



**Otto Henry Lang**  
1864 - 1947

Otto H. Lang, engineer and architect, was born in Freiburg, Germany on December 2, 1864. He was educated in engineering and architecture at the Karlsruhe Polytechnic Institute in Karlsruhe, Germany. In 1888 he traveled to the United States on a wedding trip and stayed to make his home in Dallas, Texas.<sup>3</sup> After working in local architects' offices for two years, he became responsible for architecture and design for the Texas and Pacific Railway. In this position, Lang designed the Texas and Pacific depot in Fort Worth. He also eventually designed railroad stations in Wichita Falls, Amarillo, Paris and Weatherford.

In 1905, he formed a partnership with Frank O. Witchell to practice architecture and engineering in Dallas. The new firm's first project was the Columbian Club, a four story Renaissance Revival style building for a social club.<sup>1</sup> Lang must have recognized the opportunity that existed in Dallas at this time. The firm was well positioned to participate in the transformation of Dallas from a frontier town to a major metropolitan city. Indeed, over the 37 year life of the firm, the Dallas area grew by about 380 percent. Although Lang was trained as an engineer and considered himself an engineer, he also studied and practiced architecture throughout his career. He studied the architectural styles popularized by Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright and others. At its zenith, the firm consisted of Mr. Lang, Mr. Witchell, Charles Witchell and, chief designer, Dudley Greene. There were about eight or nine draughtsmen and ten to twelve assistants.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Lang considered it his duty to participate in civic projects. From 1915 to 1919 he served two terms as Dallas Street Commissioner. He is credited with several advances in the infrastructure of the city during that time. These include improvements to the Dallas street-lighting system, the introduction of rounded curb corners at street intersections for safety, local street repair and work on the garbage disposal facilities. He was a consultant on the construction of the Oak Cliff Viaduct (later named the Houston Street Viaduct) in 1912. When completed the structure was considered to be the longest reinforced concrete structure in the world.<sup>6</sup>

It is apparent from his civic work and his organizational memberships that Mr. Lang thought of himself as an engineer. In addition, in 1938, when Mr. Lang was approaching retirement, he was in the first group of individuals to become a registered Professional Engineer in the State of Texas, number 2308. In spite of the fact that he was often

referred to as an architect, it was mostly by those who didn't know the difference and because the firm advertised as "Architects & Engineers." In addition to being a gifted engineer, Mr. Lang had good business judgment and unlimited confidence in the future greatness of Dallas.

At his retirement in 1942, Lang gave his library on architecture and engineering to the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas (now Texas A & M University) and his file of mechanical journals to Southern Methodist University.<sup>4</sup>

Lang was a member of the American Society of Civil Engineers, the Texas Association of Architects and a founding member of the Technical Club of Dallas. He was a 32<sup>nd</sup> degree Scottish Rite Mason, a Knight Templar, and a member of the Hella Temple Shrine. He devoted much time to civic interests in the City of Dallas. For many years, he was a member of the Dallas Chamber of Commerce. He had one son and two daughters. He died in Dallas on October 18, 1947, and was buried at Restland Memorial Park in Dallas.<sup>5</sup>

The firm of Lang and Witchell was the dominant architecture/engineering design firm in the Dallas area for most of their 37 years of operation. Much of the shape of downtown Dallas is due to buildings designed by Lang and Witchell. They were instrumental in the introduction of the latest architectural styles to the Southwest. In addition, due to Otto Lang's engineering training, the firm utilized the latest engineering developments that were available to design steel and concrete skyscrapers. Although the firm designed all types of buildings, including many houses, it is notable that they consistently were involved with the design of the largest and tallest buildings of the time. The design of these structures required engineering knowledge of the highest order. Otto Lang was truly one of the great structural engineers that helped shape our profession in Texas.

Marcel Quimby, FAIA, a prominent Dallas preservation architect, has written that "with Otto Lang's structural engineering and Frank Witchell's design talent, their firm was uniquely suited to create some of the most innovative buildings of the era." During the 1910's and 20's, Lang worked on many projects in Dallas, at a time when the city was booming. During this time the form of downtown Dallas as we know it was shaped. A list of buildings by Lang & Witchell reads like an architectural tour of downtown.



**Sears & Roebuck Building**

An early structure was the massive Sears, Roebuck distribution center (1913) on Lamar Avenue. Built to accommodate expansion, the original nine-story building was joined by a ten-story addition before the first phase was complete. A second nine-story addition was added in 1915. The Sears complex was said to be the largest structure in Dallas, with more than eighteen acres of floor space. These buildings were some of the first reinforced concrete structures in Dallas.

Architectural critics praised the use of the Prairie style in the design of this building. The use of this style was further developed in the design of many houses for prominent citizen of Dallas.



**The Sanger Bros. Department Store**

The firm's first true high rise building was the Sanger Bros. department store (1910). This building is a ten story, steel frame structure which has been a downtown Dallas landmark for decades.

The architecture of the building is considered to be a fine example of the "Chicago Style" of design. The structural frame is expressed with the large windows and fine brick and terra-cotta detailing. It is one of the few of Lang and Witchell's pre-WWI downtown buildings that survives today.

The building has been remodeled for use as the El Centro Campus of the Dallas County Community College.<sup>8</sup>



**Southwestern Life Insurance Bldg.**

Next Lang & Witchell designed a very significant structure: the sixteen-story Southwestern Life Building (1911), a steel framed structure which dominated Dallas until the late 1920's. This was one of the largest steel framed structures in the state, and showcased the ability of Lang & Witchell as a firm, both as architects and engineers.

Considered to be an excellent example of the Sullivanese style, the building was demolished in 1972 to make way for an even larger structure.

Considered the most prominent design firm in Dallas, Lang & Witchell teamed with Barnett, Hayes and Barnett of St. Louis to design the Busch Building (now the Kirby Building) in 1913.

This was followed in 1914 by the Higginbotham–Bailey-Logan Building at 900 Jackson Street.



**Higginbotham–Bailey-Logan Building**

A Renaissance Revival –Chicago style warehouse structure, this building was an early reinforced concrete structure in Dallas.

Texas' largest bank, the American Exchange National Bank, commissioned Lang & Witchell to design their new high-rise headquarters on Main St. in 1918. The 16-story steel structure was considered another fine example (in the manner of the Southwestern Life Building) of the Sullivanesque style of design and a significant addition to the skyline of Dallas. Lang & Witchell moved their offices into the building and remained there until the firm closed.

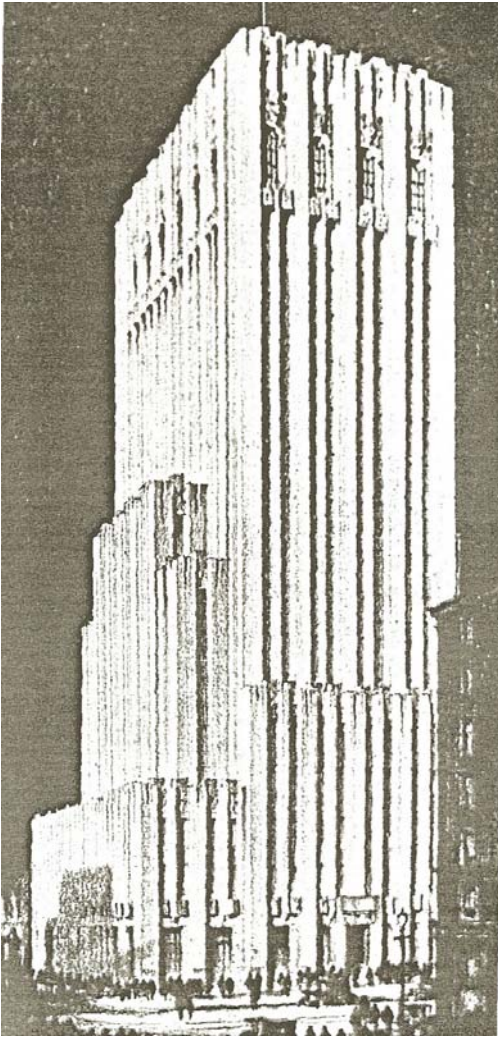
The firm also teamed with John Eberson of Chicago to design the Majestic Theater (1921) and with Lord Alfred C. Bossom of New York to design the Magnolia Building (1921). At twenty nine stories, the Magnolia Building was the tallest structure west of the Mississippi River for many years. Later, when the neon "flying red horse" was erected on the top of the building, it became the signature icon of Dallas.



**The Magnolia Petroleum Bldg.**

Other buildings designed by firm include several important hotels including the Adolphus Hotel Annex (1916), the Jefferson Hotel (1920), and the White Plaza Hotel (originally the Hilton Hotel) (1925). In addition, the Exposition Hall at Fair Park, Fair Park Auditorium, the Wholesale Merchants Building, Southland Life Building, Cotton Exchange Building, the Texas Bank Building, Dallas High School, Highland Park High School, and many other schools were all designed by Lang and Witchell.

The design practice of the firm was not limited to the Dallas area. Mr. Lang designed courthouses in Houston, Gainesville, Snyder and Cleburne. The firm also designed the Raleigh Hotel in Waco (1914), a Spanish Colonial-style City Hall and Auditorium in Wichita Falls. In the 1930's, during the depression, the Lang and Witchell firm designed the State Highway Department Building (1932) in Austin, in conjunction with Adams and Adams of San Antonio.



**The Dallas Power & Light Bldg.**

In the 1930's the firm was instrumental in bringing the Art Deco and Art Moderne styles of architecture to Dallas. The earliest Art Deco building in the city was the Marvin Building (1928) (now the Cullum Building). This was followed by the Dallas Power and Light Building (1930) and The Lone Star Gas Building (1931). These buildings are considered to be classic examples of Art Deco design.<sup>1</sup>

Other Art Deco buildings that Lang & Witchell designed in Dallas include the Southwestern Bell Building, and the U. S. Postal Annex.

The State Highway Department Building in Austin (with Adams and Adams) is also a fine example of Art Deco style.

Otto Lang is truly one of the most important "pioneers" of structural engineering and design in the early part of the twentieth century in Texas. His ability to move from the design of simple railroad stations to high-rise buildings that were the equal of any in the country is impressive. He designed several structures of from 10 to 16 stories prior to WWI, and worked in both structural steel and reinforced concrete. He was apparently able to keep pace with technical developments in the field of structural engineering at time when much of this knowledge was evolving.

Otto H. Lang must be considered one of the key individuals in the early development of the City of Dallas and was influential throughout the State.

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Ferris High School Building, Ferris, Tex.  
Fort Worth Union Depot, Fort Worth, Tex.  
Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills Building, Dallas, Tex.  
Greenville High School Building, Greenville, Tex.  
Graham High School Building, Graham, Tex.  
W. A. Green's Department Store, Dallas, Tex.  
Harris County Court House, Houston, Tex.  
Howard County Court House, Big Spring, Tex.  
R. W. Higginbotham's Residence, Dallas, Tex.  
Huey & Philp Hardware Company's Building, Dallas, Tex.  
Hippodrome Theater, Dallas, Tex.  
Hippodrome Theater, Waco, Tex.  
Insurance Building, Dallas, Tex.  
Johnson County Court House, Cleburne, Tex.  
Clarence E. Linz's Residence, Dallas, Tex.  
Nacogdoches County Court House, Nacogdoches, Tex.  
Pope Theater, McKinney, Tex.  
Riggins Hotel, Waco, Tex.  
Sidney Reinhardt's Residence, Dallas, Tex.  
Southwestern Life Building, Dallas, Tex.  
Sanger Brothers' Department Store, Dallas, Tex.  
Sears, Roebuck & Co.'s Plant, Dallas, Tex.  
Scurry County Court House, Snyder, Tex.  
Texas Glass and Paint Company's Building, Dallas, Tex.  
L. S. Thorne's Residence, Dallas, Tex.  
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Wichita Falls Union Station, Wichita Falls, Tex.

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SOUTHWESTERN LIFE BUILDING

DALLAS, TEXAS

An advertisement for the firm of Lang & Witchell (date unknown)

## **References:**

1. Quimby, Marcel, FAIA, "Lang and Witchell - Shaping the Dallas Skyline,"
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4. "Lang, Otto H.," The Handbook of Texas online.
5. Dallas Morning News, Oct. 19, 1947.
6. Fitzgerald, Ken, "Dallas, Then and Now", 2001.
7. Lofgren Jamie, "Early Texas Skyscrapers", unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1987.
8. Henry, Jay, "Architecture in Texas 1895-1945," 1993, University of Texas Press.

## **Credits:**

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