

# UP FRONT



## ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

### Gas Stations, Part II

Throughout the 1930s, as more people became mobile and competition at the pump grew, marketing came to dominate the design process of gasoline stations. Suppliers tried to entice customers to drive in, and gas stations soon looked like tiny brick English cottages, reflecting and

reconfirming consumers' desire for a single family home with garden. Architect C. A. Peterson, who moved on to develop other gas station designs for Pure Oil in Ohio, first designed an English Cottage style station in Pittsburgh for the Kenmore Oil Company in 1923. Two stations operated by independent operators on the main street of

Charleroi, Washington County, were designed by Charleroi architect Benjamin D. Trnavsky (a 1933 Syracuse University graduate) in the cottage pattern. While they no longer sell gasoline, both remain nearly as built in the early 1930s. The Monack station of 1935, shown below, is now a U-haul rental store. It was updated by Gulf Oil in the 1950s with white porcelain enamel steel panels covering the rough bricks, outlined by darker bricks around the windows and doors. The entire station was then painted white. Its neighbor, a tiny brick station at 935 McKean



Now a U-Haul rental center, the Monack gas station has cottage style architecture. The original brick, seen on right, was covered by porcelain enamel steel panels in the 1950s. All Lu Donnelly.



This circa 1933 McKean Avenue gas station with a unique round tower entry originally sold Sinclair gas.

immediately identifiable. The former Falcon Gas stations now known as Kwik Fills, found in several Western Pennsylvania counties, have yellow-and-green V-shaped rooflines and gracefully curved wooden supports. Recalling Marcel Breuer's Exhibition House of 1949 in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art, the V-shaped or butterfly roofline symbolized the speed of the Falcon's flight and was an all-around popular design element in the 1950s. While other gas stations incorporated swooping canopies over their pumps, Falcon Gas' choice of this distinctive design as its brand's signature reads purely symbolic and aesthetic, as the wings do not cover the pumps or provide much shelter. In these stations, the rectangular office space is centered under the V and surrounded on three sides by plate glass with a white concrete-block back wall.

Avenue, shown above, was built c. 1933 with a round tower entry topped by a conical roof covered in cedar shingles. The station is used as storage today, but sold Sinclair and Phillips 66 gasoline after World War II. It originally had two circular flower beds on the adjacent hillside, but after the war the hillside was cut back to allow for a double-bay garage.

A modern station design for Falcon Gas in the 1950s (at right) is

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The previous designs were generated from individual architects, company staff architects, and owners and their builders inspired by images of other stations printed in specialized journals like the *National Petroleum News*, founded in 1909. As early as the 1920s there were catalogs of small, pre-fabricated stations from which an owner could purchase a kit and have his or her station assembled on site by bolting steel panels together or having a contractor build it with materials available in the local lumber yard.

The ubiquitous rectangle covered with white porcelain enameled steel panels, sometimes called the “ice box” design, like the Quality Car Store, a former Esso then Falcon gas station on Route 51, (at right) was popular from the 1940s through the 1970s. Although some independent stations changed their look by incorporating brick and shingling in the 1960s, generally the white rectangular form dominated gas station design until the 1970s when convenience stores and self-service stations opened and fewer stations provided mechanics’ services. Today we’ve moved to a new concept where nearly every station sells fuel for the body and the automobile. Get-Go and Sheetz dominate the filling station genre, so much so that most



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driving directions in Western Pennsylvania include the phrase “When you get to the Sheetz, turn....”

It’s interesting to speculate what our needs will be in the future with hybrid cars and gas consumption practices changing. How will the design of gas stations in the year 2020 change to suit new demands? ☀

**Lu Donnelly** is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania*, a forthcoming 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.



Gas stations today are designed to sell fuel for both the car and the body.