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# Smokestacks & Geraniums

## Design Strategist

By [Roger Showley](#)  
Union-Tribune Staff Writer

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As developers and communities ponder the future of real estate, post-slump, when financing and building patterns in San Diego County are likely to be different, they might turn to Herbert B. Turner for inspiration.

The 83-year-old Del Mar resident is not your typical architect or developer, though he has built about 130 houses, condos, apartments and commercial projects in the last 50 years.

Visit his home on Zuni Drive, which he designed and built starting in 1956, and what you'll notice is his paintings and sculptures, sprinkled throughout the 4,000-square-foot, multilevel rustic but modern structure.

For above all, Turner is an artist with a businessman's eye and an environmentalist's heart — and his client's interests always in mind.

“I thought I was the original ‘green’ architect,” Turner said. He coined his own term for that subject: “terranomics.”

By that, he means develop the land both economically and environmentally — taking the cheapest lot and building a home while preserving the existing trees and slope.

Turner's story is all the more timely because this is the 50th anniversary of Frank Lloyd Wright's death. Wright was a major influence on Turner and Rizzoli has published three major works recently on the master. (See story on the Wright books, H2.)



Herb Turner gravitated into architecture and sustainable design long before the current fad. He advises his clients to buy the cheapest lot on the best street and he'll fit the house in with the landscape. - Charlie Neuman / Union-Tribune

The San Diego Architectural Foundation has completed a survey of San Diego modernist architecture, which is available online.

And Homer Delawie, one of San Diego's most admired modernist architects and active civic leaders, died last month. His passing called attention to designers who find ways to build beautiful, well-designed homes without a lot of fluff and excess. Those have been key ingredients in Wright and Turner's works, as well.

“If you look at any other city, their regional architects draw a unique identity to that city,” said Keith York, a KPBS producer who maintains a Web site on San Diego modernist architecture.

Turner earned a page on York's site and was the subject of an illustrated biography last year by Michael Gosney, a San Francisco author and producer who became a friend while he lived in the San Diego area for 20 years.

“This is the story of an American Everyman,” Gosney began in his book, “who followed his creative passions on an odyssey that led him from a Depression-era upbringing in upstate New York in a family of builders, to graduation from West Point Military Academy, to an intense study of art in New York City, and then to an architectural apprenticeship with John Lloyd Wright (Wright's second son) in Del Mar.”

Each of those markers figured into Turner's two passions — building homes and making art.

Desperate to make a living after living through the Depression, Turner, an Eagle Scout and high school leader in Saranac, N.Y., enrolled at West Point in 1945 and might have become a soldier except for a soccer injury on campus. He spent recuperation time in an art studio in New York and realized that if he couldn't make a living at art, perhaps he could as an architect.

“Everybody was talking about Frank Lloyd Wright all the time,” he recalled. He read Wright's autobiography and decided he should study under him rather than enroll in architectural school.

“It wouldn't help me out, because I wanted to study with a master,” he said. After all, that's how they did it in the Renaissance, he reasoned.

But study under Wright would have meant sweeping, cleaning, washing and gardening before designing.

“I've got to find a student of Frank Lloyd Wright,” he told himself, and he tracked down John Lloyd Wright, also an architect (and the inventor of Lincoln Logs) who had moved to Del Mar in 1946.

One Sunday in 1952, Turner showed up on Wright's doorstep on Serpentine Drive, suitcase in hand, and asked for a job, figuring no one would turn away such a determined young man.

Wright took Turner in, charged him \$35 a month for room and board, and spent the next three years teaching him by example.

To earn a living, Turner taught art classes in Oceanside, Del Mar and Balboa Park — “I earned more teaching art than drafting” — and in 1956, bought a lot for \$1,800 where he built his own house and used that to attract other commissions.

There were about 35 architects in Del Mar, but Turner, who never obtained an architectural license, outbid them with a simple strategy — design a home on the cheapest lot that his modest clients could afford and then build it for less than other contractors, using skilled, loyal subcontractors he employed.

Asking former Del Mar Mayor Richard Rypinski why he didn't pick another architect to design his house,

Rypinski told Turner, “You get your buildings built.”

Stuart Resor, a Borrego Springs architect who worked briefly with John Lloyd Wright, said Turner did what many architects can't do — play the “nice guy” as designer and the “tough guy” as builder.

“He had the capital to be his own man,” Resor said of Turner. “He'd buy his own lots, design and build his own buildings. That was a big part of his practice, doing his own thing. Most builders and architects would be a little envious of that opportunity.”

As for Turner's architecture, Resor said, “I was just bowled over when I first came upon his residence on Zuni. It was an extremely crisp and clean design, between some sandstone outcroppings and large trees.”

Inspired by the Sea Ranch development on the Northern California coast, Turner created homes, mostly in Del Mar, that retained the existing trees and landform. When there was no view to celebrate or backyard to create, Turner included patios, decks and interior courtyards to give residences a sense of open space.

“Turner's concept used the walls of the house as the enclosure, directing all activities inward,” said author Gosney of the Southworth residence, built in 1963.

Turner was even able to find solutions for low-budget clients such as George and Marge Berkich. “Turner persuaded his clients to purchase an inexpensive, smallish lot that lay in a drainage pit and was surrounded on three sides by roadways,” Gosney said.

Despite these impediments, he designed a compact house with lots of windows and decks, no hallways and an ocean view — proof that even a seemingly undesirable site can be developed.

Turner's most significant commercial project was South Fair, a 45,800-square-foot, mixed-use complex built from 1972 to 1981 just south of the Del Mar fairgrounds. Among its environmentally sensitive features was a roof garden covering the building closest to the street but lit by skylights and windows facing the courtyard.

“He's an amazingly rich, wonderfully well-spoken resident of the county and he has contributed more than a fair share to the built environment and the art world,” said modernist York. “Everybody in Del Mar knows his name.”

Turner did not fare so well when he left his ZIP code and attempted an ambitious project in Escondido, called Bernardo Mountain. Using profits from his investment in the Colonial Inn in La Jolla, he bought 232 acres overlooking Lake Hodges for \$500,000 in 1981 with plans for an 82-home subdivision. It was to be his crowning example of building in harmony with the land.

While he gained approval from the Escondido City Council, he lost his financing, blaming himself in part for not getting neighboring property owners to buy into his vision.

“I spent 20 years and lost \$2 million and didn't get anything,” Turner said. “But I did other things.”

Those things included raising a family of two children, becoming actively involved in Del Mar politics and always pursuing his love of painting, using the egg tempera technique favored in the Renaissance.

He has kept most of his paintings, fine-tuning them to add more depth and tone, and recently won prizes in New York City art shows.

No longer as active in building design and construction, Turner still follows the real estate market and wonders how San Diego will cope with population growth as its development becomes more dense.

If the average person is destined to live in a high-density building, he advocates more parks and open space “so people can get out and walk.” If affordability becomes acute, he thinks manufactured housing might provide one answer to reducing costs.

As for all the talk about “green” building, he thinks it's mostly concerned with energy-saving fixtures, not environmentally sensitive land planning.

“You can save a few dollars on electricity,” he said.

But the real savings, he said, would come by siting homes in places on or near the coast, where natural cooling eliminates the need for air conditioning and it's rarely so cold to require heating.

Surprisingly, Turner is not big on travel to see how other cities and countries treat their built environment.

“To me, it's a bit of a waste of time,” he said. “You can go and see it but you've already seen the pictures. If you want to see Italy, go live in Italy. Going there on a sightseeing tour, I don't get much out of it.”

Smokestacks & Geraniums is a monthly look at growth and development issues as they relate to historic trends in San Diego. The name is derived from a 1917 San Diego mayoral campaign in which the self-styled “smokestacks” candidate Louis Wilde belittled his pro-planning opponent, George W. Marston, as “Geranium George.”

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“The Art and Architecture of Herbert B. Turner, a Creative Odyssey” by Michael Gosney, Waterside Press, 2008, \$34.95.

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