

Frederick Sheridan, Arlington Architect

*A NARRATIVE EXCERPTED FROM AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH VIRGINIA LILLIS SMITH, NOVEMBER 2011*

*(The entire interview is housed in the archives of the Center for
Local History, Arlington Public Library.)*

I opened my architectural practice in 1956 and Bob Behm joined me in '58. We started out in the Radio Building (Lee Highway at George Mason Drive). We had one room, 16' by 16'; it worked out great. Bob and I in the back half, and in the front was a secretary and the waiting area. That was a little small after about nine months, so we propositioned Shannon and Luchs to let us fix up the storage room across the way, and we were able to have about eight draftsmen. We had gotten pretty big pretty quickly. We started out doing about everything: gas stations, bowling alleys, shop drawings for the government—not too many houses yet. We did grading. We did anything and everything we could to keep the door open. Bob's father, Fred Behm, was a builder, so he brought in a lot of the builder friends, contractors. Mine was more on the institutional side, and I started getting some of the Catholic work: the Dominican retreat house out in McLean, Saint Agnes Rectory, and we did the Knights of Columbus Hall on Little Falls Road. Now we're known in both communities—residential design and institutional design.

We built townhouses, for example, Lynnbrook Drive, a street of 33 townhouses in 1967. Dick Arms was the chief planner in Arlington, and he wanted to bring expensive townhouses to Arlington. He didn't like these small townhouses. Just the opposite happened fifteen, twenty years later, when they wanted small townhouses. He came up with this idea that all townhouses had to be 24 feet wide, nothing smaller, But the thing is, he came up with this 24 feet thing, and then he said, "No two townhouses the same." I said, "Dick, that doesn't make sense. Boy, you've got left and right—that's one. Now you have three basic designs in a townhouse. The kitchen's in the middle, the kitchen's in the rear, the kitchen's in the front. What do I do with the rest of the units?" "Well, I guess we'll have to make a few exceptions."

About the same time we were doing a lot of bowling alleys. It kind of gets lost in the history of Arlington. But we did an eighty-lane at Pentagon City, Crystal City for John Summers and Bob Harris. It was originally a hundred-lane bowling alley, and they couldn't get financing for the last twenty. They sold

more beer in that bowling alley than anyplace in the state of Virginia. To design a bowling alley you've got different heights, you have different wood. The ball hits up front, it's harder there than down the line. You have to air condition it. Gotta put in pin setters. You've got doors all over the place, and toilets. Then we did the McLean bowling alley. And now we're experts, and the Government hired us to do one down at Quantico, the Marine Corps base.

As for church work, first we did a school for Father Sacorra—Saint Ambrose. And we got that job because I approached him, and started talking, and he said, "I have a job, but I'm stuck with this other architect. If something happens, I'll be back." Well months later, he was back. He said, "You still want to do the job?" I said, "Sure. What happened to the other architect?" He said, "All he wanted to do is start talkin' about education. I didn't see any drawings." So he had a drawing within a couple of weeks so I got that job. That was a full school in Annandale. Then he gets transferred down to Fredericksburg, to St Mary's, and he gets another building program. And this one is a church and a school. So I stepped right into that. And that one, the parish just left up to me and Father Sacorra. And he said, "Look, you're the expert, you go ahead." So I gave him three designs, and they picked one, fan shaped, and it was very, very successful.

We backed into multi-family units in a couple different ways. We did Southern Towers for Snell and Carruthers, because they had an original architect, and they couldn't work with him because they couldn't find him. The architect didn't want them making all the changes. He lost the job, and we picked it up. And then Tony Dahnk picked up some ground with Dick Besley up on Lee Highway, Carlin Place, and that was one of the first ones. Then we did Jerry Reinsch's Dorchester Towers on Columbia Pike. And these are all mid-rise, 75-100 feet. There were so many buildings on Columbia Pike, from one end to the other end. We did so many. I have a list of over 60,000 units that we designed, over 60 high rise buildings over five decades.

My first association with Tom Offitt and Dittmar [Corp] was Cherry Hill. He'd just split with Henry Florence. And when he split with Henry Florence, Sid Albrittain went with Tom Offitt and John Albrittain stayed with Henry Florence. So then we picked up two clients instead of one. For the next fifteen, twenty years, that happened often. One company would split, start their own; the other one continued on. So we needed to stay in business, do a good job, give good service.

The first job we did for Dittmar, our largest client, was Cherry Hill in 1965. We got along great together the first time, and after that was finished, then he started moving on, doing other things. Then he moved into Wildwood Park and Wildwood Towers up on Columbia Pike. At that time we had more high-rises under our belt, so we knew we could do a high-rise apartment. Again, we gave

them good service, and they just kept coming back. One reason I like to work with Dittmar, when you sit down with them, you're dealing with the builder, the owner, and the management, all at one time. The guy that's going to build it comes up with this; another guy says, "Yeah, but I can't sell that. I need this." And then marketing will come in with the same thing, "I want this." And the owner says, "Well, wait a minute, I can't afford that." And you kick all these things back and forth to kind of get the product that they can build and survive, because most of these apartment houses today, you're in the red. When you finish, you're not making money. It might be three, four years. So you have to have some deep pockets to carry this thing until you start bringing in some money. Reason for that is you haven't rented enough units, and cost overruns. Cost overruns are there from the beginning, but you know this ahead of time. You might say, "Well, I'm not gonna fill the apartment up in one day," so maybe it takes nine months to fill the apartment. Who's going to pay the mortgage in that period of time? You are! So you'd better have some money. It's almost impossible for the little guys to make a go of it

In real estate the money's in development. The problem is, there are good times and bad times, and if you get caught in the bad times, you're bankrupt. You're gone. They'll take your house, default judgment. We lost a lot of good builders that happened to just hit the bad time. At that time, they were making money, and all of a sudden, nothing in the pipeline. At that time it took two years to get approval for a subdivision, so you had to hold that ground, and you were paying money on that ground. You're building over here, and all of a sudden you can't sell your other project. Now you can't pay for the ground that you bought, and everything collapses. He has to sell what he's working on now. Suppose he has a thirty-unit development. Okay, he's building thirty houses, and all of a sudden he can't sell those houses, he can't get the money to pay for the land that he purchased for the next project.

Metro increased the land use tremendously. The way Arlington planned the Metro was beautiful. Other cities envy Arlington because of that Rosslyn-Ballston corridor, because everything is built on tiers. At the Rosslyn Metro stop they have a high-rise. And then you taper on down to the low-rise place right before Courthouse. And then the next Metro stop you start climbing up again. So you don't have this volume of all high-rises.

We design on computers. To me, because of my age, I guess, I can do a lot of designs faster by pencil and paper than on the computer—because you have to feed that computer, bang, bang, bang, and I can sketch real fast, to show "this is what we're going to do." Then it can go on computer. The biggest advantage is when you're working multi-family and you want to see all the layers. The first floor's entirely different. You have to bring all these pipes

down from up above, and they have to go through your lounge, your exercise room, what have you. You've got to figure out where all those pipes go. Then you have a garage underneath, and the garage underneath sets the columns, because the County says you have to have a clear space of nine foot six inches, for a car. Now, that's between the columns. All of a sudden you say, "Uh-oh, there's a column coming' up in the middle of my living room!" So now you have to go to a different plan. This is where the computer helps. They have breaker pipes, ducts, sewer lines, water lines, all running around. And you can take the mechanical drawings and lay them over yours to see where some of the stuff is going. And all of a sudden you may end up with a pipe running through your living room. This will show up on your computer. Also, a builder might start pricing the building out, and he says, "You know, you have sliding windows; I may go to double hung." Oh my God, you have to redraw by hand all those windows?! Press a button, zip! There it is. That's a big advantage. In the old days, you'd have to redraw every one.

Arlington is still a good place for an architect. These days a building comes down, another one goes back up. A lot of architects around here do rather well with custom houses, and that's their niche. But if you want to do your own thing, it's tough. What did your father do? What did your wife's father do? Where are your connections? Now you have to do the real networking, and I guess I did a lot of networking when I look back. I'd join everything I could possibly join. I joined the Lions Club, met people in the Lions Club, got a job. That's how I broke into the Arlington School System, because one of the members of the Lions Club was the one that picked the architect. When he gets to know you, you're a pretty good guy, you get the job.

One of our last projects was a monastery for the Sisters of Poor Clare in Groveton, VA. It was done in three phases starting in 1977. It won a design award for AIA.

Our office at 3440 Fairfax Drive also won a design award in 1980. It was torn down a few years ago.

My decades in Arlington have been interesting years.