

# SKY IS THE LIMIT

■ GARY ROBERTS  
Editor

Even when just a little boy, Lynn Hill somehow knew that the wonderful world of NASA would be a part of his future — only he figured it would be as an astronaut.

He and his friends would take coffee cans and metal cigar boxes, cut them up, flatten them out and screw them together, forming a huge rocket that would take him on fanciful journeys of the mind.

"We had the gravity thing all worked out," he recalled. "We would simply use shoes with magnets."

And although these prototypes never actually flew, the young boy's dreams continued to soar, undeterred.

Hill would write letters to NASA with scientific quandaries about space travel, such as how he could "buy 1,000 pounds of thrust" needed for blast-off.

As a 12-year-old, he also clearly remembers one particular response, from astronaut Ed White. It wasn't the answer he wanted, though.

White, who was the pilot for Gemini 4 in 1965 and the first American to walk in space, wrote: "If you want to be an astronaut, you've got to study math and science."

Well, Hill didn't care much for math and science so that was the end of that. Such is how career choices are made in the evolution of a boy's life.

The dangers of space travel may have also influenced his decision. Astronaut White, along with fellow Apollo 1 astronauts Gus Grissom and Roger Chaffee, died Jan. 27, 1967, during a launch pad test at Kennedy Space Center.

But for Hill, a new mission would soon take its place and, synchronistically, NASA would still play a leading role.

Rather than flying above the stratosphere, his true calling became the field of architecture, designing buildings that reach up into, but not beyond, the sky.

While in high school, during bouts with the measles or chicken pox, Hill began making buildings and villages out of construction paper and glue. He also got his first part-time job helping out in an architect's office.

And today, the resident of Englewood Park in East Orlando continues to work for an architectural firm, still striving to reach for the stars.

As vice president and projects director for SCA Design Group, Inc., Hill has left his personal mark on a number of projects. But that is nothing new.

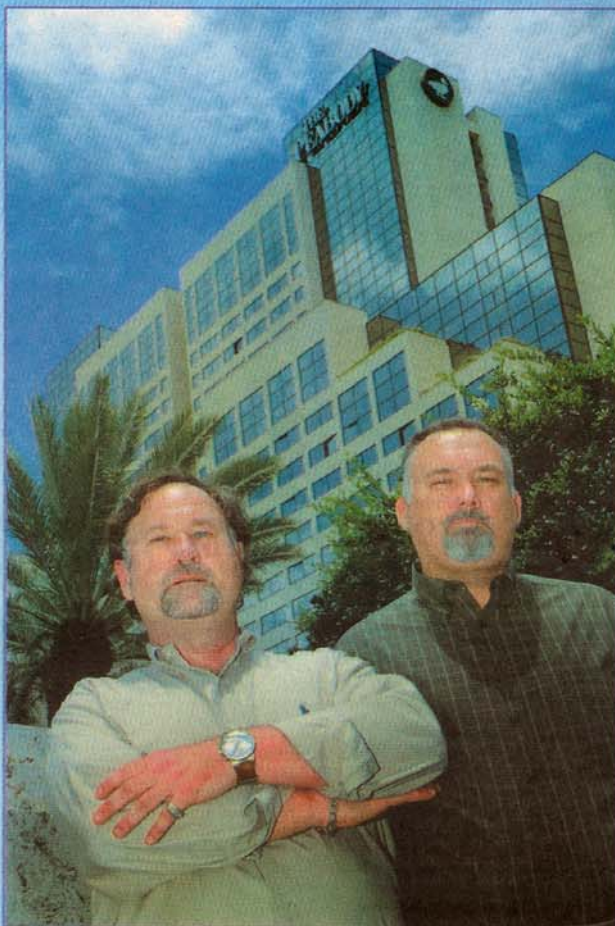
For more than 25 years, he has been involved in the design, coordination and construction of complex and highly specialized technical projects for clients around the globe.

These projects have ranged from customized state-of-the-art research facilities at NASA and Central Florida Research Park to his latest work, the \$250 million expansion to The Peabody Orlando, located near the main entrance of the Orange County Convention Center.

## Peabody Orlando expansion

The hotel development will include: a 32-story guest tower (adding 750 guest rooms to the current 891 units), additional meeting spaces (140,000

## Small architectural firm has designs on big projects like the \$250M expansion of The Peabody Orlando



Above: Stephen Abrams (left), president of SCA Design Group, Inc. and Lynn Hill, vice president, head up this boutique architectural firm.



Left: An artist's rendering of the expansion of The Peabody Orlando hotel and convention center.

useable square feet), rock and water-scape lagoon-style pool and grotto, an eight-story parking garage (2,200 parking spaces) and remedial work needed to connect with the existing facilities.

In fact, the expansion will more than double the size of the Peabody hotel and convention center, bringing the total to 2.3 million square feet.

The Winter Park-based SCA Design Group also shares some history with The Peabody Orlando, which was the tallest structure in Orlando when completed in 1986. Stephen Abrams, presi-

dent, was the design architect and principal-in-charge for the landmark convention hotel.

"Orlando has changed dramatically since then," Abrams said. "To have this opportunity 24 years later is just one of those kinds of things architects live for."

Back in 1983, when The Peabody Orlando first took shape in his mind, Abrams was a managing partner of a major architecture and planning firm in South Florida that specialized in hotel, high-rise office and mixed-use

architecture.

After moving to Orlando in 1986 to open a new office for the company, Abrams took on more and more duties. By 1990, however, he was looking for new challenges and a break from the corporate structure, striking out on his own to start SCA Design Group.

At the time, Hill was also looking for a lifestyle change.

As a consultant for most of his career, he always went where the work took him. While enjoying the freedom that came with being a contract worker — both in travel and in implementing his own ideas — Hill was finally ready to settle down. After all, he was used to calling his own shots, doing things his own way.

While attending California Polytechnic State University, he put himself through school as a professional boxer. As it turned out, he received pretty good training in both arenas.

With a 24-14-2 fight record, Hill can lay claim to an impressive career in the ring, as well as having survived a bout with Michael Spinks, the Olympic gold medalist who went on to become champion in both the light heavyweight and heavyweight divisions. And he was smart enough to retire from boxing after graduating.

Upon entering the less violent but still competitive world of architecture, Hill also flourished. In short order he found himself consulting for Fortune 50 companies across the country — and around the world.

In 1982, he would design one of his more interesting projects, a 19-story, \$25 million (in 1982 dollars) condominium complex in Bangkok, Thailand. As with most blueprints, this one required a certain uniqueness reflective of its environment.

For example, included in the structure is a 14-story waterfall that is actually part of the air-conditioning system. Also, due to material shortages, the glass for the building had to be ordered a year in advance, with all pieces coming in the same exact size.

Hill was consulting with defense industry contractor General Dynamics when his boyhood dream of working for NASA would be realized. At the time, Cape Canaveral was just starting up its commercial space program and needed more highly specialized facilities that could handle the rigors of research and development.

His work at the Space Center included refurbishing the VAB (vertical assembly building), which must support and withstand the rocket's red glare at takeoff.

"It was fun making buildings for purposes just invented," he said. "It was fascinating work and I loved every bit of it."

Though truly enjoying his four years with NASA, Hill was ready to plant his feet firmly on the ground, at home and work. When Abrams, SCA's founder, tendered him an offer to be part of his fledgling company, Hill made the move to Orlando.

In joining SCA Design Group, Hill would become, for the first time, a full-fledged member of a business enterprise in which he had a major stake.

## Drawing up SCA Design Group

SCA Design Group provides full-service architectural, interior design

# Architecture

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and developmental management services to national and international clients, specializing in hospitality, high-rise office, mixed-use design with renovation and re-use design, space planning, retail and restaurant design.

Simply put, Abrams designs the buildings and Hill makes sure they are put together right. But because the firm is small — today operating with a core of just a half dozen employees — the firm is able to provide principal-level attention in all facets of a project.

And this is critical to the success of SCA Design Group.

"Having that principal-level involvement is very important to us," Abrams said. "We've always had the philosophy that everybody draws. If you lose touch with the product, you lose touch with the clients. Everyone here is able to bring it all together."

In this high-quality boutique firm, clients have direct contact with a principal, ensuring that their input and concerns are addressed and carried through within schedule and budget, balancing artistic creativity with economic realities.

"As a small firm with large-scale projects, we had to reinvent ourselves," Abrams continued. "We really try to be more involved in the front end of things. The client makes the decisions, but we orchestrate all the ideas, background and cost efficiencies. We act as a filtering mechanism."

They brought this hands-on approach to the expansion of The Peabody Orlando.

While maintaining the design of the original — staggered walls and large window pieces — Abrams broke free of the beige building and bronze windows of yesterday.

"We're keeping the same elements but transitioning into a more contemporary style," he said.



The expansion of The Peabody Hotel, which will more than double its size, will include a 32-story guest tower, more meeting space, parking garage, and lagoon-style pool and grotto.

Another example of their giving special design consideration to a venerable institution can be found in Massachusetts, where the world-renowned Waltham Watch Company is renovating its headquarters. With the original building dating from 1897, the facility held historical significance — and landmark status.

Although the building has been added onto over the years, the current five-story, 400,000-square-foot structure — with 12,000 individual windows — is still just 28 feet wide throughout, with benches and watchmakers aligned down the middle.

Taking care to preserve its history, SCA Design Group adapted the building to meet more modern needs.

In general, the architectural firm seeks to create with all of its projects a unique sense of place. Some of these touches were developed locally, such as the restaurant in the Downtown Embassy Suites, formerly known as Concha Me'Krazy; the Orlando Science Center

expansion; as well as the office complex of Olympia Place Tower.

In addition, its notable contributions to the tourist corridor include the Kona Cafe in the Polynesian Hotel at Disney World and the conceptual drawings for WonderWorks.

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STEPHEN ABRAMS, SCA Design Group