

MAK Neighborhood Celebrates 100 Years



This photo, provided by Wilburn's niece, shows one of her houses. It was among many demolished to build Decatur's Carl G. Renfroe Middle School in the early 1970s.

By Scott Leith

In 1967, Leila Ross Wilburn died at the age of 82. She had worked as an architect her entire life and, even well past retirement age, still took the bus to an office she kept in downtown Atlanta.

Wilburn lived on Adams Street in Decatur, just south of College Avenue. She designed her own house and many others nearby, including one for her mother. Indeed, structures based on Wilburn's designs were built throughout the Southeast, in large part because she published slender plan books that developers successfully used to woo clients.

Wilburn's career began in the early 1900s and was an unusual one, thanks to her lack of college training in architecture, her focus on working with developers, and her stature as a rare female in a male-dominated field.

Atlanta is Ours

Dr. Richard H. Sams, author of *Atlanta Is Ours: The Plot to Capture Sherman*, an historical novel, gave a presentation about the historical underpinnings of his book and signed copies afterward. Co-sponsored by the Georgia Center for the

Book, the November 27 event drew almost 40 people to the Harrison Room in the Old Courthouse. There was a lively question-and-answer period after Dr. Sams spoke.

Dr. Sams focused his presentation on the

At the time of her death, few appreciated Wilburn's legacy. But recognition grew over time, especially in the late 1970s, when Wilburn's life and work caught the attention of scholars. Her remaining papers were donated to the Atlanta Historical Society. Eventually, many concluded that Wilburn was worth remembering as a pioneer.

Today, Wilburn is a key figure in the history of her former neighborhood, Decatur's McDonough-Adams-Kings Highway Historic District. Long known by the initials MAK, the small enclave sits between Agnes Scott College and Oakhurst and is currently celebrating its centennial.

A few years after Wilburn died, her former home on Adams Street was demolished – along with about 40 others in MAK – to clear a swath of land for Decatur's new middle school. When a crew wrecked Wilburn's house, her niece, who is still a resident of MAK, watched from the street. She saw stacks of books and drawings inside, all left behind in the condemned structure.

Around the same time, white flight and urban decay hurled much of MAK into a downward spiral, with falling home values and rising crime. During the 1970s, the state of Georgia – bolstered by support from Agnes Scott College – wanted to build a large highway that would have obliterated much of MAK. It was an era when many urban neighborhoods were seen as expendable.

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historical facts of the book, avoiding any temptation to reveal the outcome of the "Plot to Capture Sherman." The discussion ranged from specific facts about particular people and places near Decatur to

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**DeKalb History Center's
First Annual
Black History Month Celebration
"A Salute to African-American Entrepreneurs"**

Join us as we recognize outstanding African-American business leaders who have made a positive impact on DeKalb County.

Honoring:

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Please call for availability and benefits.

Donations may also be made at the designated levels without benefits.

LEILA ROSS WILBURN

Born in Macon, oldest of five children. 1885— 1967. Her family moved to Decatur in the 1890s.

Educated at what is now Agnes Scott College. She began to learn about architecture as a drafting apprentice with an Atlanta firm. Wilburn opened her own architectural office in 1908.

Wilburn's father died in 1909. Leila was 24 and helped provide for her younger siblings.

Wilburn created several plan books with hundreds of home designs. Her first, "Southern Homes and Bungalows," was published in 1914.

In 2003, Wilburn was inducted into Georgia Women of Achievement. Others with this honor include authors Flannery O'Connor and Margaret Mitchell.

MAK Neighborhood (Cont.)

During the 1960s, desegregation of schools and integration of housing led to massive racial changes in much of Decatur. Many white residents left MAK. Agnes Scott College bought a number of houses, especially on Adams Street, to use as inexpensive housing for faculty and staffers. This also gave ASC a buffer between the then all-white school and the increasingly African-American neighborhoods nearby.

In the midst of a decline, MAK's future started to take shape. Residents fought the state's highway plans and, by 1980, the project was shelved. Slowly, new residents arrived in MAK, helping to stabilize property values. Many of those who moved to MAK in the 1970s and 1980s still live in the area today.

By the 1990s, MAK was well on the way up. A strong sign of resurgence happened in the late 1990s, when Agnes Scott College demolished a few houses on McDonough Street to build a parking garage. Surprised neighbors banded together and eventually formed the MAK Local Historic District, a designation that recognizes MAK's significance and protects it

from more changes. The neighborhood's case for historic designation depends greatly on the preservation of Wilburn's designs. While Wilburn's home is long gone, at least 21 houses of her design still stand in the ten-block area which also includes other significant homes including bungalows, English Cottages and American Foursquares in a variety of architectural styles.

The neighborhood is now marking its centennial – an event that stretches over three years. MAK's history dates to 1907, when developers bought land to create a subdivision. MAK's first home was completed in 1910. Through decades of changes, MAK has survived. As with Wilburn, the heritage of the area has become stronger as well.

Scott Leith lives in MAK and has done extensive research on the neighborhood's history. He works for Turner Broadcasting System as director of public relations strategy for the company's entertainment networks. He spent 13 years as a journalist, including seven as a reporter for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.