

The International Style Bossier High School is a Public Works Administration project begun in late 1938 and completed in 1940. It occupies an eleven acre site in an otherwise undistinguished mid-twentieth century neighborhood. (The nominated acreage is less than this due to non-historic resources on the property.) The large, five-unit school is built of re-enforced concrete finished in blond brick veneer. The linear classroom unit is three stories. Bossier High looks much as it did when completed, with the only notable exception being the replacement of an original clock with an image of the school mascot.

In his own published recollection of the project, architect Samuel Wiener wrote that he was given “complete authority in decisions relating to the location, planning, style, and construction.” School authorities provided him an assessment of their specific needs and an explanation of the teaching and administrative systems. He provided them what he called “a five-building-in-one structure” to meet their educational goals. The five units were the classroom building, gymnasium, auditorium, cafeteria, and manual training (shop) building.

Although they read on the exterior as separate buildings, the classroom unit, gym, and auditorium adjoin each other (see original layout), but are separated structurally by expansion joints. It was considered imperative that the main entrance to the classroom unit also serve the gym and auditorium. The plan locates the three units in such a way that each is accessible from the main foyer without passing through the others. The gymnasium is to the side of the classroom unit, and the auditorium is located at the same end to the rear (see plan). The relatively small, unstyled cafeteria and shop buildings are free standing and located at the rear (see plan), just to the east of the auditorium.

Despite its three-story height, the classroom unit is so long (some 250 feet) that it has a quite pronounced linear quality. The overall lines are angular and crisp. The main entrance is skewed to the far west side – due to the interconnectedness of the three units as described above. Wiener sited the long sides of the classroom building to face north and south, providing bands of steel windows to light the classrooms. Above each band of windows on the south side is a two foot ledge. These long window bands contribute greatly to the linear quality of the building. The only vertical element is a fairly wide three story window above the entrance marking the staircase. Pronounced horizontal bars provide counterpoint to the upward thrust of the window. A stark, stylized clock was originally located at the upper left corner of the window. Regrettably, this has been replaced with an image of the school mascot (the bearcat).

Amazingly, the classroom unit retains the striking 110 foot long canopy Wiener designed to provide students protection from the elements as they off-loaded from buses and entered the building. Made of exposed re-enforced concrete, the canopy rests upon steel pipes. Its sweeping curves are repeated in the ceiling.

The gymnasium, to the side of the classroom building, is an accomplished interplay of various masses of varying heights (see original photo). Regrettably, its design, as well as the overall composition of the high school, is obscured by trees planted in the 1960s. Each element of the gym has different windows on the facade. All are strongly linear, with some reading almost as thin slits. The gym has an independent secondary entrance at the front corner (opposite side from the main entrance to the high school).

The auditorium easily is the most unusual of the five units; its acoustic-driven footprint and articulation are quite distinctive. As can be seen in the attached plan and photo, the massive front wall curves boldly, and the sides slope inward toward the stage. Wiener articulated the side walls as a series of advancing and receding forms which diminish gradually in height from front to rear (see photo). Then at the very rear, the building mass increases in height for the fly gallery. Windows are vertical and appear singly, re-enforcing the rhythm of the side elevations previously described.

The cafeteria and shop building are plain, one story, blond brick veneer buildings with steel windows.

Compared to the exterior articulation of the complex, the interiors (classroom building and auditorium) are of limited architectural interest. They, however, remain largely unaltered. The lobby, skewed to the side (as explained previously), has a few curving walls. Lobby and corridor walls feature a high wainscot of large glazed tiles. Floors in the lobby and corridors are terrazzo; the classrooms have wooden floors (some parquet). Visual interest in the auditorium is provided by the advancing and receding wall planes along the sides. There is no traditional proscenium. Instead, the side walls turn the corner and terminate abruptly to frame a recessed stage. (See attached photocopy of early view.)

#### Assessment of Integrity:

The main units of Bossier High (classroom building, gym, auditorium) remain largely unaltered. The only notable alterations (in order of importance) are the replacement of the original clock on the exterior of the classroom building with an image of the school mascot, the erection of free-standing walkways across the front of the classroom building (on the sidewalk), and the painting over of the auditorium windows.

On the interior, the terrazzo bearcat mascot in the lobby dates from 1959.

The original cafeteria has been converted into a library, and the old shop building into a yearbook room.

Note: There are three late 1950s buildings (in the same blond brick) set fairly close to Sam Wiener's five-unit campus. The largest and most prominent is a free-standing classroom building set immediately to the east of the original classroom building. Designed by another architect (T. R. Meredith), it mimics the look of Wiener's classroom building. These late 1950s buildings do not appear to meet Register requirements of "exceptional significance" for less than 50 year old buildings. Hence they are not included in the nominated area.

SIGNIFICANT DATES: 1938-1940  
ARCHITECT/BUILDER: Samuel Wiener, architect  
James T. Taylor (Fort Worth, TX), General Contractor  
CRITERION: C

The Bossier High School is of statewide architectural significance as a rare and compelling example of the International Style. Its architect Samuel G. Wiener, along with brother William, were easily Louisiana's most consummate and advanced practitioners of this European style of machined minimalist art.

The International Style came into being in Europe in the 1920s, principally in Germany, France and Holland. Its leading practitioners were Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and J. J. P. Oud. Their purpose was to create a new architecture appropriate to the modern world – one appropriate to the age of the machine. Their designs were functional, stark and unadorned, with essentially the same architectural treatment applied to a factory, school or residence. Two of the most famous examples of the new style are Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye in France (1929) and Gropius' 1925-26 design for the Bauhaus School in Dessau, Germany. The International Style is (and was) considered quite avant-garde; it was never very popular in America. Le Corbusier's definition of a house as a "machine for living in" did not fit the American ideal of a cozy home.

The very earliest examples of the International Style in America were in the late 1920s and early '30s. The Lovell House in Los Angeles, designed by immigrant architect Richard Neutra in 1928, is generally regarded as America's first piece of International Style architecture. A second well-known early example is the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society Building, a skyscraper designed by the firm of George Howe and William E. Lescaze and completed in 1932. Sam Wiener's earliest design dates to 1931-32 and William Wiener's to 1933 (see below).

When Sam Wiener began work on his first design, the style was so new that it had no name. It was christened "International Style" in a 1932 book of the same name by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson published in connection with the New York Museum of Modern Art's exhibition on modern architecture held the same year. The exhibition included photographs and drawings by various architects practicing the new architecture in a number of countries.

The style was so novel and examples so limited in the United States that Samuel Wiener and fellow Shreveport architect Theodore Flaxman went to Europe in 1931 with the specific purpose of seeing the new architecture and meeting its creators. As Mrs. Samuel Wiener related to Tulane University architectural historian Karen Kingsley: "We had to go. We couldn't see modern architecture here in America and they weren't teaching it in the architecture schools. There was no other way we could find out." In Europe they visited numerous buildings in the new idiom, attended the 1931 Building Exposition in Berlin, and met various architects, including Gropius, Erich Mendelsohn, and Alvar Aalto.

In the next few years Samuel Wiener and his younger brother William (independently and together) produced a number of major works in the International Style for Shreveport clients. Their work was wide-ranging, including institutional, commercial and residential construction. Sadly, their most exciting, most important work has been demolished or seriously altered.

Samuel Wiener's first work in the new idiom was the El Karubah Club House overlooking Cross Lake near Shreveport, designed in 1931, presumably right after he returned from Europe. The building has been extensively

remodeled, although it is still recognizably in the International Style.

Next came the Weekend House, also on Cross Lake, designed by William Wiener in April 1933, probably in collaboration with his brother. This extraordinary house was influenced by Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, regarded as one of the seminal works of modern architecture. Like its inspiration, the Weekend House was lifted off the ground on supports called pilotis. The space underneath was used for parking. As was common in modern designs, the architect(s) designed much of the furnishings and fittings. Tragically, the Weekend House was demolished in the 1980s. Just last year (2003), a fire destroyed another major design, the Big Chain Store (1940), with its sweeping curves reminiscent of Erich Mendelsohn.

The Wieners' work often was highlighted in various national and international architectural publications. The Bossier City High School was the subject of a five page article in the February 1941 issue of *The Architectural Record*. The building receiving probably the most acclaim was Samuel Wiener's 1935 design for the Shreveport Municipal Incinerator. *The Architectural Record*, in a feature story of seven pages in November 1935, hailed it as a "strikingly clean piece of design." The building was featured at the Paris International Exposition of 1937, in a traveling exhibit by the Museum of Modern Art, and at the Architectural League in New York. The City of Shreveport, in 1974, razed the off-white brick building with its signature ribbon windows.

Despite their pioneering and exceptional work in the International Style, Samuel and William Wiener are not much known outside scholarly circles in Louisiana. East Coast and Los Angeles practitioners are the ones who make all the standard books. Particular credit for bringing attention to the Wieners goes to Tulane architectural historian Karen Kingsley, who featured them in a 1984 exhibition and catalog titled *Modernism in Louisiana: A Decade of Progress, 1930-40*. Professor Kingsley undertook the first scholarly study of the Wieners and is responsible for bringing the full range of their contributions to the attention of the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation as well as countless others.

Roughly a half dozen International Style buildings designed by the Wieners survive in largely unaltered form (houses and schools and one commercial building). As noted earlier, their most important, indeed revolutionary, designs are gone or notably altered (more of the former). The only other city in Louisiana with International Style buildings is New Orleans, where there are a few examples, none as pure and avant-garde as the Wieners' work, and all about a decade later.

As one of only a dozen or so consummate International Style buildings in Louisiana, the Bossier High School merits listing in the National Register of Historic Places. With its sharp, angular lines, it is indeed a work of machined minimalist art that the style's European founders would recognize.

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