

# Potter Lawson Has Hand In Buildings Past, Present

**The Architecture Firm Keeps Its Focus On Designing Buildings In Wisconsin.**

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**By MARV BALOUSEK mbalousek@madison.com 608-252-6135**

Potter Lawson, one of the Madison area's oldest architectural firms, is a designer of Madison landmarks. Early projects included the Tenney Building (1913), Madison's Masonic Temple (1925) and the nine-story Gay Building (1915), which was Madison's first high-rise. The company also designed homes in Maple Bluff and the University Heights neighborhood.

Later, the firm's architects worked on the Dane County Memorial Coliseum (1967), Monona Terrace (1997, with Taliesin Architects), the Overture Center (2006, with Cesar Pelli and Flad & Associates) and the UW-Madison Pharmacy School (2000). Potter Lawson also did master planning for Badger Ordnance Works south of Baraboo.

Today, the firm is designing the external architecture of the 1.1 million-square-foot University Square development in the 700 block of University Avenue and Arbor Gate, a pair of office and retail buildings along the Beltline near Todd Drive.

The firm also has designed a lot of smaller projects including schools, corporate offices and police stations. "We solve problems in what we do," said design director Douglas Hursh, who recalled a project at a middle school where walls were designed so they wouldn't show pencil marks.

At Oak Lawn Academy near Edgerton, hot sauce, which had damaged the inside of a locker, was a major issue when Potter Lawson was designing a project that included a tile floor. The firm's interior designers spent hours pouring hot sauce on the tiles to see how they would hold up.

Potter Lawson has had a strong family focus and prefers projects in Wisconsin and the Upper Midwest, unlike some other Madison architectural firms that have expanded nationwide.

The firm was founded in 1913 by brothers James and Edward Law. Namesake Ellis Potter joined the company in 1916 and his son, Jim, came during the 1940s, retiring in 1995. Dave Lawson joined the firm in 1964, retiring in 2000.

Eric Lawson, who is Dave's son and became president in the late 1990s, said it was a smooth transition from the older generation.

"We really like to establish long-term relationships with our clients," Eric Lawson said.

Potter Lawson may be steeped in tradition, but that doesn't mean it's behind the times. Hursh said the firm uses the latest 3-D design software, especially to show how buildings will look to clients, but hasn't abandoned older methods when they're appropriate.

"We still use trace paper and sketching for concept phases," he said. "We still have drafting tables."

The firm's specialties these days are criminal justice, education, corporate and municipal buildings.

Potter Lawson worked on the designs of the Columbia Correctional Institution near Portage (1986) and the Wisconsin Secure Program Facility, formerly known as the Supermax prison, near Boscobel (1999) as well as

criminal justice buildings in Antigo; La Crosse; Viroqua; Racine; Shawano; Oregon, Ill., and other communities.

Hursh said the firm has developed a new courtroom design in which the judge, jury and witnesses have better views of each other.

Besides middle and elementary schools, educational projects include a residence hall at UW-Whitewater and an academic building at UW-Superior, both scheduled for completion in 2010, as well as several buildings at UW-Madison and Edgewood College.

Among the firm's corporate projects are the CUNA Credit Union Center (1980-1989), Dane County Fen Oak Resource Center (1998), General Casualty Home Office in Sun Prairie (2002) and the headquarters of J.H. Findorff & Son (2001).

Municipal projects include police stations in Madison, Reedsburg and Tomah as well as city halls in Fitchburg, Monona, Sun Prairie and Whitewater.

Potter Lawson also designed the Ellen and Peter Johnson HospiceCare Residence, a \$20 million, 32-bed addition to its intensive-care facility at 5395 E. Cheryl Parkway in Fitchburg.

"They were wonderful listeners," said Susan Phillips, HospiceCare president and chief executive. "They were able to take what they heard and turn it around in designs that truly worked for our patients and their families."

In the 95-year-old firm's future, Lawson said there are no plans to expand geographically outside the Midwest or change the mix of projects.

"I see us expanding on what we're doing right now," he said. "We like having our designers able to work close to home."

#### AT A GLANCE

What: Potter Lawson

Address: 15 Ellis Potter Court

Employees: 46 Annual billings: \$7 million

Services: Architecture and interior design

Web site: [www.potterlawson.com](http://www.potterlawson.com)

<http://www.madison.com/archives/read.php?ref=/wsj/2008/03/27/0803270001.php>