes furniture design. On display is a variety of furniture designed by Ray and [Charles Eames](#), including their popular molded plywood chairs, a chaise and a lounge chair and ottoman. The pair was famous for their design innovation not only with furniture, but also with architecture, toys and film.

5. You'll look at the world differently after seeing this exhibit. I bet you've walked or driven past some of these buildings numerous times and never even paid attention to them.

"Some of these are small buildings," says Ms. Owens. "People don't notice them."

You will now.

As architects, she says, "We create an experience. It's the poetics of being in a shelter. It's not just the room; it's the light, the way you interact with it, the way the rooms flow into one another. It's how you experience the building and how you use it. That's what good architecture does, it lifts your spirit. |

It takes a village to build an exhibit

Architect Joyce Owens may have curated "Mid-Century Modern in Southwest Florida (McMo-SWFL): Learning from Modern: A Celebration of Mid-Century Design," but putting the exhibit together was "a huge community effort," she says.

"It was more work than I thought it would be," she adds, explaining that she had to design the exhibit from scratch, tracking down photographs, discovering who the architects were, when the buildings were made.

The exhibit, co-hosted by the [American Institute of Architects Florida Southwest](#) and the Southwest Florida Museum of History, lists more than a dozen architects and almost 50 others who helped bring it to fruition.

Everyone had a little piece of information, she says. Someone would give her a photograph, someone else would tell her a story, another person would give her a phone number of another contact. Someone else would lend her blueprints and drawings.

"Everybody helped with something. It was amazing," she says. "I'd get a little bit here and there. I just kept taking notes. Then it got bigger and bigger, and people started bringing me stuff.

"It was a lot of work, and I loved every single minute of it. If I could do it again, I would in a heartbeat. I loved it."

So does the museum, which has requested keeping part of the material for its permanent exhibit. Ms. Owens wants to display the exhibit in Naples next, and is looking for a venue.

— [Nancy Stetson](#)

"Mid-Century Modern in Southwest Florida"

>> When: Through Jan. 14 (closed Sundays and Mondays) >> Where: The Southwest Florida Museum of

History, [2031 Jackson St., Fort Myers](#) >> Cost: \$9.50 (seniors 55 and older and

AAA members, \$1 off; students with valid

IDs, \$5) >> Info: Call 321-7430 or go to www.mcmoswfl.com

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