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## Architecture

# Smaller firms sparkle in the big leaguers' shadow

By Paul Gapp  
Architecture critic

**BIG LEAGUE, "DOWNTOWN"** architectural firms tend to get an inordinate share of public attention, largely because they design most of our tallest or otherwise spectacular buildings.

But there are dozens of smaller firms, including many in the suburbs, which collectively carry major responsibility for creating our built environment.

Like the large offices, they are run by a mixed bag of highly talented, mediocre, and nondescript designers and engineers.

Because their work affects all of us, it seemed salutary to close in on one of the better [and, in some ways, typical] of them for a microcosmic look at how they function.

And so, after a bit of shopping around, we descended on a Northfield firm whose partners are Forrest D. Wendt, Charles T. Cedarholm, and William C. Tippens. A series of interesting coincidences brought them together.

All are in their middle 40s and received degrees from the University of Illinois, where none knew either of the others even though their years of study overlapped. All later worked for Charles Stade & Associates, another firm of modest size in Park Ridge. Each left Stade at a different time to open tiny one- or two-man offices of their own.

Eventually, all three were forced to face the same dismal fact: Trying to be a lone wolf architect is one of the most difficult enterprises imaginable. While working on one job, you have no free time to hustle up new business. If you're sick for a couple of weeks, it's a disaster.

Faced with those obstacles and others, the disenchanting trio of loners rediscovered each other in 1967 and formed the firm of Wendt, Cedarholm, Tippens, Inc., which today employs four persons in addition to the partners.

"We decided right at the start to spell out areas of authority to avoid conflicts," said Cedarholm. "So Bill is office manager and supervisor of construction, Forrest is in charge of new business, and I handle design."

In practice, however, there is overlapping of responsibility and a free-wheeling sense of informality around the office which is common to small firms.

It is the kind of working environment which seems highly appropriate for the flow of architectural ideas. Contrast it, if you will, with the big downtown shops, where one man may spend a whole year designing and redesigning a rubbish disposal system for a towering megastructure. That kind of labor, as many an architect will tell you, is a pathway to madness and about as creative as playing with mud.

"We bounce ideas off each other," said Tippens, "and we're free of the endless, administrative paper shuffling we'd have to do if we were big."

Unlike New York, Chicago is not bubbling with architectural ferment and dialogue of the sort which might leave a suburban designer feeling out of things. Still, the three partners manage to attend seminars and other events to keep their professional edges well-honed. Tippens enjoys giving slide-illustrated lectures on Chicago's architectural masterworks.

"Perhaps the most important quality we have to sell to potential clients is the thing they're most concerned about, and that's personal attention," said Wendt.

"The client knows with whom he's working because one of us is continuously in charge of a project from start to finish. It's not like a big shop, where somebody new may show up at every meeting. That can be disconcerting."

It is usually neither cheaper nor more expensive to retain a small architectural firm. Fees everywhere are based on a percentage of total construction cost and also vary by building types; the highest percentage fees usually apply to single family houses.

Architects, like doctors and lawyers, are not permitted to advertise [although they can promote themselves in quieter ways]. Wendt, Cedarholm, and Tippens thus spent a lot of time sitting around and nervously cracking their knuckles until the first job came along. It was a church addition.

The chairman of the church's building committee also happened to be board chairman of a suburban park district which shortly afterward needed somebody to design a recreation center. On the strength of their



Ideas flow around a drawing board in the suburban architecture firm founded by partners Forrest

D. Wendt (left), Charles T. Cedarholm, and William C. Tippens.

church performance, the architects captured the park district job and were on their way.

Since then, their major projects have included 15 libraries, 15 recreation buildings, 10 office buildings, five industrial structures, 10 houses, 3 restaurants, and a public housing project.

"We believe we've done more municipal libraries than anyone else in the suburban metropolitan area," said Cedarholm. "But we don't want to overemphasize that as a specialty because it might blunt our reputation for versatility."

"And we like to think that our libraries have few common characteristics," said Tippens. "Instead, they're responsive to individual design problems."

"We've tried to develop lasting designs, rather than anything that's modish or farout. We also try very hard for warmth in terms of design, materials, and the way we handle space."

Because all bookshelves in today's small libraries are open to the public, the space handling is more than a bit tricky. Open floor plans with a maximum of flexibility are mandatory, but some areas must carry a feeling of privacy and snugness.

Audio-visual facilities, book-theft detection devices, and computer connections between sharing libraries are among other advances in library science which must either be built in or anticipated as future additions.

A library's facades are almost equally important. In some of our new dreary, flatland suburbs, the library is the only culture symbol in town and deserves to look as handsome outside as within.

But as Cedarholm pointed out, the Northfield firm doesn't spend all of its time exploring the nuances of how to mix people and books. Indeed, their other major speciality has turned out to be recreation buildings, particularly those housing racquetball layouts [both public and for profit]. They've done eight racquetball facilities, and thus probably know as much as anybody about how to physically accommodate the burgeoning sport.

Oddly, there are absolutely no standard specifications for building a racquetball court, except that it be exactly the same size as a handball court [for which use it is interchangeable]. Theoretically, you can construct one with anything from mahogany to marble.

"We're sure some kind of specs will eventually be adopted, though," said Tippens. "Many of the better players immediately detect a difference in 'feel' when they play a new court, and others are even fussy about noise variations in certain sections of a court."

The smacking, twanging, popping noises of racquetball are considered to be highly marketable in the private clubs springing up everywhere.

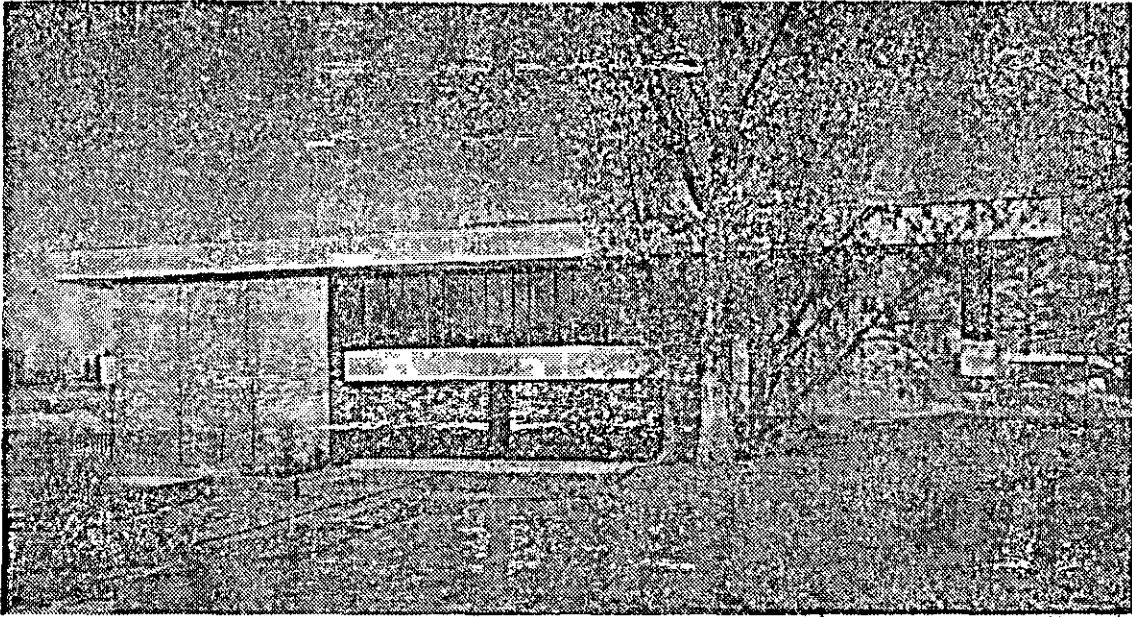
"In the old-time YMCAs, nobody except the players knew what went on inside a handball court, because there was rarely a place provided for people to watch," Tippens recalled.

"Today, when we do a racquetball building, we deliberately design it so the noise of play spills out into the lobby and the spectator gallery. When potential club members come in for a look around, the excitement of all this helps convince them to sign up."

A couple of years ago, promoters got the idea of telecasting the national racquetball championship finals in Las Vegas. When they couldn't figure out how to train cameras on the action from a variety of angles, they came to Wendt, Cedarholm, and Tippens.

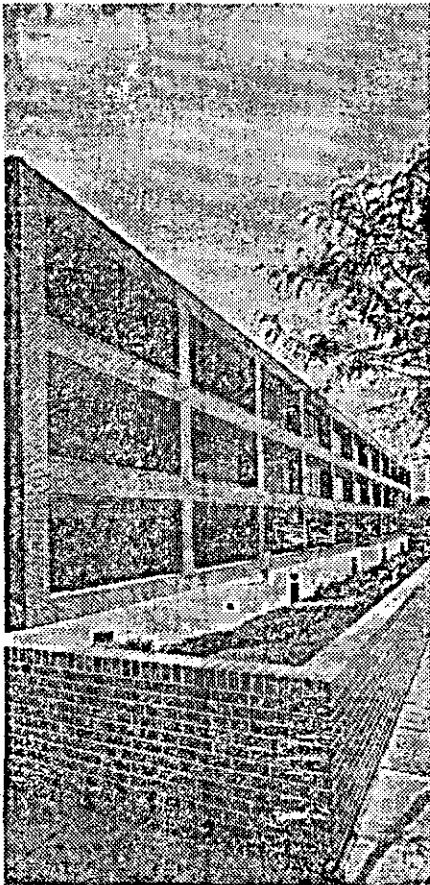
"We designed a demountable, four-wall court constructed of rigid, 7/8-inch glass," said Tippens, "and we were certain it would work." The telecasting plans fell through for other reasons, however, and the marvelous transparent cube never got off the drawing board.

And so it goes among the scores of architects out there in suburbia. They may not be turning out any skyscrapers, but their work has a great impact on the quality of life in the metropolitan area. Let us not forget that the downtown elite corps of architects holds no monopoly on good design and buildings that work the way they're supposed to.



Palatine Public Library designed by Wendt, Cedarholm, Tippens, Inc.

## Top honors for a design quartet



Mutual Trust Life Building.

**FOUR CHICAGO-AREA** architecture firms have won this year's annual "excellence in masonry" awards, presented by the Metropolitan Chicago Masonry Council.

That may seem to have a rather commercial ring to it, but be advised that the council does not fling its bouquets in the crass manner of certain other groups that promote building materials.

A couple of years ago, the council turned over responsibility for judging to the national office of the American Institute of Architects.

It won cheers for that decision, because it meant awards would no longer be dispensed indiscriminately to architects just because they happened to use bricks. Only masonry structures are eligible, of course, but the sole criterion is good design.

The winners, selected from among 48 entries:

- The Perkins & Will Group, Inc., which took top honors in the competition for the Mutual Trust Life Building in Oak Brook, an elegant structure in which brick plays an almost ornamental role despite the crisp simplicity of the basic design;

- Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, for the Percy L. Julian High School, 10330 S. Elizabeth St., a handsomely detailed complex built on a difficult site hemmed in by railroad tracks and the Dan Ryan Expressway;

- The Samuels Group, Inc., of Northbrook, for the contiguous Central Savings and Loan and Ace Hardware buildings at Clark Street and Broadway. In scale and form, the structures stand as little bastions of architectural integrity at the gateway to New Town's commercial vulgarity;

- Barancik, Conte & Associates, for the Wieboldt office building in Evanston, a five-story structure which was cited in part for its compatibility with the surrounding neighborhood.

Judges of the contest, who assembled in Washington, were Chloethiel Woodard Smith, M. Elliott Carroll, and William L. Ensign. All are fellows of the American Institute of Architects.

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