

Neighboring Notable

By **GLENN SUMPTER**

"Even before I went to the First grade, I wanted to be an architect," says James N. Sherrill. "An architect with a son about my age lived across the street, and we used to hang around his father's office quite a bit. I guess I just got pencil dust on my fingers and it never did come off."

This boyhood ambition has led to some of the most striking and widely acclaimed architecture in the Hickory area. Since James N. Sherrill came to Hickory in 1951, his designs have won recognition in national magazines, five awards from the American Institute of Architects, and widespread praise from people who appreciate original and intuitive architectural design.

Feels Civic Responsibility

The man behind these buildings is a quiet soft-spoken father of five children, who likes to discuss his work in terms of problems and solutions. He is a man with strong ideas who feels that he has a duty to make the town he lives in more attractive to the eye.

Mr. Sherrill is a native of Winston-Salem, a graduate of Reynolds High school in Winston-Salem and the husband of a Winston-Salem girl. He met



JAMES N. SHERRILL

Connie Scott while he was working as a soda jerk in a dairy bar during the summer vacation from High school. She worked in the office. They were married some years after this High school meeting, while Mr. Sherrill was in college. Their first child, James, Jr. is 16. The other children are Susan, 14;

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Steven, 11; Fran, 8; and Amy 3.

Between High School and college Mr. Sherrill spent nearly three years with the U. S. Navy. Mr. Sherrill was stationed at the Naval Air Station at Key West, Fla., and toured much of the East Coast with the station's basketball and tennis teams. He also made five trips to Cuba while in service. The time in Florida and in Cuba left him permanently influenced by the style and imagination displayed by the contemporary architects of these areas.

"I saw," he says, "a great deal of architecture in both areas, that made a lasting impression on me."

Enrolled At N. C. State

He took those impressions and his interest in sports with him to North Carolina State College, where he enrolled in 1946. He studied in the college's School of Design and lettered for two years on the tennis team. This dual interest in architecture and athletics continued until architectural studies grew more time-consuming and Mr. Sherrill was called in for a conference with the dean. "He told me," says Mr. Sherrill, "that I could decide to be either an athlete or an architect, but not both."

This conversation is recalled with sort of a slow smile. The decision was evidently not a difficult one and the tennis team's loss was the School of Design's gain.

It is worth noting, however, that while athletics have receded to a minor role in Mr. Sherrill's life—they have not disappeared completely. As he will quickly prove, if asked about a certain hole-in-one posted last February on the Catawba County Country Club's No. 3 green by one James N. Sherrill, amateur golfer.

He spent his Summers from 1947 to 1951, working in the offices of Raleigh architects and upon his graduation in 1951 came to Hickory to work for Clemmer and Horton. "I had a chance to go most anywhere I wanted to," he says, explaining the move to Hickory, "but North Carolina is my State and that's where I wanted to work. I knew Clemmer and Horton were doing good work, so I came to Hickory."

Several Winning Designs

His work for Clemmer and Horton led to award-winning de-

signs for the First Federal Savings and Loan Building in Conover, the Catawba Dairy Bar on Highway 64-70-321, which is no longer in operation, the P. E. Monroe Auditorium on the Lenoir Rhyne campus, and the Terminal Building at Hickory Airport.

He set up his own office in Hickory in 1958, and soon won another award for the Northwestern Walk-up, Drive-up Branch Bank in Hickory.

He sums up his approach to his work in these words: "I try to arrive at a good solution to the design of the space and traffic flow problem with a structural envelope that is pleasing to the client and satisfying to me."

Perhaps it is this approach that gives a fresh, original quality to Mr. Sherrill's work. He seems completely unfettered by questions of style both in design and in his conversation. He thinks in terms of the building's function and of designs that will enhance that function. "The best solution to any design problem is always a simple solution," he says. By seeking simple solutions to the problems of architectural design, he creates work that is clean and uncluttered in its form. As for aesthetics, he holds the belief that a good design is aesthetically pleasing just as surely as a bad design is unpleasant to look at.

Has Painting As Hobby

Aesthetics are an important facet of Mr. Sherrill's life both in his work and during his leisure hours. His hobby is painting, and he has achieved considerable recognition in the North Carolina art world. His paintings have been shown in Raleigh, Winston-Salem, Asheville, Greensboro, Statesville, Blowing Rock and Hickory.

He does both two-dimensional and three-dimensional painting in what would probably be described as the abstract and abstract-impressionist schools. Describing Mr. Sherrill's painting, Hickory artist John Brady has said: "The work is principally involved with simplicity." Other descriptions have pointed out that Mr. Sherrill as an artist concerns himself primarily with form—form in a structural and color sense. It is evident that James Sherrill, artist, and James Sherrill, architect, hold a common aesthetic approach

Mr. Sherrill says that his hobby has great therapeutic value. "When I'm working on a design, I have to try to please everyone. I need a design that will solve the particular problems of a particular structure that is aesthetically pleasing to the client and to myself. All this has to be accomplished within the bounds of a budget and finished by a certain deadline. When it's all done, then I'm ready to sit down and do some painting—to work on my own schedule and turn out a finished product that has to please no one but me."

Busy On State Job

At the time that this reporter talked to Mr. Sherrill, he was surrounded by the plans for the new addition to Gardner Hall on the campus of North Carolina State of the University of North Carolina at Raleigh, a \$1,822,108 job for which he is the architect. "When a job like this is finished," he said, "then I really feel like doing some painting." The Sherrill artistic talent is evidently hereditary since three of the Sherrill children have won prizes in school art contests. "I have five paintings with ribbons on them at home," says the proud father, "all painted by the children."

The task of pleasing everyone can sometimes be quite difficult. In fact, sometimes, the solution to a problem can be beyond expectation. An example is the award-winning Monroe Auditorium at Lenoir Rhyne. One of the outstanding attributes of this theatre is its acoustics. Sound carries so well to an audience in this auditorium, that one local speaker described the sensation of speaking from the stage as, "feeling the sound

being pined out of your mouth."

However, the sound travels one-way—noises from the audience do not carry back onto the stage. Now that sounds fine, but there are times when performers like to hear sounds from the audience. For instance, when they are applauding.

One of the first performers to appear in the new auditorium was near tears after the performance because of the apparent cool reception she had received. Actually the audience gave her a near riotous reception—but she couldn't hear the applause.

Simple Solution

The reason for the Monroe Auditorium's good acoustics is an excellent example of a simple solution. Sound grows weaker as it travels farther from its source—so, Mr. Sherrill sloped the ceiling downward toward the back of the auditorium providing a backboard to reflect sound to the rear seats. The result is an even distribution of sound that could arouse envy from the designers of the Philharmonic Hall at New York's Lincoln Center.

The Monroe Auditorium is one of Mr. Sherrill's favorite projects, others ranked at the top of his list of favorite Sherrill structures are the Hickory Airport Terminal Building and the James E. Phillips home in Hickory. The Phillips home was featured in the October, 1963, issue of "House and Garden."

The choice of a private home, an auditorium and an airport terminal building is indicative of another of Mr. Sherrill's traits—he has no favorite type of building. "There is no particular kind of building, I'm anxious to design," he says, "my favorite project is the next one."

"Any structure that holds heating or cooling or gives shelter is architecture," he says, "and there is on reason for it to be ugly. There is absolutely no reason why a warehouse must be ugly just because it is a warehouse. A well-designed warehouse can be attractive to the eye."

Disturbed By Ugliness

Ugliness, in general, is some thing Mr. Sherrill is disturbed about. "People accept things that are ugly just because they are used to seeing them. The City has good ordinances to control unsightliness in Hickory but there's a lot that needs to be done."

Mr. Sherrill intends to do his part by taking pictures of some of the more unsightly spots in the city and showing them to others. He sees this project as the beginning of a "stamp out ugliness in Hickory" campaign.

The campaign to stamp out ugliness is indicative of Mr. Sherrill's concern with the appearance of the community in which he lives. With a little prodding, he will expand discussions to include some opinions on the prevailing architectural styles in the Hickory area.

"Imitation," he says, "breeds bad design. Each has its own problems and purposes. If you concentrate on frills and flourishes and ignore the basic problems of the design you will wind up with a bad design. Architecture changes with the times. As new materials and new techniques develop, they inevitably lead to changes in architectural design. For instance, the Greeks of classical times built with huge columns and short spans, because they had to. Working with cut stone and the techniques available there was nothing else they could have done. Their buildings are handsome, but that doesn't mean that architecture reached its peak 2,000 years ago or even 100 years ago. It's silly to think that we've made no advances since that time."

Voices Pet Peeve

"A pet peeve is a modern building requirement adopting a colonial or pseudo-colonial style. I can appreciate the desire for a building with a traditional feeling, but that's no reason for making a copy of a building that probably served another function. Things have changed. I think it is ridiculous for someone to ask for an authentic colonial home and then fill it chock-full

of air conditioning and modern appliances.

"Colonial kitchens were designed in a certain way because people had to carry water and wood into them. I can see trying to capture some of the flavor or feeling, but to build a copy of a colonial kitchen and try to design a space for a garbage disposal and dishwasher to go into it is silly.

"I think that if someone wants an authentic colonial home — then it should have an outdoor bathroom, instead of modern plumbing."

While hesitant to say that he designs in any particular style, Mr. Sherrill readily admits to being contemporary. "I'm living and designing in the 1960's, so I must be contemporary of this time, mustn't I?"

Points Out Problem

"The problem," he says, "is that people see one contemporary design and they don't like it at first because it's different — so they decide they don't like contemporary architecture. They like colonial because they are used to it and sometimes because it is pretentious. To me, the whole thing, is just the repeating of a bad habit. Another thing, is that if a new contemporary building develops a leak in the roof, people will say — 'I never did put any faith in these modern style buildings' — the whole roof could fall off a colonial style building and no one would figure anything was wrong with the design."

Having delivered these strong opinions, Mr. Sherrill breaks into a smile and says, "things are coming along though — as new buildings are put up and people get used to seeing them and accept them — they begin to decide that maybe contemporary architecture isn't as frightening as they had thought."

At this the smile sort of develops into a full-fledged chuckle.