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[Main Menu](#)

Inside This Issue

[Home](#)[Articles](#)[Current Issue](#)[Advertisers](#)[Issue Archives](#)[About](#)[Contact](#)

Progressive architecture the hallmark of Pellham Phillips



Larry Phillips, principal engineer at Pellham Phillips.

By Michael Gillespie

Along with its natural beauty, the Ozarks region is also home to several prominent companies representing a diverse range of professional skills. One of these is Pellham Phillips Architects Engineers. Based in Springfield, Missouri, the firm has emerged as a leader in progressive commercial design.

Since 1979, when Larry Phillips teamed up with Galen Pellham to form the company, Pellham Phillips has designed scores of structures ranging from churches to schools to theaters and sports facilities, and from industrial to retail to hotel and civic buildings. The firm's projects span from coast to coast. Among their more recently famous design accomplishments was the Palace Theater in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, where one of the presidential debates took place.

"Down here, and even at the Lake, most people haven't heard of us," says the firm's marketing director, Brad Parke. "But if you would make a list of the top twelve landmarks in the region, Pellham Phillips has designed most of them. The impact that we've made on the community is pretty huge. Ours is a fully integrated firm in that we have engineers, architects, and interior designers working side by side."

In the immediate Lake area, Pellham Phillips is the architectural and engineering team behind the planned John Q. Hammons' Chateau on the Lake at Osage Beach.

"That's a big project," says Larry Phillips, the company's principal engineer. "Mr. Hammons bought that land three or four years ago, and he wanted to build a facility that was similar to the Chateau that he's got at Branson — only he wanted it to be much grander, and be the nicest facility in the Lake of the Ozarks region." Phillips explains that the success of Hammons' upscale hotels around the country is due in large measure to the inclusion of first-class convention facilities at those sites. Several of the facilities were designed by Pellham Phillips.

The Hammons' Lake of the Ozark project already has undergone significant changes on the drawing board. Originally planned as a nine story structure, the latest concept calls for twelve floors and 350 rooms. "We're headed towards a more contemporary design with it now," says Phillips. Each change creates a new set of challenges for the professionals at Pellham Phillips, but that's part of the job.

"Mr. Hammons is probably the best hotel man in the United States," says Phillips. "He was elected Corporate Hotelier of the World in 2003, so when he says what he wants to do, we have a tendency to listen."

Phillips notes that a pending lawsuit over the TIF funding, as well as the state of current financial markets, have combined to slow the progress of the development. But Phillips says that Hammons is "still very high on the project — he will do it. When he puts this building in, it's going to transform Lake of the Ozarks into another stage. It's going to be a world-class facility."

As important as the Lake project is, it is only one of many hotel designs that Pellham Phillips has undertaken. "Over 31 years we've designed more than 200 hotels, mostly upscale," says Brad Parke. "Not all those were Mr. Hammons', but we have done a lot of work for him. We also are the architects for the Chateau on the Lake in Branson. We were the designers for the Hammons Hall for the Performing Arts... Whenever Mr. Hammons wanted his really high-profile projects, we've been fortunate that he's selected us to do those."

One of those high-profile projects was Hammons Field in Springfield, home of the Cardinals double-A baseball team and the MSU Bears. The story goes that Mr. Hammons had hired a major sports architect to do Hammons Field and then one Sunday night at 10:30 he called Larry Phillips and said, "I want you to do my ball park."

"Mr. Hammons," replied Phillips, "I'd love to, but you've already hired this other company."

Hammons replied, "Well, they just don't seem to get it; can you do it?"

Phillips explained that he had never designed a stadium before.

"I know that," Hammons said. "But my question is: can you do it?"

"Mr. Hammons," said Phillips, "if you'll do the honor of letting me do it, I guarantee we'll design you the best ballpark in the country."

Hammons Field was completed in time for the 2004 Bears season. In 2005 it was named the Best Ballpark of the Year by Baseballparks.com. The key to Pellham Phillips design success was an understanding of the fans' point of view — that going to a minor league game is not so much about the game as it is in having fun.



Larry Phillips, principal engineer, at Hammons Field in Springfield. Pellham Phillips designed the stadium

There were other memorable projects. "We did a twelve story building right square on the middle of the San Andreas fault in Monterey, California," recalls Phillips. "It was really a structural challenge to do that and feel for sure that it was a safe and reliable building. In this particular instance, we made the building so rigid that it would hang together no matter how hard it shakes."

And then there was the Ripley's Believe It Or Not museum in Branson. As Phillips tells it: "The franchise in Branson was bought by an English gentleman. I think we made contact with him through a contractor. We came recommended as someone who did innovative work. We started corresponding, and he gave us the task of designing a structure that has the curb appeal that it does. During the initial meetings we hit up on the idea of, 'What if it was an earthquake? What if it looks like a building that had been through a catastrophe and was about to fall down? People would probably be interested in that.'

"One of the things they do not prepare you for in structural engineering school is designing buildings that look like they are going to fall down. It was an interesting project to put all your columns at nine to twelve degrees askew and to put in the interior design such that it looks like it's about to fall down, but be perfectly safe at the same time.

"I was pretty good friends with the contractor and it was a challenge. You teach people to do good

work and to look a certain way, and then when you have a sheet rock contractor on the job and say, 'Okay, I want this ceiling to look like it just busted and is falling down about two feet with lathes sticking out' — that's a little different mindset. But the fact of the matter is that I think everyone enjoyed it because it was so different."

But whether it's a tourist attraction, a school, or a city hall, it all begins with the most basic of ideas. It falls to the designer to bring those ideas to fruition.



The Ripley's Believe It Or Not structure in Branson, a Pellham Phillips project, was designed to look as though it was damaged by an earthquake

"Generally," explains Phillips, "people come to us because they want to build a specific kind of project. They have a goal in mind. So the first thing that we do is sit down and discuss with them exactly what their goals in the project are. Then we do an analysis and inform them that their project is feasible for the dollars they have, or tell them they're dreaming a little large and we need to either adapt the project or adapt the money."

"If I have a client who comes in and wants to build something that's very ambitious, and then he says to me, 'But I've only got a million dollars,' and his project is obviously a five or six million dollar project, we have to start talking reality to him. At that point we'll try to take him in some different directions to allow him to realize his dream."

"What's even more intriguing is when someone comes in and they have a dream and we can look at that project and one of our designers here may have a concept that the client has not thought of, but it strikes his fancy. Some of our architects can take that dream and say, 'Yes, I understand what you want to do, but there's another way to accomplish that.' A lot of times we'll have an owner change their concept based on our input."

"The bottom line is we take care of the client and do what's necessary to learn what they really need and what they really want," adds Brad Parke. "A really good example of that is, we are working on a church in Lebanon. And when we made our first proposal to them, the pastor got up and turned to the architect and said, 'You've taken our heart and you put it on paper.' What better compliment?"

With the Hammons' project in the works, Pellham Phillips has a vision for the Lake of the Ozarks area.

"The Lake of the Ozarks is such a powerful destination, especially for people from St. Louis and Kansas City, and even Chicago," says Larry Phillips. "I think they are going to demand more world-class type facilities. You're going to see an increase over the conventions and tourism travel that you have there now, especially the tourism market. I'd like to see the Lake of the Ozarks take a step up from what's been there in the past to a more modern concept of lodging."

"I've always been surprised that the Lake of the Ozarks hasn't headed down the live performance route that Branson has. More people that come into the area as a vacation destination are going to demand more venues to occupy their time, and that includes live performance facilities. I'm rooting for that; I would love to design some theaters."

Pellham Phillips Architects Engineers can be contacted in Springfield at (417) 865-1672, or through their web site at www.PellhamPhillips.com.

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