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Alumni Profile...Designing The Nation's Newest Lighthouse

"If you build it, he will come."

That line, from the movie "Field of Dreams," refers to building a baseball field in an Iowa cornfield. It also could apply to a recent project for Spokane, Wash., architect Eric Armstrong '93. While Armstrong's story line may not be as dramatic as the film's, his project features building an unusual landmark in an equally unlikely location. Armstrong's firm was the project architect for a fully functioning lighthouse erected in Kennewick, Wash.



The lighthouse is on Clover Island, a man-made island in the Columbia River, and only a few blocks from downtown Kennewick. It's part of shoreline restoration and economic development projects funded by the city and the Port of Kennewick. Other new features include a gateway feature to welcome visitors to the island and historic downtown Kennewick, a plaza at the base of the lighthouse and a paved path along the river shoreline.

For Armstrong and co-designer, Chris Herath, the project was one-of-a-kind. Not only would it be the only lighthouse on the Columbia River, it is the first lighthouse to be constructed in the United States since 1962.

"We met with the clients and they had done a lot of homework," said Armstrong. "They had searched the planet for lighthouses they liked, and actually found one down in Australia that caught their eye. We started with something similar to that one, and modified it to reflect the nature of the island and some of the newer architecture on the island so it was more consistent."

The final design called for four pre-cast concrete panel sections and a prefabricated top structure. The exterior is a dark, sandy brown, and the gallery space on top is a sage green. Accent pieces are all stainless steel. The glass tower on top houses a solar-powered beacon that blinks every four seconds. The 62-foot-tall lighthouse was completed in April.

"The biggest challenge was finding a way to build it," said Armstrong. "The structure is wider at the base and thinner at the top, and there's a curve involved, and that's a very complex shape to do out of concrete."

Armstrong admits this was the most interesting project he's ever worked on, and he hopes it passes the wedding photo test. His firm's earlier project in Kennewick - a pair of office buildings connected by a

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plaza with a waterfall - has become a popular location for couples to take their wedding photos.

"To me, that's one of the greatest compliments you can have as an architect," said Armstrong.

Since this was the first lighthouse erected in the U.S. in nearly 50 years, it could be said that Armstrong has gained notoriety as the preeminent lighthouse designer in the nation.

"I will go out on a limb and say that," claimed Armstrong, "as long as you say his tongue was in his cheek when he said it."

Not that he needs any more notoriety.

"My little sister also was going to the University of Idaho at the same time I was, and you may or may not know her. Her name is Kristin Armstrong."

That would be Olympic gold medal cyclist Kristin Armstrong, who is this year's Moscow campus commencement speaker.

And is there a little bit of sibling rivalry?

"Here's the thing you need to know, joked the big brother. "My article just needs to look better than her article."