

Architect: Axtens, S. Arthur
Birth/Death Dates: c.1898-??
Practice Dates: 1927-c.1957
Firms: S. Arthur Axtens, Architect and Engineer

Biographical Information

Arthur Axtens, both a registered architect and engineer, practiced privately in Denver from January 1927 through at least 1957. After college graduation and prior to opening his own office, he worked for seven years as a draftsman, engineer and superintendent for other architects. During 1942 and 1943, he was employed as structural consultant for the Denver District Office of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He reviewed military construction designs in steel, timber, reinforced concrete and masonry for airplane hangars, mess halls, barracks, theaters, warehouses, and water tanks.



Axtens designed both in revival and modern styles. The Dorset House apartment building (1937) is a fine example of Streamline Moderne. Steck School (1930 and 1942) employs Art Deco elements in its massing, vertical emphasis and detailing. The Church of the Epiphany is a modernist interpretation of Gothic Revival. The Mason Building on the former campus of Colorado Women's College employs Collegiate Gothic, while the four campus dormitory halls exhibit variations of Tudor Revival. In its December 1939 edition, the architectural journal, *Architectural Record*, placed Porter Hall dormitory ninth on a list of 18 of Denver's finest examples of architecture.

Axtens demonstrated his ability to handle modernist design with his Evergreen High School (1948, demolished), Science Building at Colorado Women's College (1957, demolished), and the ten-story Farmers Union Building (1955). Rejecting the increasingly popular use of large expanses of glass, the exterior walls of the highrise were cast monolithic with the floors to form a continuous deep girder around the building at each floor level. He described the building as a "demonstration of efficiency, strength, beauty and economy."

Axtens lamented the general decline in architectural design and construction quality in the building community over the later years of his practice. In the introduction to a highly illustrated, large format self-published brochure of his work between 1927 and 1957, he offered a stinging criticism on the current state of architecture:

The low level of architectural design has become so general that we are no longer surprised to see a church which we recognize as an enlargement of a farmer's hog shelter or barn, or a college chapel which we recall as having seen as a zoo monkey house, or a school which we remember as an enlarged copy of a widely used chicken house design, or an office building obviously an enlarged egg crate, or a residence copied from a factory.

Noting that buildings of the 1950s must be resistant to the powerful new forces of "aeroplanes, atomic and hydrogen bombs, guided missiles and other powerful destructive forces," he argued that "materials such as brick, stone and tile, since they cannot resist lateral forces of large magnitude, must be abandoned for structural purposes." He also urged the discontinuous of the

tall, narrow, flimsy buildings then being produced. In describing his Farmers Union Building, he noted that while it could not be said to be “bomb-proof”, it was highly “bomb-resistant” and “will withstand, without important structural damage, blasts that would collapse conventional buildings.”

Unafraid of challenging the big names of twentieth-century architecture, he rebuked the mid-century design philosophy of Frank Lloyd Wright:

As an outstanding example of ludicrous, though widely publicized architectural and structural design, one which violates all informed judgment as well as the previously avowed philosophy of the perpetrator, but which is rather typical of the kind of thing broadcast as architecture, presently, I refer to the proposed one mile tall Chicago Tower of Frank Lloyd Wrong, to paraphrase his name rightly. To quote this architect, and to agree with his statement, “the things wrong with architecture in America are its architects,” for which dereliction Mr. Wright has undisputed claim to leadership, although the competition for the notoriety has become keen.

Expressing his own dual talents as an architect and engineer, Axtens noted the need to balance attractive design with considerations of efficient and effective function:

The over-emphasis of the visual aspects of building design has produced many Architects capable of making attractive sketches which frequently bear little resemblance to the completed structures because of deliberate misrepresentation, or because between the original concept and the completed structure lays a maze of structural, mechanical and other engineering problems they were unable to either solve or correlate adequately. The designer of a building, to be effective, must at all times from the beginning of the Preliminary Sketch to the completion of the Detailed Drawings think not only how it will look, but also how it will function, how it will be constructed, how much it will cost.

The beauty and effectiveness of Axtens designs are evident to the casual observer and the zealous critic. He exhibited skills in both revival styles and Modernist forms while never losing the practical judgments of the engineer. He always strove for quality over quantity. He stated in summarizing his own professional philosophy that:

Because of the many elements to be considered, evaluated, coordinated and recorded in the architectural design, the structural design, the mechanical design and the electrical design to produce efficient, attractive and yet economical buildings and structures, the author has found it best to keep his practice of Architecture and Engineering on a personal and professional basis rather than commercial; this limits the volume of work but retains quality, and produces a more uniform service than that produced by a variable group of draftsmen, specification writers, designers and engineers.

Credited Buildings (partial list)

Building Name	Location	Site No.	Date*	Status
Foote Hall Colorado Women's College (Johnson and Wales Univ.)	Quebec St. and 17 th Ave., Denver		1930	Extant
Steck Elementary School	425 Ash St. Denver	5DV.2073	1930	Extant
Dorset House	1001 Logan St. Denver		1937	Extant apartments
Porter Hall, Colorado Women's College (Johnson and Wales Univ.)	Quebec St. and 17 th Ave., Denver		1939	Extant
Church of the Epiphany	100 Colorado Blvd. Denver		1941	Altered and expanded
Steck School addition	425 Ash St. Denver	5DV.2073	1942	Extant
Mason Building (Wildcat Center) Colorado Women's College (Johnson and Wales Univ.)	Quebec St. and 17 th Ave., Denver		1947	Extant
Pulliam Hall Colorado Women's College (Johnson and Wales Univ.)	Quebec St. and 17 th Ave., Denver		1947	Extant
Evergreen High School	Evergreen		1948	Demolished
Ashley Elementary School addition	1914 Syracuse St. Denver	5DV.2068	1950	Extant
Memorial Hall Nebraska State Teachers College (Chadron State College)	Chadron, NE		1953	Altered in 1988 and 2004
Farmers Union Building (State Human Services Building)	1575 Sherman St. Denver		1955	Extant with minor exterior alterations
Farmers Union Parking Structure	15 th and Sherman Denver		1955	Scheduled for 2006 demolition
Curtis Hall Colorado Women's College (Johnson and Wales Univ.)	Quebec St. and 17 th Ave., Denver		1956	Extant
Science Building Colorado Women's College (Johnson and Wales Univ.)	Quebec St. and 17 th Ave., Denver		1957	Demolished

*Completion date is stated if known. Plan, building permit, or assessor date is shown if completion date is unknown.

Information Sources

Axtens, Arthur S. *Thirty Years of Architecture and Engineering, 1927-1957*. Denver: A.B. Hirschfeld Press, 1957.

Hernandez, Nicole, "Church of the Epiphany," Colorado State Register of Historic Properties nomination (draft), November 11, 2004.

Site Files Database, Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, Colorado Historical Society, Denver.

Revised: August 20, 2006



*Architect's preliminary rendering of the
Farmers Union Building*



Dorset House apartments shortly after completion in 1937