



Coming Monday
The Limited Brands is changing its strategy.

By his own design

Architect Lee C. Olsen is the man behind the scenes of downtown redevelopment

By Tony Lucia
Reading Eagle

ALTHOUGH WORKING within the constraints of cost and a client's tastes and requirements, an architect not only has the power to take a building from paper sketch to concrete reality and to impose both style and utility onto space but, in many cases, to make a difference in an area's quality of life.

And as people today and tomorrow look upon and occupy some of the high-profile sites in Reading and its suburbs, they'll be experiencing the legacy of Lee C. Olsen and Olsen/deTurck Architects, Bern Township.

From Holy Name High School and Alvernia College to Baldwin Hardware and the Caron Foundation, his and his firm's work speaks for itself.

And much of the city's future will spring from his sketch pad, including Sovereign Plaza, under construction at Fifth and Penn streets, and the Goggle Works at Second and Washington streets.

His firm also is doing preliminary work on a proposed hotel site in the 700 block of Penn Street and on a renovation and expansion of the Reading Public Museum.

Albert R. Boscov, chairman of Boscov's Inc. and head of the non-profit Our City Reading, for whom Olsen has designed stores and provided concepts, said he greatly values Olsen's creativity.

"Lee has been very helpful to us," Boscov said. "He's been involved in almost everything Our City Reading has done. He's been involved in a lot of projects where I know he hasn't received any pay, and can turn out work quickly if you need something in a hurry."

Mayor Tom McMahon credited Olsen with being a great supporter of the city.

"He's always stepped in when we want to get some sketches or ideas," McMahon said. "He doesn't just show up when there's a possible contract. Every time we've needed him he's always jumped right in. He loves the city a great deal and gives a tremendous amount of his time and energy and talent, pro bono, to make the city better."

"I think there are very few people around who have made that kind of commitment as he has."

In conversation, Olsen is proud of his firm's accomplishments but self-effacing, crediting its success to timing and some luck as well as performance.

"We get it done on time and as efficiently as possible," Olsen said. "Reliability and dependability speak louder than any high-profile design."



Reading Eagle: John A. Secoges

Precision Medical Products



Reading Eagle: Ryan McFadden

The student center at Alvernia College



Reading Eagle: Ryan McFadden

An unnamed building at Caron Foundation



Reading Eagle: John A. Secoges

Lee C. Olsen, architect with Olsen/deTurck Architects, Bern Township, stands in the lobby of a building he designed, Precision Medical Products, Denver, Lancaster County.

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Olsen is the man behind the scenes of downtown redevelopment

Continued from C1

The son of Lottie Olsen, Wernersville, and the late Harry Olsen, a Reading School District custodian, he grew up in a typical Reading working-class family. But by the time he was in junior high school at Southwest, teachers began to notice his uncommon aptitude for drafting and the arts.

"I went through the entire mechanical drafting program in high school in three or four months," he recalled. "My teacher said, 'I don't know what else to give you.'"

He also recalled soaking up the glories of New York City's architecture with his uncle Ingvald Johnsen, who was the private chauffeur for the David Rockefeller family.

"The idea of designing houses became pretty fascinating," he said.

Following studies at Penn State University and at the Pratt Institute, New York, and service in the U.S. Navy and the Navy Reserves, Olsen returned to his hometown to work for a succession of firms including Muhlenberg Greene Architects, Boyd C. Wagner Inc. and Ulshafer Associates Inc.

He also gained invaluable experience in the public sector working as Reading's economic-development director under Mayor Joseph Kuzminski and in the nonprofit world at the Caron Foundation.

Then in 1993, he finally grabbed the brass ring.

He was sitting on an old swing set outside Ulshafer Associates, which had its headquarters in a former school building in Gouglersville, with Michel B. deTurck, talking about the future and what they wanted to achieve in their lives.

Thus was Olsen/deTurck founded.

Olsen said the company's philosophy of providing service after the sale has driven its growth.

"We're always mindful of schedule and budget," said



Reading Eagle: Ryan McFadden

An unnamed building at Caron Foundation, South Heidelberg Township.

Olsen's ultimate renovation

From our news staff

Of all the projects Lee Olsen has tackled over the decades of his career, the one that means the most to him might be termed a renovation: rebuilding his life after alcoholism.

"I celebrated my 21st year of sobriety last Christmas," Olsen said. "I am in recovery. Every day I'm grateful to be alive."

There was no big, dramatic turning point, he said; just the realization in Christmas of 1983 that he wanted to be sober more than he wanted to drink.

"There's an expression in Alcoholics Anonymous: I was sick and tired of being sick and tired," he said. "The hardest part was admitting I was an alcoholic. The rest was actually pretty easy."

After admitting himself to Reading Hospital for detoxification, he went through the program at Chit Chat West, part of the Caron Foundation, South Heidelberg Township.

Subsequently, Olsen served as director of facilities

for the foundation for three years and served on its board for seven years.

After his board service, he also designed Caron's facilities master plan, pro bono.

"We've had a lot of kudos for the work being done there," he said.

He said his plan was approved by Catherine Caron, widow of founder Richard Caron, just prior to her death in 1987.

"She was in her hospital bed, but had me go through every page of the plan," he said. "Then she took my hand and thanked me. I left that room and cried. I was so humbled by that."

The foundation responded to his dedication by giving him its outstanding alumni award in May 2000.

Olsen continues to serve the foundation by sharing his story of recovery.

"As I've gotten older and more comfortable in my own skin, I've been able to share my story," Olsen said. "It's important for people to hear that."

Olsen, the firm's president and CEO. "We listen. We pay attention. And we don't try to force anything on anybody. I may not agree with you, and if I don't, I'll tell you why. Customers respect that, and we get repeat

business from that."

That includes his gratis, pro-bono work for Our City Reading and other clients. And typically, he views it not as his gift to those clients, but as their gift to him.

"I'm not rich — all I have is time and talent," Olsen said. "This is very rewarding for me."

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