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A rebirth in restoration

*After 75 years and dozens of projects
Fretz Construction returns to its roots*

By Lynn J. Cook
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Fretz Construction Co. has been building Houston for decades. Now the firm is rebuilding it.

The 75-year-old family-owned construction business added the River Oaks Shopping Center, Reagan High School and St. Anne's Catholic Church to Houston's landscape, passing the company torch from father to son while enduring the booms and busts of the city's economy. And now that many of those aging landmarks have to be revamped or face the wrecking ball, Fretz Construction is recreating itself as a leader in restoration projects.

"It's always been of interest to me personally," says Bob Fretz Jr., president of Fretz Construction. "I like the old buildings. It's part of the legacy here at the company—our history of building Houston for decades. I look at the older buildings and they've always intrigued me."

One of the firm's most prominent projects is its repairs on St. Joseph Catholic Church in Houston's historic Sixth Ward. Fretz Construction won a Good Brick Award from the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance for rebuilding the church according to its original style after a fire ravaged the structure.

The "new" St. Joseph Church

on Kane Street was built in 1901 after the Great Galveston Hurricane obliterated its former wood-framed home. But even the church's additions were quite old, Fretz says. All the restoration work was done in the old-style cast plaster and hand work that originally adorned the church.

"We work with a number of very skilled and qualified subcontracting firms that also have a long history in this," Fretz says. "They tend to have people who are holdovers from a bygone day, if you will . . . who still know the way things used to be done."

"The way they built buildings 50 years ago took a lot more skill than you see today. Now people can't afford to do that."

Bob Fretz Jr.'s grandfather, Edmond Fretz, founded the firm in 1923 as Standard Construction Co. after leaving his 10-year post as City Engineer.

In the beginning, the company took whatever work came its way, capitalizing on the church and school building boom that continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

"Back then, beggars couldn't be choosers," says Bob Fretz. "We built bridges, buildings . . . we did road work. Back then you didn't have much choice. You did what you had to do to survive."

And survive for eight decades they did.



PHOTO BY NICOLE FRUJE

Bob Fretz Jr. (left), with father Robert R. Fretz: 'The way they built buildings 50 years ago took a lot more skill than you see today.'

In the earlier years, Fretz Construction built the Tower Theater and St. Thomas High School in 1939. Much more recently, the firm constructed GenMedicine's corporate headquarters in 1994 and The Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion Expansion a year later.



Fretz Construction built St. Anne's Catholic Church 60 years ago.

And during the intervening period, the firm filled its time with projects such as the Temple Emanuel in 1953, Diagnostic Clinic of Houston in 1975 and Sugar Land's William Trace Baptist Church in 1989. Then, in the 1990s, interest in historic restorations blossomed.

"We have fallen into some niche markets, in addition to the historic restorations," Fretz says. "We do a tremendous volume of religious construction and a lot of research and technical buildings."

Now that the research market is going strong in Houston, Fretz has a strong presence in that field. In the long run—which is what Fretz focuses on—those institutional and technical markets should be fairly consistent.

"We're pleased with the markets we service right now. They're thriving markets that would not be affected by, say, an oil glut or recessions or depressions," he says.

And staying afloat for 75 years practically assures a company some repeat business.

This year Fretz Construction added a new Parishioners Center to the St. Anne's Church campus at the corner of Westheimer and Shepherd. Not only was space on the lot a precious commodity, but the addition had to mesh stylistically with the original church building Fretz constructed in the 1930s.

"It's tremendously important that it had that same style—like the plaster and clay tile roof. It doesn't look like an addition. It looks like it fits and has been there many years," he says.

Fretz Construction also just added a gymnasium to the St. Agnes School, which the company originally constructed more than 50 years ago.

"We don't get out on the streets and look for work—it comes to us."

Much of the time Fretz doesn't have to look far for employees either.

Of the company's 80 workers, about 20 are related to other Fretz employees or are second and third generation workers. Felipe Devora started working as a laborer for Fretz Construction when he was in high school. His father was already working there—a recruit of Edmond Fretz.

Now Devora is the firm's director of safety services, his brother is employed as a superintendent, and his son is in Fretz's apprenticeship program. The Devoras are just one example among many.

"It was a career choice and I stuck with it," he says. "The company is really good about promoting people from within to managerial positions."

Bob Fretz Jr.'s career choice to stick with the family business has paid off for him as well. In the company's 75th year, he took the reins as president, while his father, Robert R. Fretz, stays on as chairman of the board.

Both father and son are products of Texas A&M University—a school that company founder Edmond Fretz fell in love with when his company built the university's Systems Building in 1932, which now stands as a gateway to the campus.

Bob Fretz Jr. started with the company after graduating from Texas A&M in 1980. He learned the ropes, from estimating to operations to project management for eight years before becoming vice president in 1988.

Project snapshot

1925	John H. Reagan High School
1932	Texas A&M Administration Building, College Station
1938	River Oaks Shopping Center
1939	Tower Theater
1939	St. Anne's Catholic Church
1939	St. Thomas High School
1953	Temple Emanu El
1962	Fannin Bank Building
1966	Lamar Fleming Science Building at the University of Houston
1969	Diagnostic Center Hospital
1975	Diagnostic Clinic of Houston
1984	Hermann Hospital PICU/SCN
1989	Williams Trace Baptist Church
1995	The Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion Expansion
1995	St. Joseph Church—historic restoration after fire
1995	Moriarty & Associates corporate offices—historic restoration
1997	Trinity Episcopal Church—historic restoration

But there was never any unwanted pressure to run the family business someday Fretz says.

"I would be crazy not to step into something as wonderful as this business."