

## **Ralph Rapson, Prominent Modernist Architect:**

Renowned Minneapolis architect, Ralph Rapson (1914 – 2008), was one of the world’s oldest practicing architects and also one of the most prolific. His most famous work was the former Guthrie Theater building in downtown Minneapolis. He also designed the United States embassies in Stockholm, Sweden and Copenhagen, Denmark. His other works in Minnesota include St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church in St. Paul Park, and the former Pillsbury House in Wayzata.

Rapson was born in 1914 in Alma, Michigan and studied at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and Cranbrook Academy of Art. He taught at what is now the Illinois Institute of Technology from 1942 to 1946, and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1946 to 1954. He later became the dean of the architecture school at the University of Minnesota from 1954 to 1984.

Rapson designed a prototype of a streamlined yet whimsical bentwood rocking chair. Knoll Associates introduced it on the retail market as a solid-wood version called the Rapson Rapid Rocker in 1945. Frank Lloyd Wright bought two for \$99.50 each. In a full-page ad in the *New York Times*, Bloomingdale’s promoted the chair as an “innovative and attractive modern take on a traditional piece.”

In addition to designing innovative furniture, Rapson also turned out seemingly endless plans for embassies, churches, homes, birdhouses, and an unrealized master plan for the redesign of southeast Minneapolis. In his later years, Rapson’s Minneapolis-based company developed a line of prefabricated modern houses called “Rapson Greenbelt.”

Although he’s known in Minnesota mostly for the original Guthrie Theater, Rapson also designed homes throughout the Twin Cities, including one in the Jonathan area of Chaska. “Usually most of the houses are something we have tried to create that are a little bit on the firing line, or just a little bit different,” said Rapson in a 1999 interview with the *Chaska Herald* newspaper.

His Chaska house, on Kings Lane in Jonathan, called the “Red Cedar House,” was designed in 1966 on a commission from the Weyerhaeuser Company, using Weyerhaeuser products. The plans could then be sold to new homebuyers. It was designed as “a house for everyman,” Rapson recalled.

The Ralph Rapson-designed home in Jonathan features an inverted truss, which makes the roof appear as if it had been built upside down.

- Compiled from the *Chaska Herald*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *New York Times*, *Associated Press*