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Mike McGuire, St. Croix River valley architect and entrepreneur, dies at 95

The longtime architect designed homes and found new uses for historic St. Croix River buildings, including several in downtown Stillwater.

By [Matt McKinney](#)

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Mike McGuire (Provided/Family photo)

Michael G. McGuire, a renowned Stillwater architect and painter who designed distinctive homes, built a popular riverfront restaurant and saved one of Stillwater's most iconic buildings from the wrecking ball, died Aug. 4 after a brief illness. He was 95.

McGuire led his own architecture firm in Stillwater for years, creating structures that bore hallmarks of Prairie School architecture but were recognizable as his. Bare wood, spare ornamentation, large windows, brick and stone: a McGuire house used basic materials and was often sighted with a view of the St. Croix River or a piece of wilderness while tucked into the land and made to feel connected to it.

“He had a great respect for buildings of a human scale, buildings that were meant to comfort and nurture rather than impress,” said Kelly Davis, the architect and former partner of McGuire’s. He was an architect’s architect, Davis said, someone who pushed himself to find new designs and could be experimental but also built a following of fiercely loyal fans who wanted the McGuire look for their home.

“He was fortunate through his long career to amass a very unified and cohesive body of work,” Davis said.

Michael Graham McGuire was born in Minneapolis in 1928 and grew up in St. Cloud and Mankato. He served in post-World War II Germany with the U.S. Army, then attended the University of Chicago and the University of Minnesota School of Architecture. He moved to New York City after graduation, then, after marrying Juliann Halvorson in 1957, returned to the Twin Cities to take a job at an architecture firm and start a family. Early on, while designing a client’s St. Croix River house, McGuire found the steep riverfront lot on the Wisconsin side of the St. Croix where he would build his family’s home. It sits just south of the St. Croix Crossing bridge.

Whether it was paintings, literature, music, pottery or textiles, McGuire loved exploring the creative world, said his daughter Sally McGuire-Huth. “I don’t think there was anything he liked talking about more,” she said.

Even as his architecture career blossomed, McGuire could be found drawing and painting in his private time, something that his children saw as his true passion. He produced hundreds of paintings but mostly declined to exhibit, sell or even give them away. At the urging of friends, a collection of McGuire’s work was published [on a website](#) and exhibited at a show in Stillwater.

After striking out on his own, McGuire’s office was in the former Wolf Brewery, now the Lora hotel, on the south end of Stillwater. In a 1969 Minneapolis Tribune feature about him, McGuire said he wanted to make urban spaces more liveable.

“Lots of people here live in crummy, ugly apartments,” he said, with the result that people feel uncomfortable in their own homes. A better solution to urban renewal would be to create neighborhoods where homes, the land and services are all connected to each other, sometimes leaving the old buildings in place. He added partners and his office became known as McGuire/Engler/Davis Architects.

McGuire ventured into real estate in the 1980s when he and a group of investors bought the Brick Alley building, a former power plant on Stillwater’s Main Street, to convert it into a place for artists and craftspeople. It’s now home to shops and restaurants. The deal included the Commander grain elevator, a towering feed mill overlooking Stillwater’s downtown that was in use until 1986. Facing possible demolition, the elevator building was eventually converted into a store selling outdoors

equipment and featuring an indoor rock climbing wall. McGuire added apartments above the store and a painting studio and office for himself on the upper floors.

He also acquired a riverfront car wash that had outstanding views of Stillwater's historic lift bridge. Continuing with his own urban renewal project, McGuire shuttered the car wash and designed the popular Dock Café in its place.

McGuire's architectural work can also be seen at Wild River State Park, the East Bank Townhomes in Hudson, Wis., and the Desch Office Building in Stillwater.

In recent years, McGuire continued to paint at his studio at home; he lived independently until health problems, including brain cancer, set in quickly this summer, according to his family.

"Honestly, I feel like we were just really lucky to have him as a dad," said his daughter Kate.

McGuire is survived by his children, Sally McGuire-Huth, John McGuire, and Kate McGuire; several grandchildren and longtime companion Catherine Flowers.

A celebration of life will be held Aug. 25th, from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m., at Bradshaw Funeral home, 2800 Curve Crest Blvd., Stillwater.