

HOMES



Apple bright

Fall brings the crisp, red McIntosh and furniture to match, **PAGE 11**

Men in Uniform

After 55 years, Walter Stenger and his home-building team soldier on, **PAGE 8**



Editor: Sheila Brady
613-596-3664
homes@thecitizen.canwest.com

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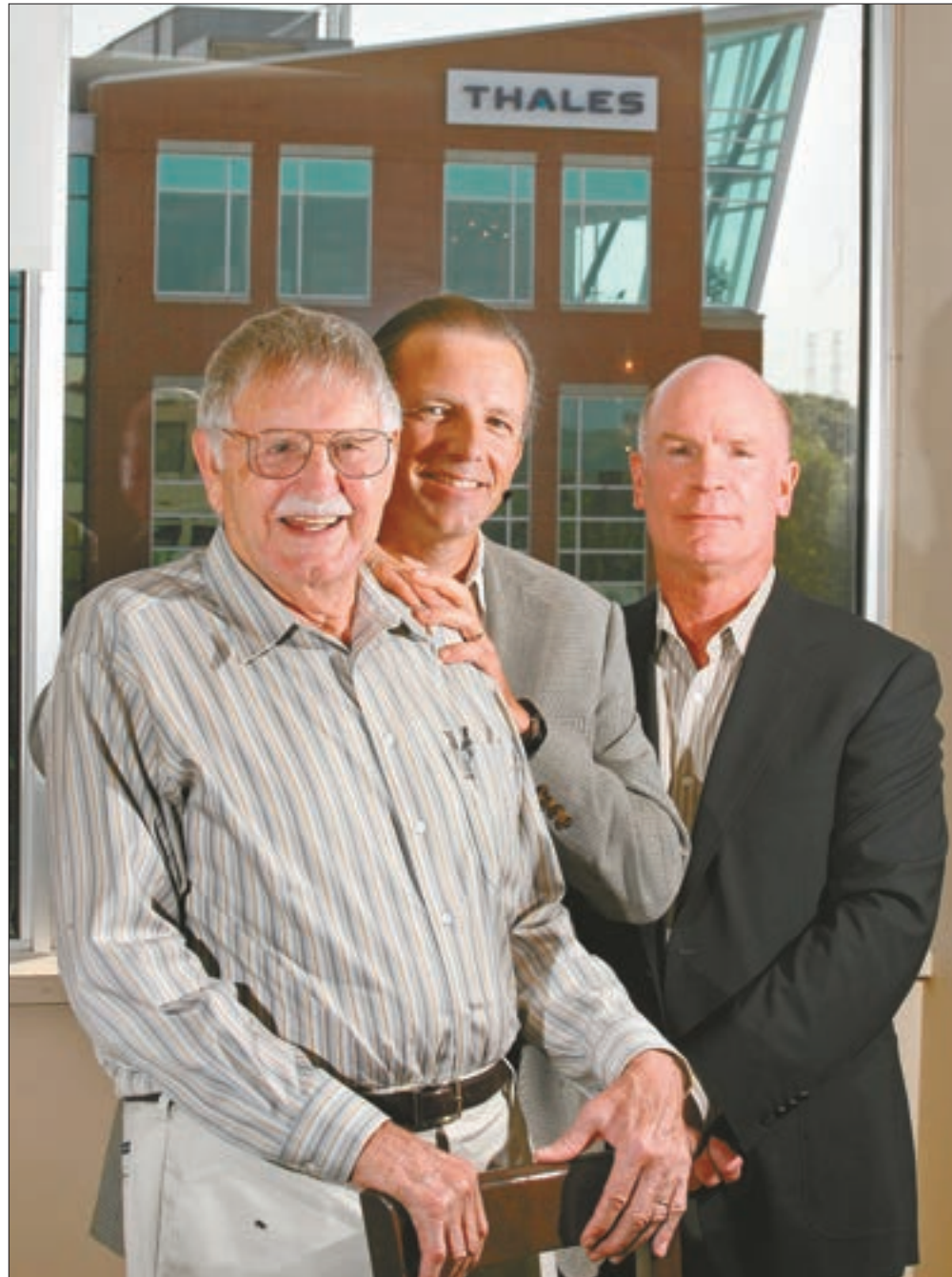
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THE OTTAWA CITIZEN, SECTION I



PHOTOS BY PAT MCGRATH, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

This recently built home in Rockcliffe Park is one of several creative Uniform Urban Developments projects undertaken in that neighbourhood over the years.



From left, Walter Stenger, Peter Stenger and John MacDougall celebrated 50 years of highly regarded design and building this week with a party for colleagues and friends.

Mandate for perfection

Uniform celebrates five decades of building churches, schools, office buildings and customized homes across the city, and it all started with an ambitious immigrant.



SHEILA BRADY
HOMEFRONT

Despite his age, 82 and counting, Walter Stenger is amazing with numbers and dates, remembering the exact day he landed in Toronto 55 years ago with \$13 in his pocket and an unbridled ambition to succeed in the world of cement and construction dust.

It's his precise Germanic nature.

Stenger had to leave his wife Friedl and young daughter Christl in Germany because he had more dreams and ambition than money.

His bank account is now considerably richer and the owner of Uniform Urban Developments has a long portfolio of commercial and institutional buildings across Ottawa.

His son and partner, Peter Stenger, and John MacDougall, another partner, head up the home-building

division, which has designed and sold a series of successful infill projects of well-heeled homes in the golf-course community of Stonebridge, single homes and condos in Rockcliffe Park and customized single and townhomes in Westboro. There are also plans for an enclave of estate homes in Manotick and a larger community of single homes on the Richardson escarpment in Kanata.

Along the way, there have been a long string of design laurels from the Greater Ottawa Home Builders' Association and an enduring relationship with Ottawa architect Barry Hobin.

The senior Stenger and the Uniform team celebrated 50 years of design, building and concrete this week with a party for colleagues and friends. There was much laughter and many memories over cocktails.

"It was July 13, 1954, when I arrived in Commerce City," says Stenger. The plan was to work in Toronto and then head to Vancouver, but there were professional hiccups.

He landed a job with Principal Investments as a "Boy Friday" and novice estimator, mostly because the grad-

uate from a Bavarian college was impeccably trained as a master builder, including specialties in architecture and administration. But this ambitious, self-described perfectionist struggled with numbers and estimating because he trained in the metric system and Canada was a nation of imperial measures and complicated fractions.

"I had to practise and learn again. It took four months," says Stenger, while sitting at the boardroom table in the offices of Uniform Developments. Learn he did, moving to Ottawa four months later to work with a company that launched a new subdivision for the Toronto firm.

He finished the assignment and decided to stay in the capital because he had made friends.

The first winter was tough with heavy snow shutting down building sites, sending many workers packing. Yet the resourceful and frugal Stenger made ends meet by drafting house plans for builders and then landing a job with Kroeger Construction as a junior superintendent. He continued to do house drawings for \$50 a set, often earning an extra \$150 a week.

It was a year later in December 1955 that he returned to Germany to ask his young wife to move to Canada. "She had to decide because I had a return ticket on the ship," says Stenger, with his droll sense of humour.

From then on it was a blend of talents. He took on a job with an engineering firm and his own renovation jobs on the side, while she was the strict bookkeeper, balancing their precarious books.

In March 1959, Stenger launched a construction company with investments from his previous employers and a line of credit from the bank. These were the years he built custom homes, including Hart Massey's iconic modern home in Rockcliffe Park.

"So far, so good. We were busy, although with houses and renovations I did not like much," Stenger said in a speech a few years back. He was often frustrated by long, intense meetings with owners and changing demands. "Our overhead was small and we made a modest profit. We would have liked to work with steel and concrete like they did in commercial or institutional work — but we

did not have enough assets for bonding."

In 1962 came a break, when an architect friend asked him to bid on a \$500,000 building. The Stengers did the estimating after their renovation jobs and came in as the second lowest bid. The owner called when the lowest bidders, two brothers in a prominent Ottawa company, weren't available to sign the contract because it was a Friday and they were off to the cottage and the race track.

"His reasoning was that if they had no time to sign a contract, how much time would they have to look after construction," recalls Stenger. "Needless to say, I jumped at the opportunity, especially since we signed the contract at our tendered price," says the man, who readily admits he loves the right numbers.

The first contract led to many schools and churches, then warehouses and a leasing portfolio of commercial and industrial buildings in business parks.

Deals were done on a handshake and honour, a philosophy the company still follows.

Stenger had largely given up on residential construc-

tion to focus on commercial and institutional projects, but that changed when his son Peter returned to Ottawa in the '80s and promptly recruited his university chum, John MacDougall, to head up Uniform Urban Developments. The two met in engineering classes at Carleton University.

The younger Stenger and MacDougall shared a passion for residential construction and immediately started "bird-dogging" potential sites for small projects.

"We are all part of the team," the younger Stenger says only half in jest, immediately adding the housing division follows the same mandate for perfection. "If you are going to do a job, you have to do it well. Otherwise, don't do it," he says. Walter Stenger smiles and nods, an emphatic yes.

On the other side of the table, MacDougall adds: "Construction is in your blood."

Sheila Brady is the Citizen's Homes editor. You can reach her at sbrady@thecitizen.canwest.com.