

This Month in Austin AGC History – In April 1969 the Building Committee Discusses Options for the Plan Room

The Austin AGC Building Committee met on April 9, 1969, to discuss design and financing of a new office space at 609 South Lamar Boulevard to replace the old structure. Mr. Robert C. Gray, Chairman of this Committee, called the meeting to order at 3pm and asked if anyone had a proposed sketch or other suggestion to offer. One submittal called for a single-story building of roughly 3600sf, but after discussion it was agreed upon by the four members in attendance that there should be two stories of roughly 2400sf each, with the first floor set up for a plan room and offices.

The cost figure was initially estimated at roughly \$75,000 for both the site work, building and furnishings. Ultimately, that figure rose to \$130,000 once architectural plans were received and bids received. On October 7, 1969, the contract was awarded to J.C. Construction Company who then completed the project in time for the July 1970 monthly Board of Directors meeting.



Robert C. Gray, the Austin AGC's President in 1972

The importance of having a physical “plan room” for members at the time cannot be understated. To bid and win work a construction company must review all drawings and specifications for the proposed project in order to make an informed estimate of the expected cost and schedule. Back in the 1970s, contractors could either buy a large paper copy of the blueprints/plans – an expensive option – or get access to a shared set either from an owner, architect or organization like the local AGC.



A Contractor Reviews Bidding Documents in the Old AGC Plan Room

Joining our Chapter for a fixed, annual fee was often cheaper and more convenient than shelling out funds for every set of plans needed week in and week out. On becoming an Austin AGC member, contractors could then visit our plan room Monday through Friday and review any of the projects on file. Plans could even be checked out over the weekend and returned any time of the day or night via an outside access panel.

Since there was no widespread internet access to blueprints up until the late 1990s, it was not uncommon for contractors to be found waiting in line to at the front door of the Austin AGC building each morning to jockey for an available seat in one of roughly a dozen semi-private cubicles located on the first floor. Fresh coffee was plentiful, and the helpful AGC staff was available to make copies of any specific sheets requested. Each week staff would also type, print and send a Chapter Bulletin to the membership with a list of plans on file, interested bidders, addenda, and bid results, along with information about Chapter new and upcoming events. This process required much time and office equipment, and some weeks the AGC crew worked late into the evening to finalize publication and the mailing of hundreds of printed Bulletins.



Austin AGC Staff Managing Blueprints in the Old Plan Room Filled with Cubicles

But once the internet era began then numerous “online plan rooms” emerged. By 2002 the Austin Chapter partnered with industry leader [iSqFt](#) to begin sharing physical plans in the new virtual, electronic format as well. As with any major technology innovation, initial adoption of this new way of accessing plans and species was slow. But within a few years, both general and specialty contractors alike began to understand the incredible business efficiencies now available. As

one long-time AGC member stated at the time, “My son started using that internet plan room. I have no idea how it works, but we sure are bidding a lot more jobs and winning them, too!”



Over the next several years, AGC members gradually stopped coming by the Austin AGC since they could just as easily stay in their own office or home to review plans any time of the day or night all week long. Recognizing and accepting this inevitable change in the industry, the Austin AGC strengthened even further its relationship with our online plan room partner, known today as [iSqFt, a ConstructConnect company](#). From their headquarters in Ohio, the iSqFt staff “harvests” plan information for

the Central Texas construction market area and makes it available to review online. The Chapter also takes part of this information – project name, bid time, location, estimated cost, owner – and makes it available to AGC members each week via our [Plan Bulletin](#) along with updates on Chapter news and events. Meanwhile the old plan room has been repurposed as a large training and meeting room regularly used by member firms, Chapter committees, and industry partners.

The Chairman of that AGC Building Committee back in 1969, Robert Gray, also served as Chapter Chairman in 1972 and no doubt had blueprints for his projects available in our plan room. One notable local building completed by his firm around that time was Austin High School that opened in 1975 on Cesar Chavez near Town Lake. An aerial photo of that project shows a yet to be completed MoPac under construction as well. Also among Mr. Gray’s construction projects was a University of Texas System Cancer Center completed in 1977 and located outside of town in Bastrop.



Austin High School (and MoPac) Under Construction in 1974

Another notable construction connection to Mr. Gray is the house he lived in from 1967 to 1978 located at 1603 Niles Road. According to City document, Mr. Gray was “a self-made Austin building contractor” who, along with his wife JoAnn, remodeled the house twice during their ownership. Changes includes the additional of a pool and pool house, large family room and a new garage with a covered walkway. More details about those renovations can be found in the 1976 book [Austin and Its Architecture](#) published by the American Institute of Architects – Austin Chapter and available to review at Austin Library’s Howson Branch.

Also, a lengthy review of that historical property on Niles Road was included in a [2009 Zoning Change Review Sheet](#). While City zoning documents often make for dull reading of limited interest to only a few stakeholders, this particular compilation is worth a look as it details a fascinating history of that house along with short bios of all the owners. (The legendary life and mysterious death of one of the property’s owners is also featured in a [Texas Monthly story here](#).)

Throughout our 75 year history, the names of the Austin AGC leaders and company members may change but we always continue the strong tradition of helping the local construction industry build Austin’s quality of life!