

UP FRONT



ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

On the Avenue, Fifth Avenue

Along Fifth Avenue, from downtown to Point Breeze, the entire development of Pittsburgh unwinds in just over 40 blocks. From commercial to industrial buildings, from hospitals to homes, a drive along Fifth Avenue touches on nearly all the aspects involved when a city evolves from an 18th-century fort to a modern metropolis with technology at its core.

Two blocks of Fifth Avenue between Morewood and Wilkins Avenues illustrate this point. There are six mansions dating from 1870 (when the road was first paved) to 1914 (the height of the trolley era). These houses were designed for upper-middle-class and wealthy 19th-century families who chose Shadyside because it was only 45 minutes from downtown via the urban railway and later the trolley, plus had cleaner air than Hazelwood or the Strip District, where the bulk of the industry operated. Each of these houses was architect-designed, and grand enough to accommodate the era's larger households, which included a multitude of servants to maintain them.

Maps and secondary sources show us that in the 1860s the area was farmland and oriented towards the Pennsylvania Railroad station at the northern end of Amberson Avenue. The local building journal stated that after Fifth Avenue was paved in 1870,



**McCook House,
5105 Fifth Avenue.**

Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation.



Sunnylee, 5124 Fifth Avenue.

land prices jumped “from farm values to one hundred dollars a front foot,” and “many large residences” were built. Among these was William B. Negley’s house at 5061 Fifth Avenue. Negley (1828-1894) was a nephew of Thomas Mellon and a Princeton-educated lawyer. His c. 1870 house is, at its core, the oldest of the group and the only one with an intact carriage house. Its neighbor to the west at 5045 Fifth Avenue is a large Second Empire style house with a mansard roof constructed around 1876 for James Rees, an engine builder. Rees and Negley and their neighbors commuted to offices in downtown Pittsburgh via the railroad. In fact, Rees’ address in the

1876 directory is simply “Shady Side PRR.” John Hartwell Hillman, Jr., bought the Rees house in 1919 and commissioned E.P. Mellon to modernize the exterior.

By the time Dr. James H. McClelland chose to have his house designed at the southwest corner of Fifth and Wilkins Avenues in 1886, the horse-drawn trolleys ran regularly (electric trolleys began four years later). The neighborhood remained full of substantial single-family homes and the newly completed Shadyside Presbyterian Church was a neighborhood anchor. Dr. McClelland’s house “Sunnylegge” accommodated his medical office and family. It was the first residential

commission in the city for the newly formed firm of Longfellow & Harlow (Alden was not yet a partner), who went on to design the Duquesne Club and the Carnegie Institute. The house was the scene of many lectures and parties and a great advertisement for the fledgling architectural firm. Today it houses a boutique hotel and tearoom appropriately named “Sunnylegge.”

In 1905, when Willis F. McCook bought the corner lot at Fifth and Amberson, a noted journalist who wrote eloquently about improving American cities came to Pittsburgh and said that at first glance “civic art had little chance here” since “Industry is the god.” But,

William B. Negley House, 5061 Fifth Avenue.
All photos by Lu Donnelly except McCook house.



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he noted a different atmosphere in Shadyside: “Here there is room and to spare; and in the purer atmosphere and the ampler space the higher spirit of the community seems to have found its wings.” McCook had two houses designed by architects Carpenter and Crocker: the larger stone mansion at 5105 Fifth Avenue for his wife and eight of their nine children, and the adjacent house at 925 Amberson Avenue for their oldest daughter Bessie and her husband, William Edgar Reed. With institutional buildings lining Fifth Avenue further west, the neighbors had been worried

that either a high school or an apartment house would be built on the 1.5 acre George Porter lot. *Construction* magazine reported that McCook bought two of five Porter lots for \$61,500 and that two neighbors bought the larger property to save it—and even managed to make a profit. Today the two McCook houses look better than ever as the beautiful and popular hotel “Mansions on Fifth.”

The circa 1910 mansion house on the south side of Fifth Avenue (now nearly dwarfed by its additions) is the Snowdon House at 5034 Fifth Avenue. While it is unclear

that Charles Leidy Snowdon commissioned the house or who designed it, he and his wife Elizabeth lived there by 1911. He was a clever businessman, banker, and coal mine owner from Brownsville. Like Willis McCook, the Snowdons had a large family of six children and moved to Fifth Avenue in their 50s.

Finally the Moreland-Hoffstot House at 5057 Fifth Avenue, built in 1914 for Andrew and Clara Moreland, illustrates the longevity of the high-end suburban atmosphere of Fifth Avenue. Banker Moreland and his wife summered in Newport, Rhode Island, and were



Moreland-Hoffstot House,
5057 Fifth Avenue.

familiar with “Rosecliff,” Tessie Fair Oelrich’s mansion designed by Stanford White. The Morelands commissioned Pittsburgh architect Paul Wellwood Irwin to design them a smaller version on Fifth Avenue. It was purchased in 1929 by Henry Hoffstot, Sr., who preserved it throughout the Depression and whose family continues to own it. A historic easement donated to Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation will preserve it in perpetuity.

By 1939, the final historic maps available for this area show banks owning several of the lots. After World War II, Pittsburgh’s population was nearly double what it is today and there was a critical housing shortage. The large mansions were expensive to maintain—even without servants—plus households were smaller and transportation had shifted from trolleys to automobiles. Wealthy families were moving farther away from the city to Sewickley Heights and Fox Chapel. Today most of these lots have apartment buildings on them. It is a wonder that six of these mansions remain in such close proximity to give a flavor of Pittsburgh’s early suburban development. ☀

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania* (University of Virginia Press, 2010), a book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States*. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art.



Hillman House, 5045 Fifth Avenue.



Snowdon House, 5034 Fifth Avenue.