

Gin Wong, Who Designed Futuristic Buildings in Los Angeles, Dies at 94

By Richard Sandomir

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Gin Wong, a Chinese-born architect whose modernist designs helped define the postwar landscape of Los Angeles in structures as diverse as a gas station, CBS Television City and Los Angeles International Airport, died on Sept. 1 in Beverly Hills. He was 94.

His death was confirmed by his daughter Janna Wong Healy.

Architects traditionally achieve renown with corporate headquarters, private residences, museums, concert halls and stadiums. And while Mr. Wong worked on many such projects, it was an unconventional one — his 1960 design of a Union 76 gas station in Beverly Hills — that remains one of his most beloved and enduring.

With its red, swooping canopy angling toward the sky, the gas station wed the space age to the mundane task of filling up in a city devoted to cars.

“This was always designed as a simple structure, to represent everyday life,” Mr. Wong told Los Angeles magazine in 2015.



The Union 76 gas station in Beverly Hills is one of Mr. Wong's best-known designs. Ann Johansson for The New York Times

The station, which was originally to be within an airport, became a landmark that the Los Angeles Conservancy called “one of the highest examples of Googie architecture in the world,” referring to a form of futuristic design.

Mr. Wong designed the gas station while working for his former teacher and mentor, William L. Pereira, around the time that he was also credited with creating the startling, spider-like Theme Building at the Los Angeles airport.

Writing in The Los Angeles Times in 2010, the critic Bob Pool called the building “part spaceship, part flying saucer” and said that Mr. Wong had “set out to create a futuristic building that would both reflect its relationship with aviation and stand the test of time.”



The Los Angeles International Airport's Theme Building. Mr. Wong is credited with creating the startling, spider-like structure.
Michal Czerwonka for The New York Times

Mr. Wong was professionally connected to the sprawling airport throughout his career. He was drawn to helping transform it to accommodate the jet age in part because of his own aviation background: Mr. Wong had been a B-29 navigator in the Pacific during World War II, based on the island of Tinian.

He became the airport's director of design development in a joint venture with architects in the 1950s, and three decades later his firm supervised a redesign. He developed its satellite terminal system and its two-level roadway.

Gin Dan Wong was born on Sept. 17, 1922, in Guangzhou, China, and moved to Los Angeles with an aunt at age 9. He was later joined by his mother, Ng Pui King, and his sister, Wong Kam Chung. His father died before Mr. Wong immigrated to the United States. As a youngster, he excelled in mathematics, science and drawing; he once said he found it easier to draw a word than spell it.

Mr. Wong studied engineering at Los Angeles City College before serving in the Army Air Corps. While there, a platoon member whose father was an architect noticed Mr. Wong's skills in math and art (in drawing posters) and suggested that he study architecture.

Years later, he recognized how helpful being a navigator had been to his work as an architect.

“I had to learn how to get from here to there,” he told The Los Angeles Times in 1974. “I had to know how much fuel would be needed and how long the trip would take. The big message was to minimize the odds to survive.”

After the war, he studied at the University of Illinois and graduated from the School of Architecture at the University of Southern California before working for Mr. Pereira at two firms, Pereira & Luckman and William L. Pereira & Associates. He quickly became indispensable and had a principal role in creating CBS Television City, which opened in 1952.

A simple, large and practical design built in the early days of the medium, Television City housed studios, offices, a carpenter’s shop for building sets and areas to make props and to service cameras. It featured exterior walls that could be removed for future expansion. Television City was the subject of a 1953 segment of “See It Now,” the CBS News program hosted by Edward R. Murrow.

“He had a very refined sense of style in terms of his design aesthetic, and if you look at what he did pre-1970s, he had a clear eye for what he wanted to see,” said Trudi Sandmeier, the director of graduate programs in heritage conservation at the U.S.C. School of Architecture.

“The gas station was elegant and beautiful, and that was his hallmark,” she added. “And function was the primary driver of Television City, with its clean lines, not a lot of fuss, and a way of uniting a campus for a purpose that was coming of age.”

Mr. Wong became president of the second Pereira firm before opening Gin Wong Associates in 1973. He shuttered it two years ago on his retirement.

Among his many other works were commercial buildings in Singapore and Honolulu; a savings and loan branch in Rancho Mirage, Calif., with curved walls made of Mexican black lava rock; hotels, restaurants and houses; a library in South Korea; and, in downtown Los Angeles, the Midnight Mission, a facility for the homeless featuring landscaping with golden-leaved honey locust trees that shimmer in the breeze.



The Transamerica tower was designed by William L. Pereira & Associates under the leadership of Mr. Wong. Jim Wilson/The New York Times

While running Mr. Pereira's company in the late 1960s, Mr. Wong oversaw the design of the Transamerica Pyramid, the striking 853-foot-tall building that pierces the sky in San Francisco.

Mr. Wong said that Jack Beckett, the chairman of Transamerica, gave him straightforward direction. "His first statement was, 'I want to make sure that everybody in the financial world knows who we are,' " Mr. Wong recalled in a video made by Neil Healy, his son-in-law. The general public, he added, understood that the building was making a statement.

In addition to his daughter, Mr. Wong is survived by his wife, the former Louise Yvonne Tom; two other daughters, Terrina Wong and Kimberlee Durst; and four grandchildren.

Mr. Wong said the lessons that he learned as a B-29 navigator and that he applied to architecture gave him peace.

"I was never really close to people in the sense that I could open my heart and spill out all my problems," he told The Los Angeles Times. "So I found a tranquillity within myself. I plan ahead and therefore I seldom have anything to worry about."