

**Michael McGuire, 'the most influential architect in the St. Croix Valley,' dies at 95**

**McGuire specialized in Prairie School design, the architectural style pioneered by Frank Lloyd Wright**

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1 of 10

The red-roofed Commander Grain Elevator is among the notable Michael McGuire projects in and around Stillwater. He saved it from demolition to use as his office, studio and retail space. (Jean Pieri / Pioneer Press)



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Architect Michael McGuire, known as an apostle of Frank Lloyd Wright, believed that buildings should be designed to fit their sites, whether steep slopes or prairie or downtown city blocks.

Among his notable projects in and around Stillwater: the Dock Café, a former car wash that McGuire transformed into a restaurant with views of the St. Croix River; the Brick Alley building, a former Northern States Power substation that McGuire converted into a space for shops, artists and craftspeople; and the Commander Grain Elevator, a 1898 building that McGuire saved from demolition and recast as his office and studio and a retail space that featured an indoor rock-climbing wall.

McGuire died Aug. 4 after a brief illness at his home, which he designed in 1962 overlooking the St. Croix River in the Town of St. Joseph, Wis. He was 95.

Architect Rosemary McMonigal, a longtime colleague, called McGuire “the most influential architect in the St. Croix Valley.”



Architect Mike McGuire died Aug. 4, 2024, after a brief illness at his home, which he designed in 1962, overlooking the St. Croix River in the Town of St. Joseph, Wis. He was 95. (Courtesy of Sally McGuire-Huth)

The Eastbank townhouses in North Hudson, Wis., McMonigal’s favorite McGuire project, were built in the mid-1980s. “The open living plans were forward-thinking for the time period, with natural light throughout,” McMonigal said. “The vaulted ceilings give some volume, and the low slope keeps it

comfortable. Light and views were special to Mike, and his buildings are a joy to be in, with windows wrapping corners and decks that connect inside and outside. All of his projects had phenomenal attention to detail.”

McGuire also designed the Desch Office Building in downtown Stillwater, the Wild River State Park Visitor Center in Center City, and the St. Croix River Watershed Research Station in May Township.

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But McGuire’s highest talent was residential design, said Kelly Davis, a retired architect who worked with McGuire for two decades at McGuire/Engler/Davis Architects in Stillwater.

“They were the perfect reflection of the man – of Mike and his beliefs, his outlook on the world,” Davis said. “No matter if the houses were grand or modest, they were humble. They avoided ostentation. They were honest. They had integrity of natural materials, and they were highly respectful of land. Mike always felt that his best buildings were the ones that could barely be glimpsed through the vegetation. He felt that architecture should be subservient to the natural landscape, rather than dominant.”

### **Prairie School design**

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1 of 2

The exterior of the Mitchell House in Inverness, Calif. Stillwater architect Michael McGuire designed the house, located near Point Reyes National Seashore, in the mid-2000s, when he was around 80. (Courtesy of McGuire Family)

McGuire specialized in Prairie School design, the architectural style pioneered by Wright, and designed many private residences in Minnesota, Wisconsin, New Mexico, California and Hawaii. He knew how to employ “architecture to blur the line between man and nature,” according to a profile on McGuire published in Mother Earth Living: “He’s a master at expressing Wright’s concept of ‘continuous space,’ an idea that espouses that the inside and outside of a home are coherent, seamless, one.”

McGuire was often involved in projects at the earliest stage, even going so far as to help clients decide on a piece of land, said John McGuire, his son. “His idea was not to design a house and put it on a piece of land,” he said. “His idea was to design the house to the piece of land.”

McGuire, an accomplished painter, “approached architecture as an artist,” said daughter Sally McGuire-Huth. “He had this uncompromising ideal about how important beauty is – that it’s as important as almost anything else. To do anything less than what is beautiful is just really unacceptable. In Stillwater, he fought for years to do what he thought was beautiful work.”

McGuire almost single-handedly spurred Stillwater's push for historic preservation, said Brent Peterson, executive director of the Washington County Historical Society, who called the Commander Grain Elevator "one of the great symbols of architectural reuse in the city."

"He changed the thinking around historic buildings – from demolition to reuse," Peterson said. "His work in that area marked the turnaround in Stillwater to thinking more about preservation of the historic character of our community."

### **Studied art in Chicago, architecture in Minneapolis**

McGuire grew up in Mankato and St. Cloud and studied art at the University of Chicago. "The story goes that he was studying art there, and one day one of his professors pulled him aside and said, 'Mike, I think you should look for a profession you can make a living at,'" John McGuire said.

McGuire returned to Minnesota to study architecture at the University of Minnesota School of Architecture, graduating in 1954. He served in the U.S. Army in Germany, and then moved to New York City, "where he threw himself into the vibrant 1950s art and music scenes – cementing his lifelong love of folk, blues, and jazz," [according to his obituary](#).

In New York, he reconnected with Juliann Halvorson, whom he had met while studying at the University of Minnesota. The couple married in 1957 in Tuxedo, N.Y., and then moved back to Minnesota; they divorced in 2001. They had three children.

McGuire was working for an architecture firm in St. Paul when he got a commission in 1959 to design a house for Sue Warren, who worked in the same office, McGuire-Huth said. That house, an A-frame structure in Houlton, Wis., overlooking the St. Croix River, "got a lot of attention," she said. "It was featured in House Beautiful. That kind of put him on the map."





1 of 2

The Warren House in Houlton, Wis., overlooking the St. Croix River, was the first house designed by Stillwater architect Michael McGuire. (Courtesy of McGuire Family)

McGuire started looking for a nearby property where he could design and build a house for his growing family. “He bought the property just down the street and then started designing the house he moved us into in 1962,” McGuire-Huth said.

### **Started his own firm**

McGuire, who helped design many of the Pentom townhouse developments around the metro area and several houses in the University Grove neighborhood in Falcon Heights, started his own architectural firm in Stillwater, which later became McGuire/Engler/Davis Architects. It was initially located in the old Joseph Wolf Brewery building on Main Street, now the Lora Hotel, and later moved across the street to the Brick Alley Building.





The Brick Alley building in downtown Stillwater on July 25, 2020. (Nancy Ngo / Pioneer Press)

Davis said he decided he wanted to work for McGuire when he was a student at Stillwater High School and took a tour of the Warren House.

“It was radically different from any other house I had experienced,” Davis said. “It was built of stone and redwood and glass, and it had a glass skylight that ran from one side of the roof to the other. I walked into this very comforting, very nurturing living space, and it literally took my breath away. This was the first house that showed me what the power of architecture could be. It made me feel like I was being held in the palm of somebody’s hand.”

McGuire never sought the limelight or bragged about his projects, Davis said. “You had to pry information from him about his own work,” he said. “He was a very humble man.”

Davis once asked McGuire what he thought his best building was, and McGuire “didn’t hesitate to answer,” he said. “He said, ‘It’s my own house.’ I think as an architect that is often true because you are the architect, but at the same time you are the client. You are providing a shelter for your family, a home that should embody your ideals. It should affect the way you feel when you get up in the morning and go to bed at night. It should be nurturing and comforting, and, in my mind, Mike’s house is a supreme example of that.”

### **Experimented with design**



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1 of 2

Stillwater architect Michael McGuire designed the Clark-Nelson House in River Falls, Wis., nicknamed the "Hobbit House," a bermed, earth-sheltered house, in 1972. (Courtesy of McGuire Family)

McGuire wasn't afraid to experiment with design, John McGuire said. His father designed the Clark-Nelson House in River Falls, Wis., nicknamed the "Hobbit House," a bermed, earth-sheltered house, and the Noel Bennett House, in Jemez Springs, N.M., which was made out of straw bales.

The Bennett House was featured on the cover of "Living Homes: Sustainable Architecture and Design," a book written by Suzi Moore McGregor and Nora Burba Trulsson and published in 2001.

The book details how Bennett and her late husband decided to hire McGuire. "It wasn't long before they realized that architect Michael McGuire would be the best choice for creating the sustainable, energy-efficient, minimum-impact home they desired," the authors write. "Of all the architects they had met during the research, McGuire was most well-versed in building in wild places. During the course of his career, he had built State Park buildings, an environmental research center, and buildings for a wilderness camp, and had experimented with passive and active solar systems and new materials since the 1960s."

McGuire's plan for the house followed "hemicycle designs" favored by Wright, "an early proponent of solar architectural strategies, and one of McGuire's major influences," according to the book. "Particularly in the winter, the sun warms the concrete floors in the master bedroom first, then moves through the gallery until it reaches the living quarters towards the end of the day."

The last house McGuire designed was in Inverness, Calif., near Point Reyes National Seashore, and completed in the mid-2000s, when he was around 80, McGuire-Huth said. But McGuire continued working as an architect until he was 93, finishing a second apartment in the Commander Grain Elevator in 2022, she said.

McGuire is survived by his children, Sally McGuire-Huth, John McGuire and Kate McGuire, and four grandchildren.

A celebration of McGuire's life will be held from 1 to 5 p.m. Aug. 25 at Bradshaw Funeral Home in Stillwater.

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