

# ARCHITECTURE - AS - ART

## Exhibition at the Library Gallery

Before computers, there was art—true art—in architecture. Architects painstakingly drew designs by hand, mapping out minute details of buildings that brought glory to cities—and to style itself.

One such Birmingham treasure was D. O. Whilldin, whose career extended from 1904 to 1962. Still-standing structures include Legion Field, the Florentine Building, Phillips High School, Tuscaloosa High School, the Dr. Pepper Building, and a large number of civic structures, theaters, and fine residences.

### *New Library Exhibit*

The Birmingham Historical Society (BHS) displays 70 of the foremost drawings produced by Whilldin's practice—from small details for bronze, copper, or terra cotta embellishments to entire plans for Beaux-Arts buildings—in the exhibit "Architecture as Art" November 2–December 28 in the Library Gallery at Birmingham Public Library. A publication will follow early next year.

"The drawings had been privately held for a number of years, seldom seen," explains Marjorie White, BHS director. "People will be utterly amazed. This is a fraction of the architect's prolific work. They were never intended for exhibition—most are construction drawings intended for the stone or wood carver or the terra cotta manufacturer." The Whilldin Collection, featuring some 78 projects, currently resides in the archives at the Birmingham Public Library.

### *Creating Pieces of Beauty*

The BHS exhibit is riveting to behold: you are instantly drawn into the detail and grace of Whilldin's designs. "He set out to create things of beauty," says White, "in styles ranging from Beaux-Arts to International Modern, always keeping up with the times."

Among the exhibit of reproductions (the originals are executed on fragile tracing paper) are:

- Ceiling and mantel plans for Whilldin's home and office—carved rosettes, rope moulds, marble floors, draped festoons over entrances
- Stone ornament over the entrance to the Buffalo Rock plant, which works soda bottles into the design amid grapevines and acanthus
- A six-foot stone-carved eagle and cloud machines for Tuscaloosa City Hall and the Bama Theatre within
- Cast-iron finial for the main entrance gate post for the Crawford Johnson & Co. (Coca-Cola) Bottling Plant
- Cast-cement ornaments over the entrance to the Ensley Moving Picture Theatre

The exhibit is sponsored by the Birmingham Historical Society and the Birmingham Public Library. Admission is free; open during normal library hours.

*Carolanne Roberts*



*Full Size Stone Details, City Hall Building, Greensboro Ave. and 7th Ave., Tuscaloosa, 1936–1937. Pencil on Tracing Paper, Photograph by Marc Bondarenko, Courtesy BPL Archives.*

### *About D.O. Whilldin*

Whilldin was born and trained in Philadelphia as a draftsman and an architect. His natural artistic talent and educational experience at Drexel Institute, the University of Pennsylvania, and the office of a leading Philadelphia architectural firm prepared him well for success as one of the first generation of architects formally trained in America.

In 1902, a national engineering firm recruited the 24-year old to Birmingham, then a fast-growing industrial center. Recognizing opportunity here, two years later he opened an office and developed a reputation for completing



D. O. Whilldin. Color-tinted photograph taken in the 1920s. Courtesy of Cornelia Fox Crumbaugh.

projects on time, on budget, and with “artistic finish.” School systems, cities, businessmen, bankers, developers, companies, and homebuilders became patrons for the more than 400 projects completed by his essentially one-man practice in Birmingham, Tuscaloosa, Gadsden, and other Alabama towns and cities.

As Whilldin biographer Thomas Mark Shelby enthusiastically states: “D. O. Whilldin’s career is a remarkable episode in Alabama architecture. His legacy is one not only of quantity but also of creativity and attention to detail. Whilldin transformed the built environment of Tuscaloosa and Gadsden and designed some of the most recognizable buildings and landmarks in

Birmingham. In these and other cities throughout the state, his work stands out. His is *the* school, *the* skyscraper, *the* hotel, *the* civic building, and one or two of *the* few great houses.”

***About Thomas Mark Shelby, His Research, and the Forthcoming BHS Book***

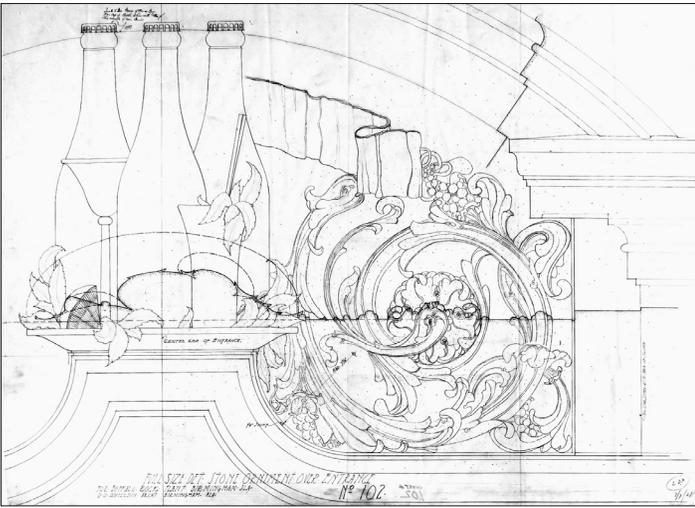
Thanks to the inquiring mind and painstaking research of Thomas Mark Shelby, currently a doctoral student at Georgia Tech, we know a lot about Whilldin’s education and career as a leading architect of the early 20th century Alabama.

The Society is editing Shelby’s master’s thesis completed in 2006 at the University of Alabama under the direction of Robert Mellown and John Schnorrenberg and looking forward to publishing *D. O. Whilldin-Alabama Architect* in early 2009. The publication will be the BHS Members Publication for 2008 and available for pickup at the BHS Annual Meeting in 2009. Limited additional copies will be available for purchase.

***About the Whilldin Collection at Archives***

The Whilldin Collection at Birmingham Public Library Archives. In the late 1970s, BHS researcher Bitsy Williams [Brevard House Windsor] was gathering information about everyone’s favorite city-center landmark: the Florentine Building, the terra cotta fantasy at 21st Street North and 2nd Avenue that is currently being restored by Ken Effinger and Rebecca Corretti. Bitsy interviewed Whilldin’s son-in-law, Joseph Fox, and learned of the drawings that remained in the architect’s possession at his death in 1970. The family’s generous gift of these drawings to the BPL Archives, just as it was being created under the direction of Marvin Whiting, placed the remnants of some 78 projects in the public domain for study and enjoyment.

No one knows why Whilldin retained *these* drawings. With very few exceptions, they are not “presentation” drawings intended for public view; they are “working” drawings, created by Whilldin and teams of draftsmen, whom he trained to help him design and create buildings. Most of the originals are pencil on tracing paper. Some 25 projects dating from 1904 to 1939 will be shown in the current exhibition.



Full Size Detail, Stone Ornament Over Entrance, Buffalo Rock Plant, 10th Ave. N. and 26th St., Birmingham, 1927. Pencil on Vellum, Photograph by Marc Bondarenko, Courtesy BPL Archives.

***Society Calendar***

**Sunday, November 2, 4–6 p.m.**

Opening Reception for *Architecture as Art* Exhibition  
Library Gallery, Birmingham Public Library

**To Reserve a Copy of *D. O. Whilldin-Alabama Architect***

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 Birmingham Public Library