

World-renowned architect Philip Johnson died on Jan. 26, 2005, at the age of 98. During his lengthy career he changed the face of Houston, and buildings on the UST campus are among the first and last of his creations. During the 1950s, he laid out a Master Plan for the Academic Mall, which was substantially completed in 2001 with the opening of Malloy Hall. While in his eighties, he came out of retirement to design the Chapel of St. Basil, one of his crowning architectural achievements.

Bookends of a Great Career Philip Johnson, 1908-2005

During the 1940s, Houston arts patron, philanthropist and good friend of the University of St. Thomas Dominique de Menil hired a radical young architect out of New York named Philip Johnson to design her house. After his design for a new St. Michael's Church (situated on an unpaved Sage Road that cut through a pine forest) was rejected, the Menils became involved with the University of St. Thomas, then contained in the 1912 Link Lee Mansion, O'Rourke and Murphy Halls.

According to Frank D. Welch, writing in *Philip Johnson & Texas*, "Johnson's master plan was a straightforward, comprehensible scheme that could be completed incrementally by adding buildings and colonnade as funds allowed. It would have a monumentality, albeit horizontal, that was an essential element of Johnson's sensibility, a result of those years, from childhood, of looking at historic European buildings. The 'add-a-pearl' feature of expansion at St. Thomas would ensure the concept's integrity."

Johnson's design, which would cover three city blocks when completed, favored Thomas Jefferson's concept for the University of Virginia with two parallel rows of two-story buildings, separated by a lush lawn, with a library at one end and a chapel at the other. Even though the buildings serve radically different functions, they are stylistically and thematically linked as belonging to one university, with the anchors at each end representing the dialogue of faith and reason.

Johnson himself designed Welder, Jones and Strake Halls. "Like a sculptor, Philip Johnson was concerned with exterior shape and interior spaces," said the Rev. Janusz Ihnatowicz, professor emeritus of theology and who was involved in the planning of the Chapel of St. Basil. "With this preoccupation with shape and form, he often did not plan for storage space. In the design of Jones Hall, he neglected to add restrooms."

"A library by Eugene Aubry and William Morris Crain and Anderson closed the south end of the academic mall in 1971. For years the north end of the mall remained open and exposed to the rear of Hamburgers by Gourmet, facing West Alabama. Finally, in 1990, the school authorities moved, and plans for a Chapel of St. Basil began to materialize. Johnson, 84, was called back," writes Welch.

Fr. Ihnatowicz adds that Hamburgers by Gourmet had a very lucrative business, ironically fueled largely by UST students. That property and an adjacent parcel were not easily acquired.

Just as Johnson came out of retirement to design the Chapel of St. Basil, dedicated in 1997, the architect also rendered a "landmark" design to herald the University as a gateway to the Houston Museum District.

“Johnson, who loves clean, simple lines and even clean, simple sentences, is hardly a simple man. He is easily one of the most complex figures American architecture has ever seen. He is a clever but disarmingly straightforward writer, an able curator, and energetic enthusiast for the field and foremost a very serious and delightful architect. His works have not only made a mark on other where they are located but also have been models for many works by other architects,” wrote author Hilary Lewis in *Philip Johnson Architecture 1949-1965*.

Between the Academic Mall and the Chapel of St. Basil, Johnson’s designs changed the very face of Houston. The milk-carton shaped Pennzoil Place (1976), the gabled-roofed Bank of America Building and the Art Deco monolith Williams Tower and its accompanying Water Wall are Johnson’s contributions to the Houston skyline.