



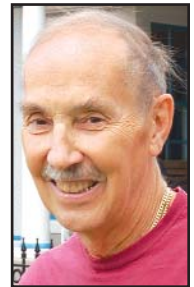
Urban Times

ARCHIVES

FROM: APRIL 2008

IN MEMORY

Tom Jones, civic activist and builder of homes



ONE OF CHATHAM ARCH'S LEADING citizens, Tom Jones, died on March 15 after a lengthy illness.

Jones was a former member of the Chatham Arch Neighborhood Association Board of Directors, continued to be a long-time active member of its Urban Design Committee, and for 11 years edited the Chatham Arch Archives.

His made his biggest mark, however, as a builder of custom homes in Chatham Arch and other Downtown historic neighborhoods. In addition to his own home, Jones built 13 other brick homes in Chatham Arch, the Old Northside and Lockerbie Square.

Tom's long-time partner, Paul Atkinson, was also very active in the Chatham Arch neighborhood until his death in 2006.

Two years ago, Jones announced his plans to donate the plot of land located at the corner of East and St. Clair streets, adjacent to his home, to the Chatham Arch Foundation for use as a public park. He subsequently purchased a sculpture by noted artist Tom Otterness to adorn the site.

As word of Tom's death circulated, long-time Old Northside resident Kurt Flock was quick to offer tribute. "Tom left behind a legacy in bricks and mortar that helped shape the redevelopment of Downtown neighborhoods," Flock said. "Tom was a stalwart supporter of appropriate development and contributed to our Downtown neighborhoods in ways that go far beyond the homes he built."

Tom is survived by a sister, a brother, and seven nieces and nephews. Services were conducted March 19 at All Saints Episcopal Church, following calling at the Downtown Flanner & Buchanan Funeral Center. The family requested that donations be made to the Chatham Arch Neighborhood Foundation. ■

On next page:
A profile of
Tom Jones,
from the
December 2007
issue of
Urban Times.



Urban Times

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FROM: December 2007

Self-taught builder

Chatham Arch's Tom Jones has made a structural impact on historic neighborhoods

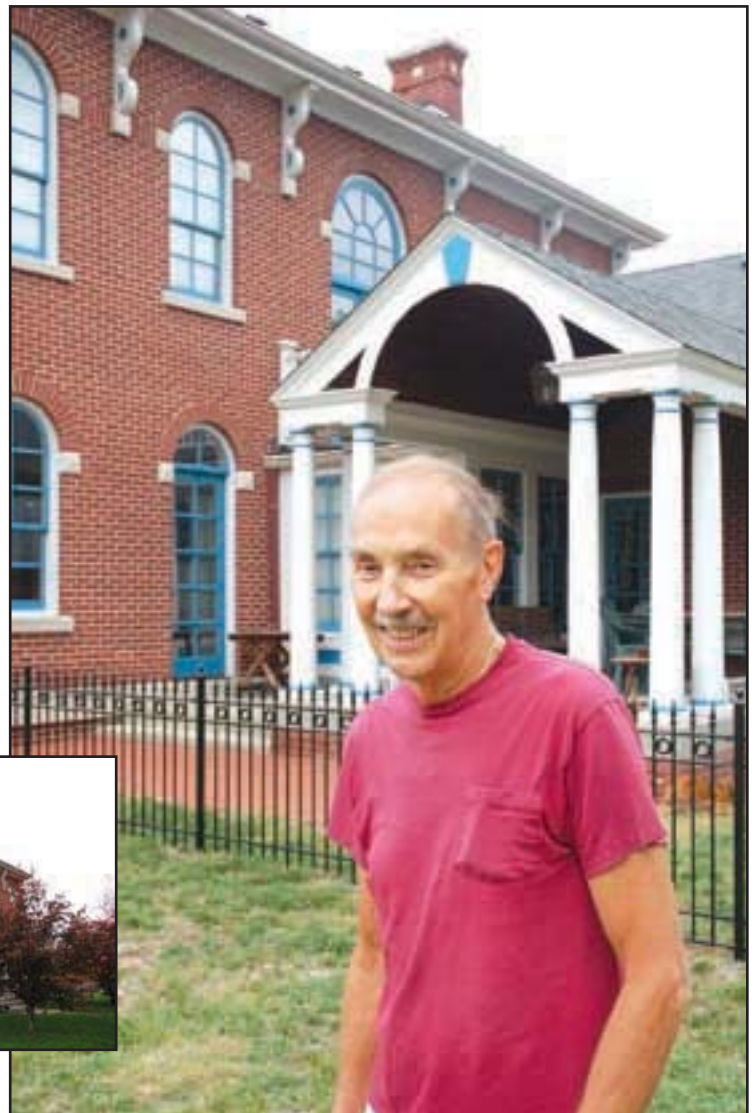
THIS STORY BEGINS IN THE MID-1960s, WHEN Tom Jones bought a lot in Brown County. He and his partner, the late Paul Atkinson, also bought a log cabin which dated to 1820 and moved it on to the property. The task at hand was to renovate the cabin into livability, so he decided to do it himself. He checked some books out of the library, studied up on heating and plumbing, and reconstructed the cabin, even adding a basement.

Four decades later, Tom Jones, self-taught home builder, has transferred that knowledge to 14 new-home constructions in Downtown neighborhoods – all in neighborhoods under the auspices of the Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission.

How Tom Jones got from a Brown County basement to historic preservation home builder really goes back even further, when he was graduated from the University of Michigan with degrees in both mathematics and engineering. He used the math degree during a long business career which by the early 1980s found him working as the manager of a Travelers property casualty office in South Bend. As his retirement approached, he bought some land in Downtown Indianapolis as an investment.

The engineering degree had given him a leg up on

Tom Jones has built 14 ► homes in Downtown historic preservation districts, including his own in Chatham Arch (below).



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those build-it-yourself books he used in Brown County, as well as the confidence to turn one of those Downtown properties into his own residence – a stately two-story brick home built in 1990 in Chatham Arch. The house, designed by the late Todd Mozingo, was also Tom’s first dealings with the Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission.

Fourteen of his own projects later, Jones understands IHPC about as well as anyone outside of IHPC Administrator David Baker’s office. Add to his own direct experience the contact Tom has had with IHPC as a member of the Chatham Arch Neighborhood Association’s Urban Design Committee, which makes recommendations on all projects proposed for Chatham Arch.

All this experience has taught Tom Jones the value of historic preservation – and exposed him to the pitfalls as well.

“Having an historic plan certainly helped with the development of the neighborhoods,” he said, “making sure they were developed properly. I’m not so sure it would have happened otherwise.”

But, he would advise anyone thinking about building within the IHPC sphere, “It’s a very political process.” Prospective builders should study the dynamics within IHPC, as well as the philosophies of the individual commission members. Experience helps. “The more projects you have done, the more you get the know-how to work around the problems.”

Tom learned that from project number-one, the house which would be the home shared with Paul Atkinson, who died in February 2006. “We really wanted an attached garage,” Tom remembered, an idea counter to the Chatham Arch historic plan. “But Paul didn’t want to compromise.” Mozingo would come up with a design involving a breezeway to obscure the fact that the garage was attached, but IHPC staff weren’t impressed. Paul developed a strategy. He had undergone a hip replacement, so he bought a cane and hobbled into the public hearing, insisting he needed the attached garage because he couldn’t carry the groceries into the house.

Tom’s house has an attached garage.

He remembers another Chatham Arch house with the same issue, so he presented IHPC with two alternatives – “one with an ugly, detached garage, the other with a pretty, attached garage. IHPC chose the latter.” The other pesky

problem which pops up in historic neighborhoods – setbacks on garages. “The original structures were built right on the alleys, for horses. But you can’t do that with cars, which need a turning radius. Garages are not usable if you can’t swing a car into them.”

The first 11 projects Jones completed in the IHPC arena were “spec” homes. He didn’t work with a specific homeowner until Don and Kathy Willing approached him to build a house on a Lockerbie Square lot. Tom declined at first, because he was in the middle of one construction project with another waiting in the wings – and each project takes a year. But the Willings themselves were two years away from the project, so he reconsidered. Tom agreed for two reasons – he liked the Willings, and he had always



▲ The Lockerbie home of Don and Kathy Willing, the first one Jones built for a specific client.

wanted to build in Lockerbie. This project might be his only opportunity.

The result is another stately home, this one at the corner of Vermont Street and College Avenue. He built a house, and he forged a strong friendship. “Working with him was just a pleasure,” Kathy said, with her husband finishing the thought: “As opposed to most people’s horror stories.”

By this time, Tom was working with architect Val Williamson, who had been Mozingo’s partner until he died in 1997. Mozingo was the architect on Tom’s first six projects; Val worked on five. (She, unfortunately, would die before the Willing home was completed in 2004. Todd Rottman was the architect for two projects, while Jim Kienle did one.)

“Tom was there every step of the way,” Kathy said,

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“from the first shovel of dirt to when we were hanging the fixtures. He’s just the most conscientious and thorough.” Not that there weren’t problems. Early in the project, she remembered, a severe storm which brought tornados to the city’s Southside also brought torrential rains which caved in the basement. The next winter, Tom’s crews kept working through the winter even though they frequently had to shovel snow out of the uncompleted house.

The most significant design hurdle, the couple remembered, was that the long-gone historic house on that site had faced College Avenue, whereas they wanted their house to front on the quieter Vermont Street. Working with IHPC, Williamson solved that issue with a College Avenue door which opens on to a small porch with a sidewalk leading to nowhere, while the real front door opens on to Vermont Street.

Don, whose banking career had taught him caution, felt instantly comfortable with the Chatham Arch builder. “From the very first meeting, we just trusted the guy – and he was totally honest, totally fair.” The project, he said, was launched with a one-page contract. The Willings never had any regrets. “Tom was a peach to work with,” Don said.

Tom has subsequently built two other contract homes, both in Chatham Arch, one for Steve Thornton (who not surprisingly lived across the street from the Willing house when it was built), the other for Larry Cleaver and Greg Peck. That brings his Chatham Arch total to 10 homes, plus the renovation of an historic cottage on Arch Street. The other three of his houses sit in the Old Northside.

All are identifiable by the swirling brackets which sit underneath the eaves. All except Tom’s own home, where IHPC insisted upon contemporary brackets. That was before Tom learned more about the process – and at a time when he relied more on the architect and less on his own wiles.

“Initially, the architect was very important because I didn’t know enough,” he said. “But architects don’t care what things cost; they want ‘pretty.’” As the houses were checked off the list, however, Tom took a larger role in the design; his later projects are based on his own sketches. He still prefers the “spec” process to building for a client, “because you don’t have to check with anyone.”

His experiences have also taught him more about IHPC, which he has watched evolve as well over the years. “Once, the commission was a rubber stamp for staff recommendations,” he said. “It used to be once I got staff approval, I thought I had it made. Not any more: they make up their own minds.”

He noted that the commission’s staff – led by David Baker throughout Tom’s 14 projects – has been fairly consistent in its approach despite the many architectural review-



▲ A Tom Jones house in the Old Northside.

ers who have come and gone. What has changed, he said, is IHPC’s attitude toward the neighborhood associations. “Before, they really didn’t pay much attention to what the neighborhood wanted,” Tom said. “Now, the staff is more attuned to the neighborhoods.” In earlier years, he said, IHPC never asked what neighborhood response was to any given project. “But now, if a neighborhood doesn’t like a project, IHPC wants to know why. And the committees will give them a long list.”

Tom pointed out that each neighborhood has a committee, such as Chatham Arch’s Urban Design Committee or the Old Northside’s Land Use Committee, which review projects with developers before the plans reach IHPC. “The plans end up in pretty good shape by the time you get to (IHPC) staff,” he said.

Along the way, Tom Jones also learned that each neighborhood’s historic preservation plan is different, although those differences are not significant between Chatham Arch and the Old Northside. One difference: “The lots are bigger in the Old Northside, so the houses need to be bigger. You have to put a good-sized house on those lots.”

He fought a significant difference, however, when he approached the Lockerbie Square project for the Willings. Lockerbie’s zoning – HP1, is a unique designation specifically designed for historic preservation districts. “You build on everything, where in Chatham Arch there’s more green-space. And in Lockerbie, you don’t need variances; you just need to be careful you don’t overhang on the next guy’s property.”

He also found another difference, at least in the Willings’ case: The people who owned the neighboring lot at that time (they have since moved) would not allow any scaffolding on their property, forcing Tom’s crews to do the framing and

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brick work from inside. “That drove the costs up,” the builder said.

Although he’s not currently in a building project, Tom Jones isn’t slowing down very much. He continues to serve on the Chatham Arch Urban Design Committee, and plans to help with a plan to bring a fountain back to the intersection of Walnut Street , Park Avenue and Massachusetts Avenue. In the meantime, he will be a steady presence in the neighborhood as he walks his dog, Sammy (see Chatham Arch Archives, page 41).

Such service is hardly new. Tom was editor of and wrote the Chatham Arch Archives for 11 years. He has served on the Board of Directors, although never as president. “Paul was president for three years, and when that was over I felt like I’d been president.”

Beyond the homes he has built and the volunteerism he has offered, Tom Jones has etched another mark in his neighborhood – at least partially because he didn’t get his wish in 1988 when he built his first house. He and Paul Atkinson had wanted the house to sit astride two lots, but IHPC was firm in its stance that the house occupy only one lot. That left the corner lot free, which Tom now intends to donate to the Chatham Arch Foundation to serve as a neighborhood park. He subsequently purchased one of the Tom Otterness sculptures to adorn the space.

Tom would like to build one more house, “but the market is terrible.” Once he had a backlog of people wanting to build, but that was before the property tax fiasco. But his desire to wear a hard hat again isn’t financial. “I enjoy the process,” he said. “It’s lots of fun.”

– Bill Brooks