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Architects build on family tradition

Joseph & Joseph marks 100 years

By Bill Wolfe

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In 1908, brothers Alfred and Oscar Joseph launched Joseph & Joseph Architects in Louisville with a humble assignment -- a shoeshine shop at 550 S. Fourth St. For their next design, they jumped to a much larger work -- the original Kentucky state fairgrounds in the Parkland neighborhood of western Louisville.

In the coming years, the architecture firm helped shape the Louisville landscape with projects such as The Republic Building, Kosair Shrine Temple and Keneseth Israel Synagogue.

A century after its founding, the company belongs to architect Merrill Moter. But it continues making an impact on Louisville with new designs, such as the proposed 17-story Willow Grande condominium at Willow and Baringer avenues, as well as remakes of historical structures.

Joseph & Joseph recently received the Louisville Historical League's Preservation Award for landmark renovations that included The Inverness Condominiums, the Henry Clay Building, The Cloister and the Lofts of Broadway.

"We try very hard to give our clients buildings that will serve their purpose and last a long time, and have a design that we hope will last over the ages, a timeless type of design," said Moter, 59.

The firm remains a family business -- though no longer in the Joseph clan.

Joseph & Joseph had prospered in its early years with projects that included movie theaters and office buildings, Moter said. It also designed a number of large houses in the Cherokee Gardens and Cherokee Triangle areas. In the 1920s, the focus turned to large apartment buildings in the Highlands.

In the 1930s, each brother brought a son into the business -- Alfred Joseph Jr. and Graham Joseph, both architects. Oscar and Graham Joseph left Louisville for Los Angeles, leaving the company with Alfred Joseph and son.

The Moter family entered the firm after World War II, when Cass Moter, Merrill Moter's father, took a job as a structural engineer and later became a partner. Alfred Joseph Jr. retired in 1982, leaving the company in the hands of the Moter family.

By then, Merrill Moter had joined the business. Despite the ownership change, the Moters chose to retain the firm's original name.

"We thought that it was more important to keep the tradition and the name and the identity of the firm as Joseph & Joseph than it was to put our name on it," Merrill Moter said. "It gives us an identity and a history and a tradition that we can carry on and pass on to the next generation."

The Joseph descendants are pleased to see the original name maintained -- and to see the Moters carry on the business, said Alfred Joseph III, son of the late Alfred Joseph Jr.

"My father was demanding of himself and everyone with whom he worked," said Joseph, a lawyer, but "was confident that the firm would continue with the same principles" under the Moters.

The Josephs' way of doing business has helped the company endure, Merrill Moter said. "To last 100 years, you have to have a spirit in the company that you share with everybody that works here. ... Pride in what you do, and pride in what we've done in the past. And I think we have that."

The business also boasts a historic location on Fourth Street -- the site of the former shoeshine shop that Alfred and Oscar Joseph designed a century ago.

Soon another Moter will join the firm's three architects. Merrill Moter's son Cash Moter, 28, already works as a project manager for the company and expects to complete his architectural registration exam this summer.

The Moters share a name, as well as a profession. Cass Moter's full name was Cassius Merrill Moter Jr. Merrill Moter is the third generation with the name, and Cash Moter's full name is Cassius Merrill Moter IV.

Working for a century-old company adds perspective to the need for buildings and designs that will endure, Cash Moter said.

Some of the buildings the company remodels now were designed by earlier generations of Joseph & Joseph architects, and it's "ultimately the hope" to create structures that will stand for the next 100 years.

The company's legacy is important to Merrill Moter, too. "Sometimes it would be a lot easier to take some shortcuts, and you just can't do that. The tradition here, the culture here, the reputation here is too important," he said.

Alfred Joseph III, who spoke at a 100th-anniversary celebration at the company last week, said the tradition lives on.

"Dad and my granddad," Joseph said, "would have been really proud."

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