



INSIDE MODERN HOUSTON

The Life and Design of Sally Walsh

BY JUDY KUGLE



LEFT AND BELOW University of Houston Student Union, 1968.
 ABOVE Sally Walsh in the Houston Public Library, 1976.

“When posed with the interior design for the University of Houston’s new hub of student campus life, the University Center Building, Sally Walsh approached the project with the concept of a simple, handsome, well-coordinated interior involving classic pieces to form the best possible contemporary environment.”



At the end of her last resumé, Sally Walsh wrote, “When I walk through Houston buildings today and find good contemporary design, whether or not I had a hand in it, I find myself taking credit ... because on this specific turf it flourished with my help.” This statement is not narcissistic; it is a statement of fact. Gary McKay quoted these words and called them “justifiably proud” in his Spring 1992 obituary for *Cite*. To begin the story of Walsh, one must first acknowledge her mark on every aspect of how commercial interiors and furniture specification are still practiced in Houston.

Apprenticeship with Knoll

Walsh was born in Inspiration, Arizona, on April 1, 1928. Her father worked for Anaconda Mining Camps. She lived and attended the camp schools in Sonora, Mexico, from 6 to 10. At the age of 19, Sally dropped out for what she called “rebellious boredom.” She went through many jobs before landing a life-altering opportunity with Hans Knoll, co-founder of the furniture manufacturer and interior design firm that redefined the corporate office.

She said that for her interview with Knoll she wore a white straw cloche, or bell-shaped hat, that her mother sent her off with when she left Sioux Falls. As she waited in the reception area seeing all the other interviewees carrying large cases and looking very sure, she became frightened and decided to leave. The receptionist asked her where she was going and told her to sit down.

Walsh cited her mother’s Knoll catalog as a reason she was hired. Hans Knoll told her she was hired for two reasons: she had a perfectly blank mind, and he had never seen a more enchanting hat. He asked her to take off her hat and, when she did, never to wear it again. *Knoll women do not wear hats!*

Beginning in 1949, Walsh spent six years as Knoll’s assistant. She “typed, walked the sheep dog, waited on customers in the showroom, watched Hans present one incredible Planning Unit project after another, called on architectural firms in five states, cut thousands of perfect rectangles out of fabrics and pasted them on plans, flew to Manila to find out why Knoll furniture was arriving in Japan with spool legs, designed spaces, found showroom sites in San Francisco, kept a sharp eye out for imaginative furniture/textiles,



Wilson Stationary & Printing Company, 1972, Houston.

Her presence inspired the women who worked there to dress and act like she did. She dressed smartly and avant-garde, and did not hold back her individuality.

Transco offices, 1972, Houston.



decorated the Christmas tree with cookies flown in from Germany, and cried when [she] displeased the fifth God—Hans.”

Walsh began calling on architects in Chicago and gradually picked up more territory as the orders began rolling in until she was the manager of the department. Walsh credited her curiosity and belief in the perfection of the product for her success. In August 1954, after becoming engaged to be married, Walsh resigned.

Wilson

In 1955, Walsh moved to Houston with her new husband. She planned to open a Houston Knoll showroom, but Hans Knoll died before the plan materialized. Her first Houston job was at Suniland Commercial, where she met architect Jack Evans. After 18 months, they started Evans Walsh, a pioneer “good design” shop. As she put it, “The architects were kind to us and so we survived—not prospered but survived.” It was at Evans Walsh that Preston Moore first encountered Walsh. He made her an offer: leave her business and join Wilson Stationary & Printing, an old Houston firm that, among other services, sold office equipment and furniture. At the time, Wilson did not have the design presence that would bring in business from architectural firms beginning to control the design of corporate interiors. With the approval of E. C. “Charles” Wilson, Moore offered a salary of \$25,000, close to doubling her salary at Evans Walsh.

According to Moore, she changed the business in every way. Walsh promptly bought Wilson a Knoll dealership. Her presence inspired the women who worked there to dress and act like she did. She dressed smartly and avant-garde, and did not hold back her individuality. She not only changed the way the women at Wilson dressed, she changed the attitude of the men. She was not afraid to speak up — and she was usually right.

The interior design Walsh completed while at Wilson was mostly corporate, including offices

for Schlumberger. In 1968, while Walsh was with Wilson, she designed the installation of a Rodin exhibition at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFA,H). Another notable project while at Wilson was The University Center Building at the University of Houston with Pierce and Pierce. The October 1968 *Interior Design* observed that: “When posed with the interior design for the University of Houston’s new hub of student campus life, the University Center Building, Sally Walsh approached the project with the concept of a simple, handsome, well-coordinated interior involving classic pieces to form the best possible contemporary environment.”

The April 1974 *Interior Magazine* published an article on the offices of Transco, Houston’s first “open office” building, completed in 1972 with 3DI. “The planning idea was to place work units 45 degree angles to outside walls in V’s that leave clear views to the windows while the angled 5’ 5” high files and unit shields preserve intimacy and privacy.”

Walsh had a huge influence on those she mentored at Wilson, many of whom started their own businesses. Henry McCoy met Walsh while she was at Wilson. Before he founded McCoy, he sat down with Walsh to solicit her advice and her exact words, as related by him, were: “God damn it, ‘Hinnie,’ you go do that!” He credits a big part of his success to her. She helped him by lining up a bank loan and introducing McCoy to manufacturers.

S.I. Morris Associates

In 1971, Walsh left Wilson and started Sally Walsh Inc., working as a consultant for six months. She then joined S.I. Morris Associates as Partner in Charge of Interior Design, where she remained until 1978. Those years at Morris were a high-water mark for Houston architecture. One has only to look at the list of principals in the 1960s through the ’80s to see the influence of the firm. In 1973, partners were Eugene Aubry, Sally Walsh, William Kendall, Aalsey Newton, Rob Roy, George



Knoll International Showroom, 1980, Houston.

Spence, John Weigman, Nolen Willis, Charles Hubbard, John Bertini, Jim Heaton, Magruder Wingfield, and Tom Daly.

In 1972, Walsh completed the new space for Wilson Stationary & Printing Company, which moved from downtown to the Southwest Freeway. (The building is now wrapped in the decaying Sphinx and columns of a magic show gone bust). Her brochure for the project states: “Having worked with the owner for a number of years, the interior designer was able to provide a straightforward program to the architects—[a] single white box with a black concrete floor, [a]ll space divisions to be freestanding allowing for future changes.”

Practically all the furniture in the Wilson showroom was displayed in settings, which allowed people to imagine themselves in a rooms similar to their own offices. The large space was divided to prevent a customer from being overwhelmed by hundreds of choices at once. One

exception to the concept was the 120-foot space running along the freeway frontage where new designs and systems were dramatically displayed.

Harding Lawrence of Braniff Airlines saw an article in the November 1975 *Texas Monthly* in which S.I. Morris was quoted as saying Walsh was the “toughest son of a bitch in the partnership.” Lawrence asked her to design his apartment interiors. (She forced him to reframe all his family photos.) They developed a great working relationship, and Walsh went on to design Braniff’s corporate headquarters in Dallas. Her notes dated April 2, 1980, read: “So, imagine if you please a white world (walls, ceiling) anchored by an oh so practical dark navy blue clad floor—clad with a 2” black base and punctured with rows of doors in tan crisply outlined in black. And then—the bank of color runs—a connecting, meandering, beckoning thread.” She used such furnishings as an armless lounge chair and bench that she and Don Palmer designed, made



by Brochsteins, Inc.; a Mies coffee table by Knoll; and an Atlas sofa by Stendig. Later in her career, Walsh and Raymond Brochstein sought to start a furniture line based on the products that Walsh had designed, including the Braniff desk, which she patented. The prototype for the Braniff chair is now part of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston permanent collection.

Walsh worked with Gene Aubry on Morris's new Central Library for the city of Houston. It is now impossible to appreciate how sensational the original design was. Stephen Fox writes in the *AIA Houston Architectural Guide*: "Remodeling in 2008 radically reconfigured the library's interior spaces and led to the destruction of Sally Walsh's subtle, stylish, and eminently usable interiors."

At the time of its opening, the library got rave reviews in publications. From a June 1976 *Interiors* article, "Pavilion on the Piazza," the description reads: "A library where no one need feel cooped up. The ruddy quarry tile of the vestibule gives way to [a] continuous surface of flame-colored carpet in the reading areas."

James Ross of S.I. Morris Associates writes, "Where once you saw only a disjointed wasteland of parking lots, aged small buildings shivering in loneliness, and hermetically sealed alien giants, now if you look out of the library or towards it, you see a real city, possibly even a Renaissance city. People respond instinctively."

When she designed offices for Lehman Brothers, no chair made the traders happy. According to John Weigman, Walsh rode in Aubry's Citroen car and decided that its seat was the most comfortable she had ever sat in and that Gene should take it out of his car so they could put it on rollers to test it as a piece of moveable furniture. The traders loved it, in particular the pocket in the back, where they could place their calls. She called France to order the bucket seats, and the factory representative said, "Just what kind of accident did you have?"

Legacy

Walsh's boldness with the Citroen seats was just one of her many audacious experiments with materials and space. She persuaded clients to embrace modern design as a total concept, thereby influencing interiors, buildings, and entire landscapes.

Though Gerald Hines is rightly credited with bringing Houston to the forefront of architectural excellence in the 1970s, Walsh also deserves credit for convincing Houston's corporations and institutions to embrace modernity through the sheer force of her personality and the power of her design.

Walsh was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia while still with Morris. From 1980, she worked independently when her health permitted. In 1986, she was inducted into the *Interior Design* Design Hall of Fame. She died January 12, 1992 at the age of 65. Her name is recognized by many because of the lecture named in her honor, but the younger generations of Houston's design community have little knowledge of her impact on design and Houston's built environment. I hope that this documentation motivates others to carry out the critical and historical analysis her work deserves. ■

Above: Lehman Brothers, Houston, 1974.

Left: Braniff International, Braniff Place, 1979, Dallas, DFW Airport.

