



# The ‘Mayor’

Influential Salt Lake architect Mike Stransky is revered throughout the A/E/C industry for his marketing prowess, outgoing persona, and contributions to the design profession.

By Brad Fullmer



Ever been to lunch with Mike Stransky?

Typical one-hour power lunches with the long-time Principal of Salt Lake-based GSBS Architects (Gillies Stransky Brems Smith) tend to organically stretch into two hours and change because of his magnetic presence and gregarious personality. Stransky is also easy to spy in a crowded room, with his signature white hot, close-cropped hair.

“He has a big presence...that big shock of white hair,” said GSBS President/CEO Kevin Miller. “When you walked into a room you knew he was there. Everybody knows who Mike is.”

“When we officed in the Walker Center we’d go to lunch at Lamb’s or Judge Café. I was still a young guy and didn’t go to lunch all the time. We’d walk over to Caputo’s and an hour lunch would be an hour and a half because he knew everybody. That ability to be visible and not just represent the firm but the profession in the community...is unique.”

“I called him Mr. Mayor,” quipped Tom Batenhorst, Principal and Manager of the firm’s Fort Worth, Tex., office. “It should be a five minute walk down the block, but

Mike Stransky designed and managed many different types of projects in a wide array of markets, including the innovative Salt Lake Public Safety Building and the reverent St. Thomas More Catholic Church in Cottonwood Heights. (courtesy GSBS Architects)



Mike was always busy talking to people, shaking hands. He's just a great mentor-how he conducted himself in interviews, his ability to network."

"Mike's gift is his ability to work with people," said David Brems, Principal and Director of Design. "Mike can walk into a room and walk out with a job. People are attracted to him and trust him. Leading the marketing efforts for our firm was his responsibility and he was one of the best at it. Mike is the guy you want in the room

to work through problems."

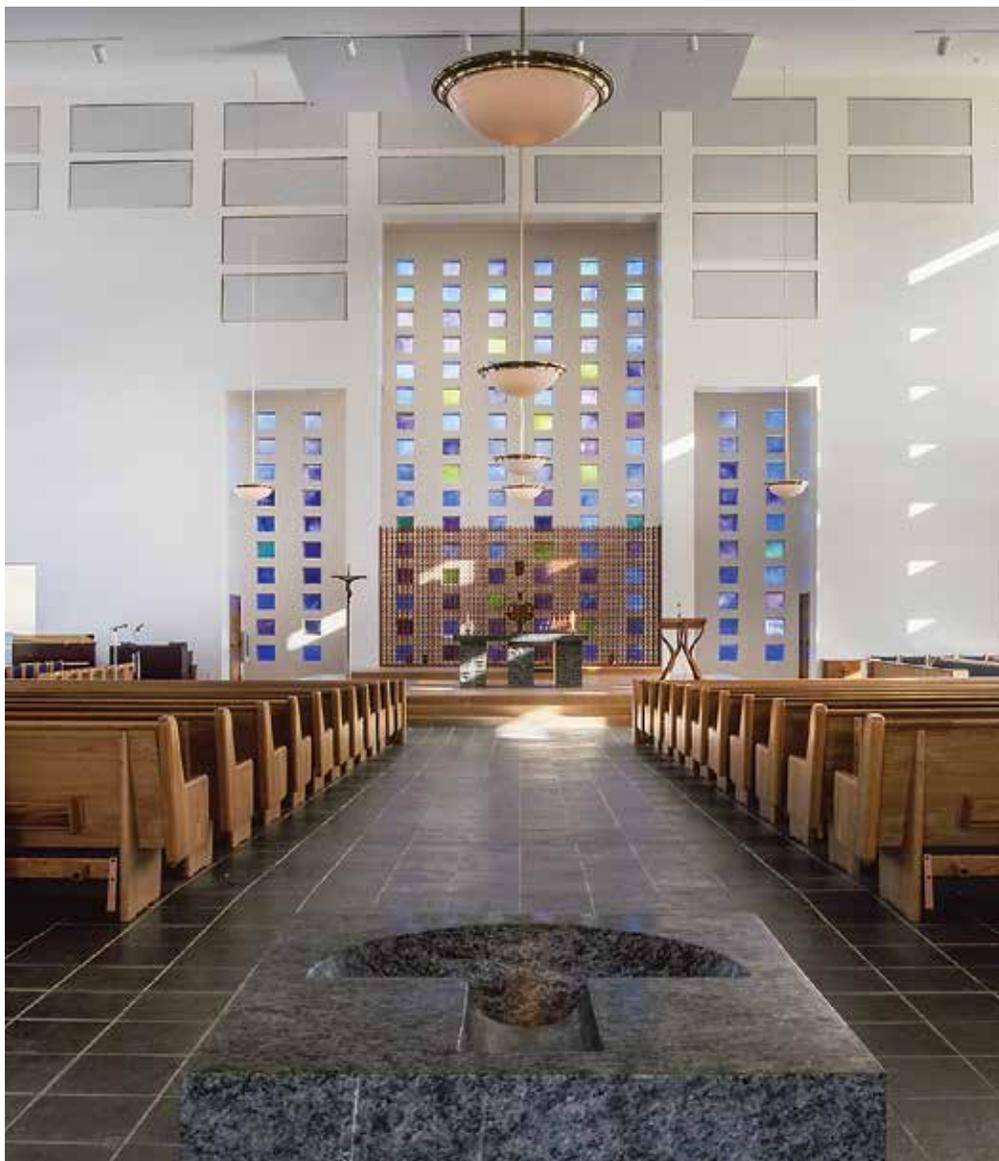
Stransky's impact on the architectural profession over the last half-century – not just within the cozy confines of the Beehive State or even Intermountain region, but on a national level – is deep and far-reaching. He has been a champion of the American Institute of Architects throughout his career, serving in a host of positions and gleaming as much information he could from some of the best and brightest architects on a national level. He is a past President of AIA Utah (he served on the board from '91-'93), was one of two directors from 1990-95 in the six-state AIA Western Mountain Region, and racked up a slew of years as a member of AIA National's Documents Committee. Stransky also served on the National Accreditation Board for three years starting in 1995 and spent another decade doing accreditation visits to various institutions of higher learning. One memorable five-day visit 15 years ago was to the Architecture School of Turkey in Ulidag.

"It's professionally rewarding," he says of giving of time and talents for the betterment of the industry. "They were looking for the best accreditation they could get and chose the U.S. It was an honor to be able to go there as a representative of the (AIA) national board and share with them how things are done in the U.S."

"Our firm has greatly benefitted from his national AIA work," said Brems, a former Chair of AIA's national committee on design and also a past AIA Utah President. "We have an ethic...that we owe (service to) the profession. It helps with recruiting, with professionalism."

Stransky emphasized the value of gaining new perspectives from architects from different markets and regions, all the while creating lasting relationships that may lead to collaborative business opportunities.

"When you get to rub elbows with other professionals across the country, in virtually every state and (major) city, >>



Other notable, award-winning projects in his portfolio include the renovation and seismic upgrade of the 300,000 SF Wallace F. Bennett Federal Building in downtown Salt Lake City (completed 2001) and the Summit Lodge at Snowbird Resort, the final project he served on as Project Architect before semi-retiring in 2013. (courtesy GSBS)



it puts your company in perspective,” he said. “You get to see how the very best run their practices, what life they bring to their communities. I am better for those relationships.” Stransky referenced the first Salt Palace expansion and the Utah Museum of National History as two notable projects that came to fruition because of AIA networking.

### From Rural Wyoming to Salt Lake City

Stransky was born in Cheyenne in 1946 and raised in Casper, a rural farming and ranching community. His father, Clarence, worked in the wholesale grocery business and Stransky had a fondness for the title ‘Salesman’. As it turned out, that’s exactly what he would become at GSBS – the guy who leads the charge of getting work.

An interest in drawing led to Stransky

taking mechanical and architectural drafting classes in high school and a year at Casper Jr. College cemented his interest in architecture. He applied to the University of Utah’s School of Architecture and was accepted, moving to Salt Lake in 1964.

He would ultimately meet his wife, Carolyn, at the U and proposed to her in 1967. Ten days after proposing, Stransky was drafted to serve in Vietnam. Ultimately he was counseled to join the ROTC and get a commission, which would give him two years to finish his degree before going into military service. He spent nine years (’70-’79) in the Army Reserves.

Stransky landed a job in 1970 working for Donald H. Panushka & Associates in Salt Lake and spent most of that decade there. In 1977, the firm teamed with two other architects to design the expansion of the University Medical Center – a mammoth,

highly-technical project that challenged all parties involved in design and construction.

“It was the largest job I had worked on and a very complex project,” Stransky recalled. “I really enjoyed the complexity of it on all levels – the relationships we built, patient care, ancillary services. The site was incredibly difficult, very complex. But a very exciting job.”

Near the tail end of the project, Stransky left Panushka’s firm in March ’79 for an opportunity to work for Abe Gillies and Bob Brotherton, with the idea of becoming a Principal in their relatively new firm (founded January ’78). It didn’t take long for his marketing/PR abilities to shine through, and he became the firm’s third Principal. Batenhorst came on board in ’79, and Brems and Steven Smith joined in ’85, giving the firm a well-rounded mix of talents.

It was during this period when traditional approaches to marketing and business development within the industry were being scrapped, with new methods and ideas being implemented to impress existing and prospective clients. No longer could firms just expect projects to walk through the door based on a company name, past personal relationships, or a shiny project portfolio. Stransky was very much at the center of this movement.

“My job was to make sure this firm was known,” he said. “I was willing to do whatever was needed to make that happen. I was in charge of leading interviews...I’ve

been told we do some of the best. Little did I realize that after years of going to architecture school, a big chunk of my life became being a salesman for the firm.”

### Impressive Project List

Stransky has designed and managed dozens of interesting projects through the years, including recently the Salt Lake Public Safety Building and Summit Lodge at Snowbird Resort. Both projects earned ‘Most Outstanding Project’ awards from UC&D, the former being named ‘Project of the Year’ in 2013.

Summit Lodge (GSBS/Lu’na Design Studio JV), completed at the end of 2015, was his last job as Project Architect, although he’s quick to point out that it requires a lot of talented people to make it happen.

“That’s what’s good about this firm – not one of us can say we did it all on a project.”

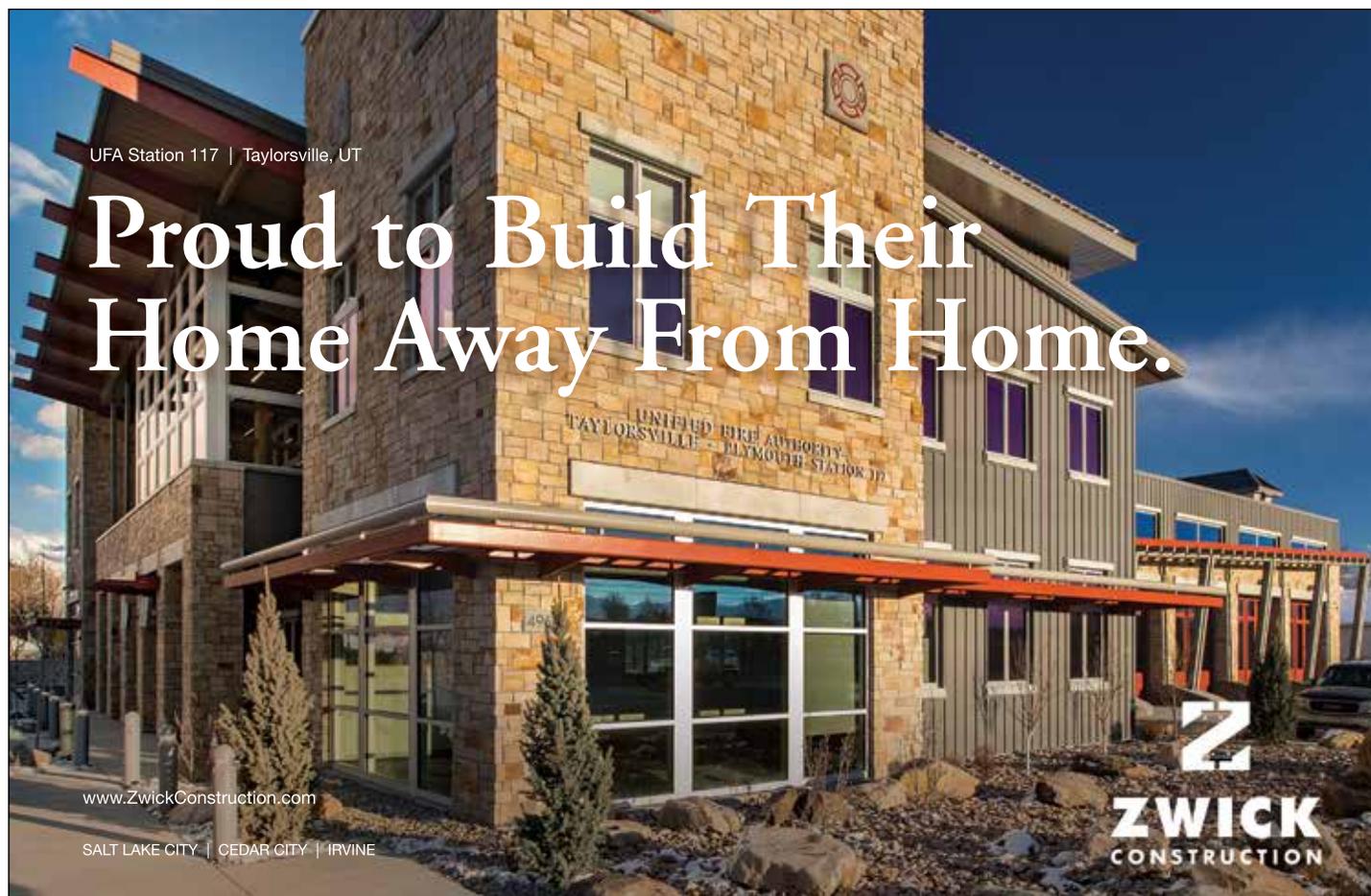
The 71-year-old started dialing back his workload six years ago in the midst of the Public Safety Building and sold out his stock by 2013, yet still puts in a couple days a week and offers sage advice on various matters, a kind of ‘Godfather’ presence. Handing over the reigns of a firm to the next generation is never easy, but he’s ultimately satisfied that the firm is in good hands and well positioned for future success.

“We’re all important to the firm, but the firm will go on, and that’s been proven by the transition,” said Stransky. “When Abe retired (in ’99), we say that it went without a hitch. Kevin stepped in and filled Abe’s shoes a little at a time. In some respects Kevin does things better than any of us did.

We have an excellent management team in place – that is a huge thrill.”

“In many ways he’s still the passion of the firm,” said Miller. “When he’s in the office, his engagement with people is genuine. They know he wants them to succeed. He listens to your stories and can tell you what he did back in the day. He’s still actively engaged and very current in his thinking.”

“Mike has all of his institutional knowledge of who we are and all the projects we’ve done and all the clients we’ve served – that is a valuable resource,” echoed Brems. “The fact he comes in...we can ask him a question about what we did 20 years ago for (a client)...we don’t have to go back to zero. All that gray hair has value – he’s an experienced man.” ■



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