



Alan Hess on Architecture

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 14, 2013

The oldest McDonald's as Architecture



McDonald's, Lakewood and Florence, Downey, CA. 1953.
Stanley Clark Meston, architect

Sixty years ago this Sunday, the oldest remaining McDonald's stand opened for business at the corner of Lakewood and Florence in Downey, CA. Its yellow neon-lined arches piercing its dynamic roof wedge, and its wrap-around sheets of slanting glass make an unmistakeable icon. And it deserves to be called an icon, no matter how often that over-used label is applied to eye-catching but less significant buildings.



Original franchisees
Roger Williams (l),
Bud Landon (r). 1983

Since it qualified for the National Register of Historic Places in 1983, Downey's McDonald's has also been certifiably historic -- now for exactly half of its existence. If anyone cares to think about it, that fact comes with a whole host of thorny questions and facts that shake up our ideas about what architecture is, where it comes from, and what makes a good architect.

Bud Landon and Roger Williams worked for General Petroleum in 1953 when Roger's brother-in-law, Neil Fox, told them of a good investment: two brothers in San Bernardino were franchising their hamburger stand idea, and Fox had purchased the first franchise. He opened the first golden-arched stand in Phoenix in June, 1953 (long since demolished.) Bud and Roger bought the second franchise and opened two months later.

Dick and Mac McDonald sweetened their franchise terms to interest people, but they did require Bud and Roger to use the design for the stand that they had developed with Fontana architect Stanley Clark Meston. It was a gem; on a tennis court, the

ABOUT ME



Alan Hess

Architect and
historian Alan Hess
is the architecture

critic of the San Jose Mercury News. He has written nineteen books on Modern architecture and urbanism in the mid-twentieth century, including monographs on architects Oscar Niemeyer, Frank Lloyd Wright, and John Lautner, as well as architectural histories of Las Vegas and Palm Springs. Hess' other books include Google: Ultramodern Roadside Architecture, Forgotten Modern, and The Ranch House. He is currently researching the architecture of Irvine, California, one of the United States' largest master-planned communities of the 1960s and 1970s. Hess has been very active in the preservation of post-World War II architecture, qualifying several significant buildings for the National Register of Historic Places.

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three of them (with Meston's draftsman, Charles Fish) had laid out the exact measurements of every piece of equipment for maximum efficiency. Dick and Mac had operated their original stand since 1948, perfecting a limited-menu self-service system. Meston's building embodied that system, right down to the built-in advertising: Dick had suggested large arches so the stand would catch the eye of customers through their windshields as they went about their daily life in new suburbs like Downey. That town was booming with aerospace companies at the dawn of the space age. Meston gave those arches the space-age spring of a bounding parabola, and made sure they glowed with multi-hued radiating neon.



sign, 1960

It's a simple design and thoroughly and functionally Modern; if form follows function, one of a hamburger stand's functions is advertising. Not only was it made of modern steel and glass, it was plugged into the cultural zeitgeist of new technology that was changing the way everyone lived. Steel and glass office skyscrapers rose in America's city centers, kinetic Googie coffee shops appeared on major suburban corners, gleaming white refrigerators stood in every middle class kitchen in the new mass-produced Ranch Houses across the nation. Meston's McDonald's brought the same aesthetic to the roadside of everyday life.

It's also a design that can be critiqued; the way the arches plunge through the roof is slightly awkward. But more interesting is to

compare it to another drive-in restaurant designed by a master of Modernism, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, for Indianapolis in 1948. No one can deny Mies' credentials. The [Hi-Way Drive-In](#) tried out his universal vocabulary of steel and glass made famous in his 1956 Crown Hall at the Illinois Institute of Technology, where he taught: large steel trusses supported on steel columns at either end rose above the roofline. As the building's entire structural skeleton, exposed to view, they left the interior space open and the exterior walls entirely glass. It was a theoretical tour de force: technically exquisite, but functionally tin-eared. The Hi-Way Drive-in was never built. For all his fame, Mies did not know how to design a building to serve hamburgers to the growing suburban population of America. Stanley Meston did, even though you'll rarely read about him in history books.

There are many good reasons to visit the McDonald's in Downey this weekend to celebrate a piece of history, culture, and architecture. It is a time machine: you can still buy a burger, fries and shake by walking up to the outdoor service window, exactly as Downeyites did August 18, 1953. You can still eat in the comfort of your car. You can look inside to see the ice cream freezer where Ray Kroc, a salesman who came

by to sell his MultiMix milkshake machine to Bud and Roger, sat when he got the idea to open his own McDonald's franchise back in Chicago. You can still see Downey, only fifteen minutes from downtown Los Angeles but still claiming its unique identity as builder of key parts of the Space Shuttle, and home to original musical talents from Pop's Karen and Richard Carpenter to Rockabilly's Blasters.

It's that strong civic sense that helped to preserve this piece of American history when

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Meston and Charles Fish's original rendering of prototype franchise design for McDonald brothers, 1953.
(Charles Fish collection)

McDonald's Corporation demolished scores of them nationwide. Back in the early 1990s, the McDonald's Corporation wanted to tear this one down after they had bought out Roger and Bud's franchise. Downey citizens, lead by Mayor Joyce Lawrence and aided by the Los Angeles Conservancy, stalled demolition until wiser corporate heads prevailed, and the stand was restored and re-opened in 1996.

In 1983, the idea of a McDonalds being a historic landmark was a punchline, even among architectural preservationists. How could a hamburger stand be historic, let alone significant? How could a suburban building be good architecture? How could Stanley Meston stand in the pantheon of architects with Mies van der Rohe?



Stanley Clark Meston,
architect, 1983

How? It's a design that's inseparable from its time, place and people. That's what really good architecture is.



Posted by [Alan Hess](#) at 9:42 AM

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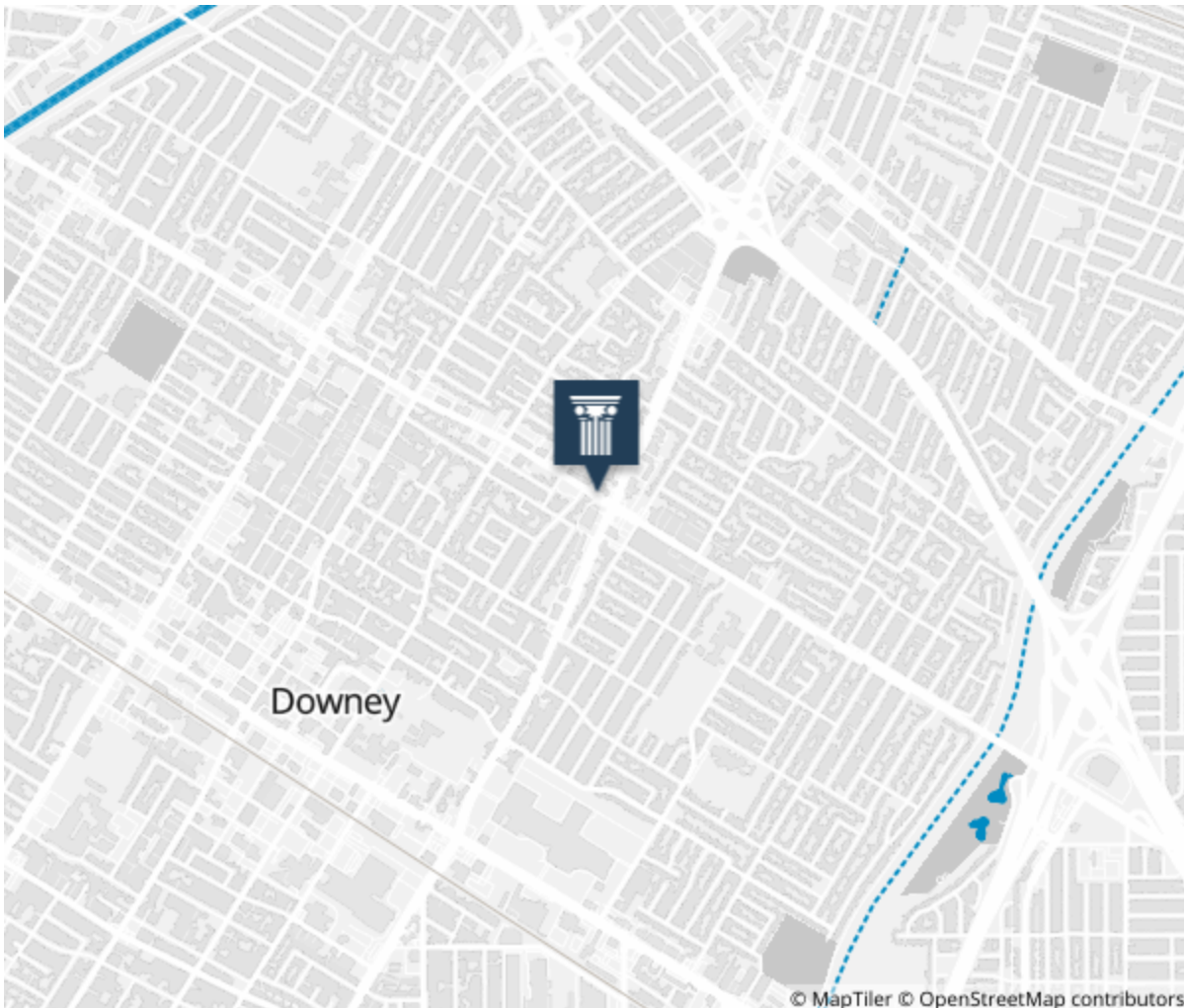
PLACE

McDonald's Hamburgers

A Googie-style building designed and built in 1953 to reveal the restaurant's innovative food preparation techniques is home to the oldest McDonald's still in operation.

Saved

Since being saved from demolition in 1996, the World's oldest McDonald's continues in operation as a fast-food historic landmark.



ADDRESS

10207 Lakewood Boulevard,
Downey, California 90241
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ARCHITECT

[Stanley Clark Meston](#)


YEAR

1953

STYLE

-  [Googie](#)
 -  [Modern](#)
-

DECADE

-  [1950s](#)
-

DESIGNATION

-  [Eligible For National Register](#)
 -  [Preservation Award Recipient](#)
-

PROPERTY TYPE

-  [Restaurant](#)
-

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Adrian Scott Fine/ L.A. Conservancy

Overview

Once a fixture in most American suburbs in the 1950s and '60s, the distinctive McDonald's hamburger stands with twin golden arches and red and white tiled exteriors were facing extinction. As McDonald's Corporation changed branding and design requirements, the Googie-style drive-in's were being demolished or substantially altered.

The Downey location survived intact because it was franchised not by the McDonald's Corporation, but by the McDonald brothers themselves. By 1994, it was the World's oldest remaining McDonald's.

After corporate McDonald's shuttered the location, the Conservancy and its partners undertook a two-year long campaign to save building. Saving an icon of America's car culture increased the public's awareness of the historic resources of the recent past and gave legitimacy to preserving other popular culture resources, making preservation understandable and more accessible to the public.

About This Place

The McDonald brothers had been in the restaurant business for several years when they invented the “Speedee Service System” to automate and optimize food production at their San Bernardino drive-in restaurant. They commissioned Stanley Clark Meston, a commercial architect from Fontana who specialized in auto showrooms and had once worked for architect Wayne McAllister, to design a new building in Downey that could be replicated by franchisees.

Completed in 1953, the Googie-style building features two thirty-foot-high parabolic arches made of sheet metal that pierce the stucco wedge of the shed roof and were originally outlined in flashing pink neon. The brothers were proud of their food preparation techniques, so they revealed their operations with canted plate glass surrounding the kitchen to allow public inspection from all sides. In 1959, the original stock neon sign was replaced with a custom model featuring the original mascot Speedee running atop a 60-foot golden arch.

The hamburger stand received official recognition as a historic resource in 1984, at only 31 years of age, when it was determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Adjacent to the McDonald's building is a replica of the McDonald brothers' original stand in San Bernardino which houses a small museum.

Our Position

In response to closure of the Downey McDonalds in 1994, The Conservancy, led by its volunteer Modern Committee, and the Downey Historical Society pressed for preservation by staging rallies at the site that helped generate international publicity.

A campaign encouraging people to write to the chairman of McDonald's even prompted a response from state Governor Pete Wilson who urged the corporation to "preserve for posterity the home of the Golden Arches." It also caught the attention of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, who designating it one of [America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places](#). The site's owners, Pep Boys, remained a crucial ally by resisting market pressures to lease the land to another tenant and kept the building secure and clean.

The stalemate was broken when internal politics at corporate McDonald's brought a new regime of leaders who took a fresh look at the Downey Golden Arches and realized that it had to be saved. McDonald's restored the landmarked stand's distinctive features and incorporated a new structure to house a museum, gift shop and restrooms. The world's oldest remaining McDonald's, once claimed by the corporation to be losing money and threatened with demolition, is now thriving and capitalizing on its heritage and is celebrated by many McDonald's fans.

Timeline



December 1996

The restored Downey McDonald's drive-in continues to thr



McDonald's Downey museum | Adrian Scott Fine / Los Angeles Conservancy



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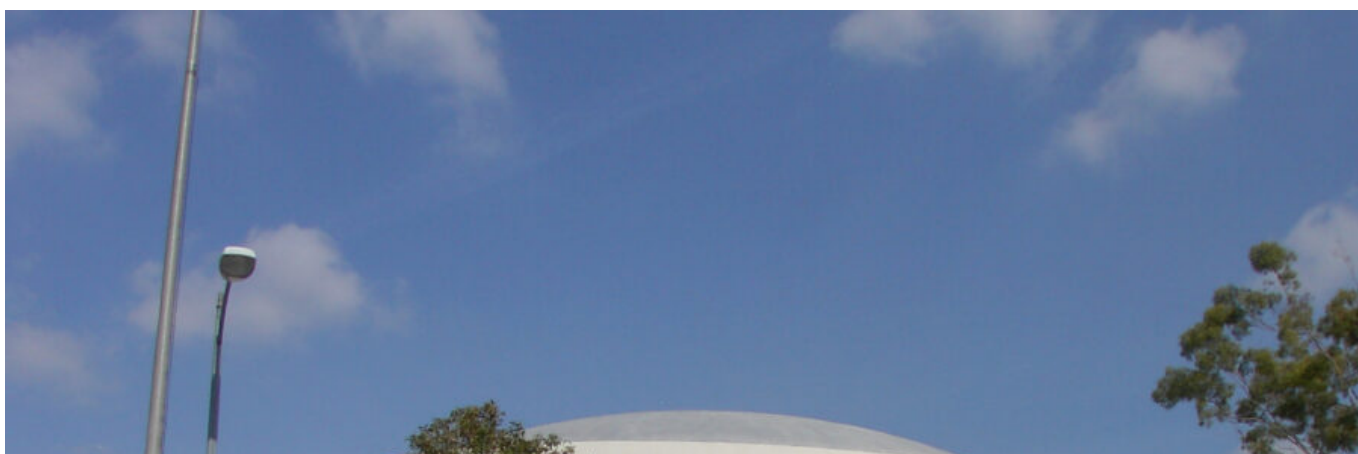


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**BUSINESS**

Architect's Arches Got the Job Done

By Dirk Sutro

Jan. 5, 1989 12 AM PT

SAN DIEGO — The co-creator of McDonald's Golden Arches, those 20th-Century American seducers of 70 billion burger buyers, sat in his small San Diego apartment recently and reminisced.

Architect Stanley Meston was 43 when he designed a new restaurant prototype for brothers Richard and Mac McDonald. By the early '50s, in San Bernardino, the McDonalds had food production down to a science. Now they wanted eye-catching shells for their operations.

"They were very smart men," recalled Meston, who is slowly losing his eyesight to a degenerative eye disease. On a living room wall is a rendering of the first McDonald's, all red, white, and yellow.

Richard McDonald had strong ideas, particularly that an arch should be somehow incorporated into the new drive-ins. But the high-powered Los Angeles architects he interviewed didn't see the virtues of the arch idea. Meston was hired because he was willing to work with the McDonalds' concept.

No Sketches by McDonalds

The commonly reported story is that McDonald gave Meston a sketch of a stand with two arches above it. But Meston doesn't remember any sketches.

“They didn’t bring a sketch. They just came and introduced themselves, and we discussed what they wanted to accomplish,” he said. “I went to their place seven or eight miles away. The drawings I did were just what one does when trying to absorb the intentions of a client.”

As Alan Hess wrote in “Googie,” a book on ‘50s coffee-shop architecture, Meston’s subsequent McDonald’s design was not without precedent. Bold geometries had been used for years in the style Hess calls Coffee Shop Modern.

But what was new was the way the arches took off as a corporate symbol, the icons of the burger empire subsequently created by entrepreneur and former milkshake machine salesman Ray Kroc after he secured franchising rights from the McDonald brothers in the ‘50s.

There has been speculation that Meston took his inspiration from such predecessors as Eero Saarinen’s St. Louis arch.

“No. The problem was to design a building that would be noticeable and attract attention,” Meston said. “The shape developed for several reasons. If people were to line up outside three windows for service, they needed protection. The front of the first one faced east, and the roof sloped back to shed water. The arches were kind of a combination of thoughts. They’d had a sketch from some local design man, but nothing like they ended up. But it put a bug in their minds. We went on and developed the arches. Incidentally, those were not structural.”

Dramatic Neon Rainbows

Although today the arches have been reduced to logos, in Meston’s day they were the chain’s dramatic calling card, beckoning motorists from a distance, twin neon rainbows in the night sky.

Ultimately, six clones of Meston's original design were built, none of them in San Diego. Besides arches piercing a sloping roof, there were other distinct features.

Front windows were slanted so that customers would not be temporarily blinded by the glare of their own headlights. And to further enhance their allure, Meston helped select red and white tiles for the horizontal exterior bands. The red tiles, made with a gold pigment, "had a real brilliance," Meston said.

"I took this job very seriously," he explained. "I spent a lot of time studying their equipment, layout, manpower, efficiency. I wanted to take advantage of what they'd learned.

"They carefully weighed and measured all the portions. During lulls, men made malts and put them in a freezer for when things got busy. They had a production line that only required four people.

"One of the brothers knew more about potatoes than anyone in the world. I don't think french fries'll ever be that good again. They developed a machine to apply mustard and ketchup, but they never could get a machine to apply pickles."

As for whether or not Meston's drive-ins were art, he has no pretensions. He agrees with a critic (not this one) who found them aesthetically lacking.

"They were designed to get a job done," said Meston, an architect who knows how important it is to listen to clients. "They were created purely to solve the clients' selling problem."

Of the original six Meston-designed buildings, only one remains, in the Los Angeles suburb of Downey. Hess is spearheading a movement to save it from demolition.

Meanwhile, McDonald's has little place in its cold corporate heart for Meston. The

company's headquarters near Chicago reported that the first McDonald's was built in Des Plaines, Ill., in 1955. Actually, that one was a knock-off of Meston's original design. The first Meston McDonald's opened in Phoenix in 1953.

As Hess reported in "Googie," businessman Ray A. Kroc tinkered with Meston's original design after he bought the franchise from the McDonald brothers, then replaced it entirely in the '60s. But its basic form was eventually replicated in more than 1,000 McDonald's buildings across the country.

When you visit today's typical suburban mansard-roofed McDonald's, you feel yourself longing for the good old days when America celebrated commercial seduction where appropriate, instead of couching it in pseudo respectability.

When he was hired, Meston was given a choice of being paid a flat fee or a commission each time a new restaurant was built. He chose the fee, and sometimes dreams about what might have been.

"This is kind of a sad story to relate," he said. "The fee was probably 8% back then, and a building might have cost \$35,000. If I had accepted a participation agreement, I would probably have a residence on the Riviera and a 600-foot lot."

He paused and chuckled. "But, then, I've had a pretty good life."

DESIGN NOTES: Gerald Thiebolt, an associate of San Diego sculptor Rhoda Lopez, was responsible for the tile work on the San Diego Museum of Arts' new fountain. He was not given credit in an item here last week. . . . San Diego architects Austin Hansen Fehlman are collaborating with San Francisco's Kaplan McLaughlin Diaz on the new University Center for the University of California San Diego. They were not given credit in a recent piece on the campus's new master plan. . . . Legorreta, Maki, Meier & Rogers are the architects who will participate in UCSD's all-day seminar Feb. 4, "Architecture--Shaping the Future."

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April 25, 2020

Could This Donut Shop Ever Flip Back to Its 'Golden Arches' Roots?

In 1954, the McDonald brothers opened up their 7th or 8th McDonald's location at 1057 E. 5th Street in Pomona, California—about 30 miles west of their [very first burger stand in San Bernardino](#).



circa 1954 (original attribution unknown, via [RoadsideArchitecture.com](#))

It was designed by architect Stanley C. Meston of Fontana—the same one who designed [most of those first red-and-white-tiled stores](#) for Richard McDonald, starting in 1952.

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The McDonald's operation ceased at this location in 1968. The tops of the "golden arches" that burst through the roofline on either side of the building were hacked off sometime before the business became Star Taco—and 5th Street was renamed Mission Boulevard.



Star Taco occupied the former McDonald's building—and took over the Mickey Mouse-shaped sign, whose neon lettering and depiction of the chain's mascot "Speedee" were removed—through the 1970s and 1980s, until it [closed in 1985](#).

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Star Taco's owner, Jim Phillips, had gotten to collecting classic Chevy Corvairs behind his taco stand—as well as at the neighboring auto body shop, which he owned as well. Phillips told the *Los Angeles Times* in a [1991 article](#), "The Star Taco collection was known all over the country."



He claimed that [80%](#) of his 120 Corvairs was restorable—but local authorities (at the time, the area was considered unincorporated San Bernardino County) deemed the "collection" a junk heap ("illegal auto storage yard") and, in 1992, stormed the property and towed and impounded the lot of them. Some of the cars went into the crusher; others sold at auction for scrap.

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It's unclear how long of a gap there was between Star Taco and the current tenant, AMA Donuts—which has been operating in this location at least since 2004.



I've gone there twice this year alone—once in January to just see it in person after having read about it, and once in April during the **coronavirus pandemic**. Ironically, it was closed in January but open in April. Upon my second visit, I bought three donuts for \$4-some-odd and gave them a \$2 tip. Thank goodness for donuts during a health crisis.





Sure, the AMA Donuts sign looks a little shabby. But they should keep it. They shouldn't touch it.

Maybe one day a McDonald's could move back in—and it'll be brought back to life much in the way that [the Downey location](#) was. I'm going to put that possibility out into [the Universe](#) and see what happens.

In the meantime, if it can't be a McDonald's, it might as well be a donut shop. Both are so incredibly Southern Californian.

And that design is still so unmistakable.

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