

Gary Swenson Retires After 50 Years as a Structural Engineer



After 50 years as a structural engineer in Seattle, founding principal at Swenson Say Fagét, Gary Swenson will retire next month.

"I'd always been interested in architecture; there was never any question about that", said Gary. After graduating from the University of Washington in 1961 with an engineering degree he briefly worked the night shift at Boeing while attending architecture classes during the day. With no way to fast track design courses, and an engineering degree already in hand, he decided that working with architects was an acceptable alternative to being an architect, and he joined Peter Hostmark & Associates as a structural engineer. In 1968 he opened his own office in Pioneer Square.

"My motivation was to do fun interesting stuff. It was the ideal time for me, I could go find people I liked to work with and they could find that I was an engineer interested in architecture."

One of Gary's first clients, George Suyama reflects, "Gary and I both started our businesses around the same time in 1971. My first office was just up the street from his so the best thing about working with Gary was that his office was close and convenient. It turned out that Gary was a damn good engineer and we've been collaborating with him and SSF for 40 years now."



Historic Preservation

In 1970 a major grass-roots campaign had taken hold of Seattle and Pioneer Square was designated a national historic district and the city's first preservation district. Gary labored alongside local architects and the Seattle Building Department to establish guidelines and standards for preserving the historic structures.

"There were no structural engineers located in Pioneer Square. Most structural engineers at that time didn't want anything to do with rehabilitation.

There was no defined way to handle those kinds of issues. It was unknown territory, working on unsafe structures."

Over the course of his career Gary has dedicated much of his practice to the preservation and restoration of historic buildings. In 1977 he was appointed by the Mayor to the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board where he served until 1981. He also served from 1986-1991 on the Seattle Design Commission and on the Pioneer Square Preservation Board from 1992-2002.

Another long time client, Ed Weinstien said, "Gary was wonderful in thoughtfully explaining why he was proposing certain strategies and never told me that 'I had to do it a certain way'. I consider him to be one of my true mentors, responsible for enhancing my interest in utilizing structural systems as expressed and integrated elements of our architecture. In addition, he has always been a great friend and a professional counselor."



His Work

Gary's early work in Pioneer Square includes the Colman Building, 123 S. Jackson, 110 Cherry St., the Triangle Building, and the Merchant's Café Building. In the late 1980's Gary was involved in the structural and seismic study of seven historic Carnegie libraries in the City of Seattle, which led to the funding and eventual rehabilitation of the buildings.

Other historic projects include the renovation of the historic Eagles Auditorium Building for Seattle's ACT Theater, the restoration and seismic retrofit of St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral and the Issaquah Pickering Barn. He has also worked extensively at the University of Washington including the rehabilitation of Parrington Hall and

Suzzallo Library. More recently he was involved in the adaptive reuse of Building 25 at Magnuson Park into a new center for pediatric dentistry.

In addition to his extensive historic preservation experience, Gary has also worked on other prominent projects including the UW Olympic Natural Resources Center, the UW School of Social Work addition, Broadway Market, and the REI Flagship Store.

“Gary has always attracted the most interesting and creative people as both clients and engineers, and it is hard for me not to see his influence almost everywhere I look in the city”, said Nic Rossouw of Giraf Design.

In recent years Gary has done several projects for global non-profits offering rural development services to poor communities around the world. This work included a trip to Tibet in 2010 to design a community clinic and a trip to Peru this last summer to design an orphanage.



What's Next?

When asked what he plans to do next Gary said, “I don’t know.” After a bit more digging he mentioned spending more time with his family in San Diego, traveling, and pursuing more international work.

Fellow engineer and principal at SSF, Gary MacKenzie said, “Gary’s vision and leadership have been instrumental in helping to create a truly unique engineering practice. His mentorship has

inspired a whole generation of engineers and left a notable imprint on Seattle's architecture. We at SSF wish that Gary enjoys the next twenty years as much as we have enjoyed working with him the last twenty.”