

# Recognizing Rochester's First African American Architect and His Lasting Contributions

The work of Thomas W. Boyde Jr., Rochester's first African American architect, will become more recognized and celebrated thanks to a project initiated by the Greece Historical Society.

With a \$15,000 grant from the Community Foundation's Lloyd E. Klos Historical Fund and contributions from other sources, a reconnaissance-level survey of Boyde's life and work is under way. Starting with drawings and records in the Rochester Museum & Science Center's Boyde Collection, an extensive inventory of his work will be produced by Bero Architecture PLLC and an independent historic preservation consultant.

According to the New York State Historic Preservation Office, this would be the first survey of an African American architect to practice in the state.

Boyde's designs are spread throughout New York State, but their locations are not fully known. He was considered a master of mid-century modern home designs and loved interior curved walls, corner windows, and overhanging roofs. He also did a great deal of work designing buildings for communities of color and the economically disadvantaged during his career, which lasted from 1931 until his death in 1981.



From the Thomas Boyde Jr. Collection. Rochester Museum & Science Center, Rochester, N.Y.

Born on December 25, 1905 in Washington, D.C., Boyde was educated at several universities. According to his family, he was the first Black architecture and civil engineering graduate of Brown and Syracuse universities. While at Syracuse University, Boyde won a prize for his State Tower building design (see photo at left). His thesis was used as the basis for the final design of this Syracuse landmark.

In April 1930, the 23-year-old Boyde answered a help wanted ad for an architectural designer in *The New York Times*. The ad had been placed by the Rochester firm of Siegmund Firestone, an architect and engineer.

Boyde was hired and began working with Firestone on the Monroe Community Hospital project. His more notable contributions include many decorative aspects of the distinctive building on East Henrietta and Westfall roads, which include clusters of gargoyles, cherubs, dragons, and other mythical creatures.

Boyde also worked for another Rochester architect, from 1940 to 1947, before establishing his own practice, initially working out of an office in his home.

Some of Boyde's more prominent local designs include the Rundel Memorial Library Building, Harro East, The Strathallan, the Kennedy Towers apartment complex, Benjamin Franklin High School, and the cottage-style residential buildings at the Villa of Hope and Nazareth College campuses. Other designs include New York City's Waldorf Astoria Hotel, YMCA, and Hotel Lexington.

"After his successes with Firestone and in other endeavors, Tom could probably have established himself with a big international architectural firm. For reasons of his own, he elected to stay in Rochester," wrote Gary L. Shirley, the Town of Brighton building inspector (1968-1989), for Boyde's RMSC archives.

There is some urgency behind the project timeline for the survey of Boyde's work. Many of his buildings have reached or surpassed the 50-year mark and may now be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Some have been lost or threatened with demolition or inappropriate alterations.

This project will include:

- A written narrative that will document the history and significance of Boyde's career – context that will be relevant to any future National Register nomination of a Boyde-designed property;
- A description, statement of significance, and National Register registration requirements for each property type associated with Boyde's work (e.g., single-family houses, religious buildings, apartment buildings);
- A list of next steps that can be taken, such as intensive-level surveys, nominations of properties to

the National Register, and designation of local landmarks. A PDF of the final report will be uploaded into the New York State Historic Preservation Office's online system, along with information about eligible properties individually.

The Greece Historical Society also will look into developing a public presentation about Boyde that can be presented at various historical and architectural organizations; curating an exhibit on Boyde and his work at the Greece Museum; and making copies of the report available to the public.

For more on Boyde and his work, check out this story from the Monroe County Post.