



PROFILES IN: ARCHITECTURE

Roy Braswell



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BY SANDRA LOWE SANCHEZ

The man who designs the homes of many of San Antonio's who's who didn't grow up in posh housing. In fact, many of his years were spent in and around Fort Sam Houston, where his father was stationed.

"Even though things were not luxurious, as a kid, I thought we had everything: a house with a pool table and ping pong table, good schools," and more, says Roy Braswell, president of Braswell Architecture.

A middle child with an older sister and younger brother, he remembers first moving to San Antonio when he was 8 years old. "We never lived in anything that was historically significant, but ... when we moved to Harris Heights my mom was so excited," he recalls, describing a one-story home near the base. "When I was in 7th grade we moved to infantry post and I got my own bedroom. We just thought we were living in heaven. We had a basement and bought green shag carpeting and green curtains. I thought it was beautiful."

It was some of those old buildings on and around the base that piqued Braswell's interest in architecture before he even realized it. When he entered a building, he would examine it. "A lot of those buildings had neat attics, they had basements and big porches," which, he explains, served to keep the rain from getting inside the homes in times when residents relied on open windows to cool them.

When he was 13, he found a stack of flat files at the Fort Sam Houston library. The files had architectural drawings of some of the area's older buildings, including the Quadrangle — four structures built in a square, with a clock tower at the center. Braswell knew then that the tower had been used to hold Geronimo prisoner. The drawings captured his interest, and he often returned to the library to review them.

"All those buildings still fascinate me today," Braswell says.

Today, however, he's designing buildings that fascinate others. Homes with his signature stand in neighborhoods from The Dominion to Terrell Hills. In the multifamily arena, his seven-person firm designed La Villita Townhomes in Alamo Heights and Waterford Villas in Terrell Hills. He's also the architect behind the Courtyard at Brackenridge Park and Shavano Commons.

It's his relationship with the developer of Shavano Commons that Braswell credits with some of his most successful projects. Besides Shavano Commons, Roberto Kenigstein — through his company Image Homes Ltd. — is known for his prestigious dwellings. When Braswell started his own firm in 1991, Kenigstein asked him to design a spec home in Elm Creek for him. Since then, Kenigstein has been one of the Braswell's key clients.

"Roberto is a client who ... believes in me and encourages me at every opportunity," Braswell says. "He won't limit me ... he wants to make it as good as it can be."

Braswell recently talked to the Business Journal about his youth, his career, and his relationship with Kenigstein.



The Quadrangle at Fort Sam was built in 1876. The clock tower stands in the center.

(and hospital administrator).

Work ethic: I mowed yards from age 9, I got a paper route at age 14, at age 16 I worked fast food until age 18. I then worked as an apartment complex maintenance man, then as a waiter. Then I worked at a fishery in Alaska, then I worked at a gas station, I worked at a scuba shop, then selling ceiling fans. I worked as a construction laborer, then as a janitor where I cleaned the office of an architect who I went to work with for nine years.

Defining moment when you knew you wanted to be an architect: When I was thumbing through the UTSA catalog and saw Architecture. I was working construction when I first started college and I thought I'd go into engineering. Then I saw that and it hit me like a ton of bricks. I thought, that's what I wanted to do.

On your career: During college I worked construction on the West Oak building at

Company: Braswell Architecture Inc.
Position: President/Registered Architect, State of Texas

Age: 48

Family: Wife, Susan, beloved dog Jojo

Education: B.F.A. with concentration in architectural design, University of Texas at San Antonio, 1986

On growing up: My parents were very loving and just plain supportive of anything good that I did. My dad was a captain (and hospital dietician) in the U.S. Army when we moved to Fort Sam, so I grew up in military housing. He retired as a major

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A home in The Dominion that was designed by Braswell.

West Avenue and NW Military Highway. I then became the janitor for the building. (After I graduated), I went to work for Bill Hablinski, who was an architect and a tenant in the building. The first project that I did all the way through was a house for the ranch foreman for KK Amini's ranch. Bill assigned me to that project. I was 22 years old.

... (When Texas' economy soured in the late 1980s), Bill decided to move to California. He wanted me to move out there, but I didn't want to leave San Antonio. Bill gave me work (in California), but eventually (around 1991) I decided to start my own firm.

On Roberto Kenigstein: I knew of Roberto from his work with Great America Companies (developer of The Dominion and Elm Creek). A friend who was a stone mason told me that Roberto was starting his own firm. Roberto had me design a spec house (in Elm Creek). He works on a referral basis. I have clients that say Roberto's my builder. (Braswell designed a home for Kenigstein and his wife, Gloria.) Roberto's not afraid to pay me to redesign something if he thinks (it's better for the client) or he wants to offer the client more options.

(Out of the close to 200 projects that Braswell has designed in his career, Kenigstein has built 50-60 of those.)

Texas architects that influenced you: Leonard Lane was my most influential design instructor (former professor at UTSA, now an architect in Houston); Bill Hablinski (now in California), (the late) Henry Barfoot, Ken Bentley, Mac Chesney, David Lake, Ted Flato, Michael Imber, (the late) Charles Moore (dean of architecture of University of Texas)

International architects that influenced you: Renzo Piano and Richard Meier, the late Andrea Palladio and Frank Lloyd Wright

How have you grown your firm: We have stayed small and lean and really busy because I am pretty conservative. We are a

firm of 7 highly skilled people.

Buildings that have inspired you: I examine every building that I enter. They all inspire me, good or bad.

On the job challenges: Getting designs executed properly. Training good people.

Residential/commercial split: 85 percent residential and 15 percent commercial

On commercial projects: We only do the special commercial, not cookie cutter stuff. Most of our commercial clients have come to us through word of mouth ...

On the green movement: We have always strived to do economical, energy efficient designs.

Biggest professional risk: Starting my own firm.

Survival plan for the recession: We have some good projects right now that will sustain us. I've always been overloaded and understaffed.

I've been slow to expand and slow to hire somebody, so I guess that saves now.

Signature style: It's more of a philosophy of design than a style. I'm trying to solve the site and the function of the site and let the architecture flow out of that ... The material starts to suggest what it looks like.

Accomplishment you are most proud of: Actually passing the A.R.E. and getting my license as a registered architect.

Favorite material to use and why: Stone, because the earth is made of it.

Professional pet peeve: Faux stone

Most influential trip: A week I spent in Venice and Florence, Italy, because of all the real classical architecture.

Trips to New York City, Chicago, St. Louis, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Mexico have also influenced my thinking of design.

To a big extent, I plan my vacations around architectural sites. In May we are going to visit Fallingwater, the (famous) home in Western Pennsylvania designed by Frank Lloyd Wright (in 1935).

Most influential books: When I was a kid I found a book about pyramids that I kept checking out from the library ... then one time I went to check it out and it wasn't there. I was really disappointed.

More recently, "The Complete Frank Lloyd Wright Letters Trilogy." The book includes a letter by Wright to his client Edgar Kaufman Sr., owner of Fallingwater. Wright was angry that Kaufmann was (questioning his judgement.) The client backed off, and as it turned out, Wright was right.

I have a pretty big architectural library, in the neighborhood of 300 books. There are books about different types of architecture, lots of design books, early American architecture. I have this really neat book that is full of sketches ... I have books on architects, including Lake/Flato (Architects).

Books about your work: My work has been featured in "Dream Homes of Texas" by Jolie Carpenter and Dan Piessick (2005). It will be featured in another book by Jolie Carpenter that is coming out (June 1), "Luxury Homes of Texas."

PROFILES is a regular Special Report feature. For more information, contact SANDRA LOWE SANCHEZ at slowesanchez@bizjournals.com.

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