



Atomic Age Architecture in Idaho Falls

August 7, 2025

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Battelle Energy Alliance manages INL for the
U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Nuclear Energy

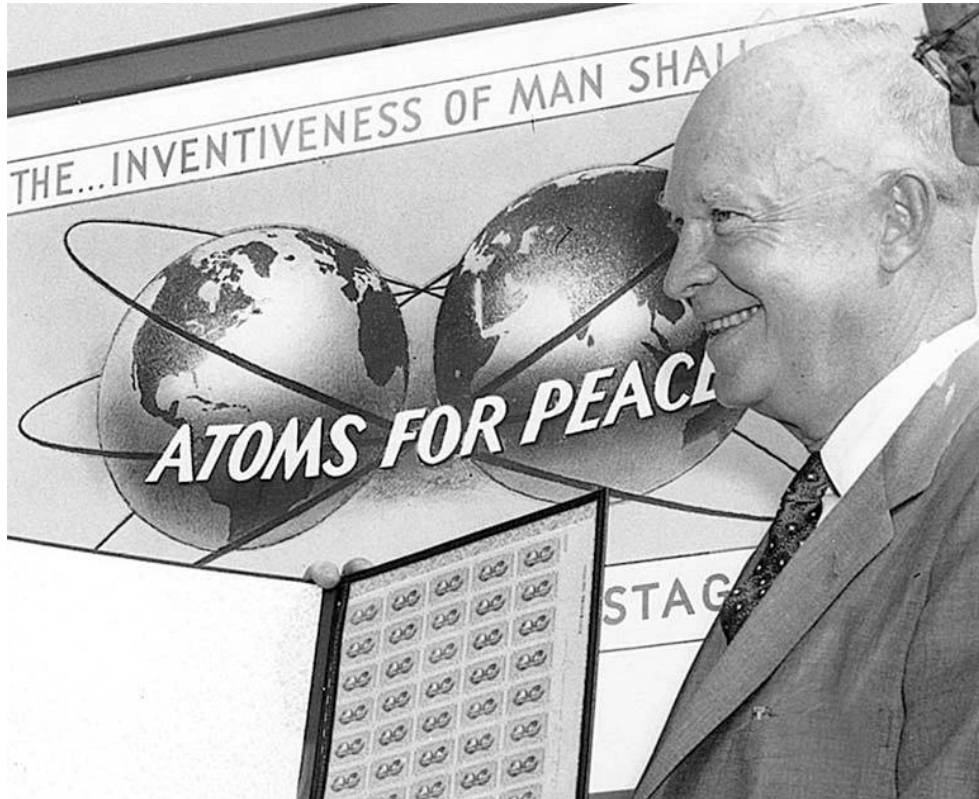


Idaho National Laboratory



**How has the Idaho National
Laboratory impacted Idaho Falls,
and how is this reflected in the
built environment?**

Atomic Age Context



- The Atomic Age emerged in the aftermath of WWII, spanning the late 1940s to the mid 1960s.
- In 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower delivered the "Atoms for Peace" speech, balancing fears of nuclear armament with the promise of peaceful uses of uranium in future reactors.
- There was a strong focus and optimism surrounding the atom and its technological promises.
- The speech spurred new research at the National Reactor Testing Station. (NRTS)

Atomic Age Architecture Characteristics

- **Responding to the Atomic Age**
 - The futuristic look of atomic age design reflected the hope that the technology would make people's lives and the world a better place.
- **Commercial Focus**
 - This style was prominent in commercial buildings like diners, motels, and gas stations.
 - It brought a sense of the “future” to everyday life.
- **Designed to stand out**
 - With the rise of car ownership, cities expanded into suburbs.
 - These eye-catching buildings attracted customers by standing out in the cityscape.
- **Googie Architecture**
 - Style associated with the Atomic Age.
 - Very playful and kitschy.
 - Not all Atomic Age style buildings are Googie.



Googie style car wash in California

Key Features of Atomic Age Architecture



Google style restaurant in California

- Exaggeration
- Asymmetry
- Contrast over harmony
- A mixture of materials including glass, steel, concrete plastic, and neon
- Bold colors
- Bold geometric shapes
- Dramatic angles
- Prominent and unique roofs
- Cantilevered rooflines
- Many of these building designs were co-dependent on their signage

Idaho Falls Context

- In 1949 the Atomic Energy Commission chose the desert area west of Idaho Falls for the NRTS.
- Immediately after it was announced that Idaho Falls would be the NRTS headquarters, Idaho Falls formed a committee to assist in fulfilling the needs of future housing, schooling and other facilities.
- Within two decades the population of Idaho Falls more than doubled and its economy boomed.
- In 1968 50% of the city's structures, homes and businesses had been built since 1950.

“Idaho Falls is on the threshold of the greatest era of growth and development in her history.”





Atomic Age Architecture Buildings in Idaho Falls

Le Baron's

- Built in 1949.
- Remodeled in 1958.
- Demolished between 1997 and 2000.
- Located on Yellowstone highway, one of Idaho Fall's main roads.
- Example of Googie architecture.

Key Features

- Asymmetry
- Bold Shapes
- Cantilevered rooflines
- Integrating the logo into the design



Le Baron's before 1958 remodel



Le Baron's after 1958 remodel

Civic Auditorium

- Built in 1952.
- The Civic Auditorium was a part of Idaho Fall's effort to prepare for the growth of the city because of the NRTS.
- Built using bonds which were approved at two special bond elections in 1950.
- The campaign to urge voters to approve the auditorium bonds emphasized the incoming "Atomic Surge," and used the phrase "Up and Atom City."

Key Features

- Geometric designs
- Exaggeration

"Progress waits for no one. If we fall behind, we jeopardize our future as the first city in an area that will soon be the atomic center of the nation."



Ferrell's

- When the original Ferrell's location opened in 1950 at 295 W Broadway, they modernized the façade.
- Ferrell's moved to 417 W Broadway in 1959.
 - This building, constructed in 1909, received a similar modernization.
- After Ferrell's moved out in 2018, the slipcover façade was removed, and there are plans to restore the building.
- **Storefront modernization and the Atomic Age**
 - As commercial centers began to move out of downtown, downtown businesses modernized their storefronts to keep up with current trends and attract customers.

Key Features

- Neon sign
- Large flat vertical façade slipcover
 - Exaggerated, modern design



Original Ferrell's location.



417 W Broadway, 2025.



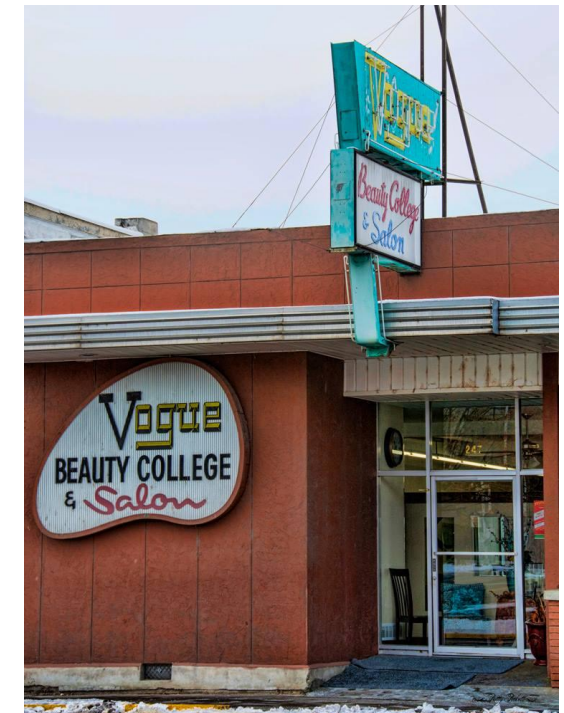
417 W Broadway, 2018.

Vogue Beauty College

- Opened in 1959 and has continuously operated.
- Original signage.
- The building has a simple design, but its standout feature is the Googie-style signage.

Key Features

- Bold shapes
- Neon sign
- Bold colors
- Cantilever awning
- Mixed use of materials



Clair E. Gale Junior High School

- Built in 1961 to address overcrowding schools due to rapid population increase.
- “Most modern and functional school building in the state.”
- The main features of this “novel” design included maximum use of space, excellent lighting, and cost-effectiveness.
- Example of 1960s and 1970s experimental school architecture.

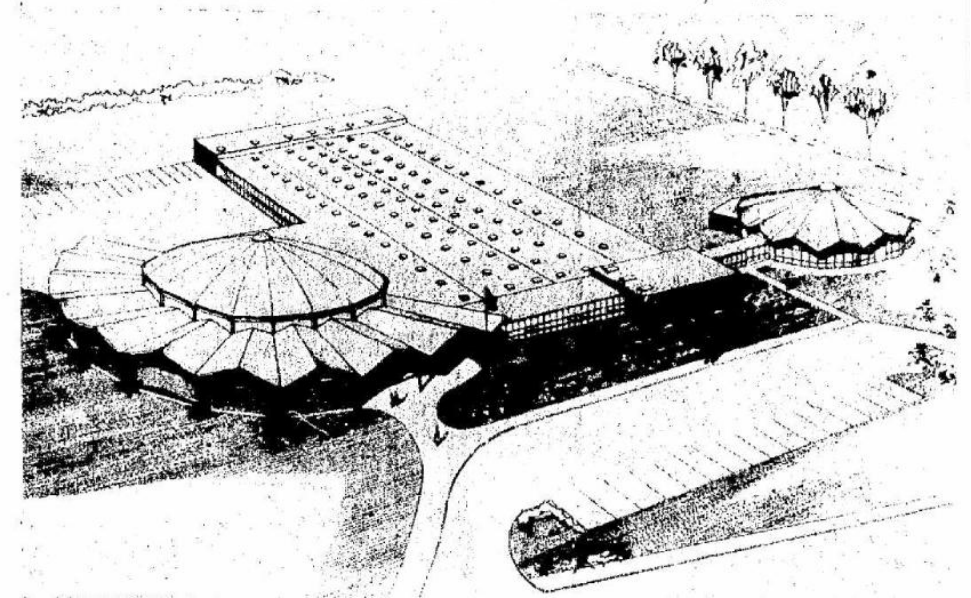
Key Features

- Dome
- Unique roofs
 - Folded plate roof
 - Butterfly roof
 - Cantilever roofs
- Geometric
- Innovative materials like plastic and aluminum

Tuesday, July 12, 1960

The Post-Register, Idaho Falls, Idaho

HOW NEW CLAIR E. GALE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL WILL LOOK

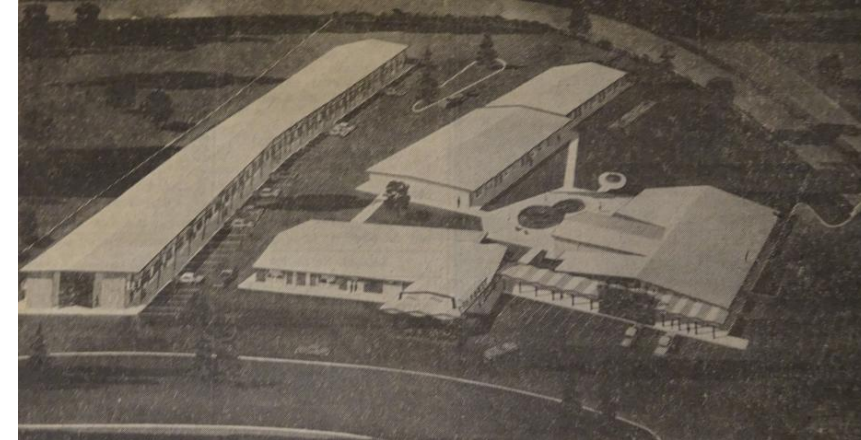


Stardust Motor Lodge

- Built in 1964.
- Largest motel in the state at time of opening.
- Demolished between 2000 and 2004.
- Great example of Googie architecture.

Key Features

- Neon signs
- Bold shapes
- Bold colors
- Unique roofs
 - Upswinging roof
 - Butterfly roof
 - Folded plate roof



Scotty's

- Built in 1964.
- Another great example of Googie Architecture.
- One of the very few surviving Googie buildings in Idaho Falls.
- Scotty's is a prime example of a key feature in this style: the illusion of defying gravity.
 - The building's upswept roof design gives it a dynamic, floating appearance.

Key Features

- Neon sign
- Cantilever roof
- Upswept roof
- Bold shapes
- Exposed purlins



Chesbro Music Co.

- Chesbro has been at 327 West Broadway since 1922 and has made numerous expansions throughout the years.
- **1958**
 - Updated the storefront with new windows, a canopy, and a green and white marble façade.
 - The Post Register described it as the “largest and most modern building in Idaho Falls.”
- **1965**
 - Modernized the building with a precast stone slipcover façade.
 - This update was the “talk of the town.”
- **1972**
 - Demolished the adjacent building and constructed a new one, expanding to occupy the entire corner of the block.
 - Updated the entire façade.

Key Features

- Neon sign
- Geometric shapes
- Exaggerated modern design



Chesbros in 1960



1965 renovation



Chesbros after 1972 renovation

Westbank Tower

- Built in 1974.
- Constructed by Ferris Clark, who had owned hotels at this location since 1928.
- **End of the Atomic Age**
 - By the 1970s, enthusiasm for nuclear power began to fade.
 - As a result, Atomic Age architecture also declined.
- The West Bank building, unique in shape, has subtle residual Atomic Age features.
- Built after the end of the Atomic Age, the design carries forward some architectural elements that influenced later design trends.

Key Features

- Folded plate roof
- Geometric
- Exaggerated



Conclusions

- While no direct cause-and-effect relationship can be established, a correlation between the presence of INL and the architectural developments in Idaho Falls can be observed.
- The establishment of the NRTS in 1949 played a significant role in the city's rapid growth. This influx of innovation and optimism is reflected in the unique architectural landscape of Idaho Falls.
- INL's ongoing presence in Idaho Falls continues to have a significant impact on the city.
- The influence of technological advancements and the spirit of the Atomic Age are evident in the city's buildings, contributing to the unique built environment of Idaho Falls.

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Idaho National Laboratory

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