

The
**PRAIRIE
SCHOOL**
Review

Volume VIII, Number 4

Fourth Quarter, 1971

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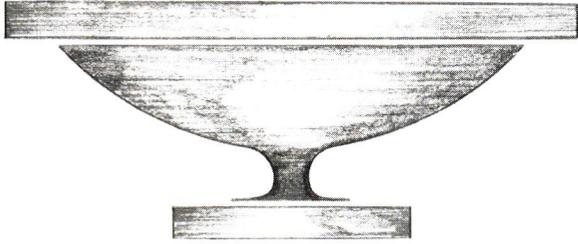
ABOVE:

Williams & Wells' Colcord Building remained the tallest structure in Oklahoma City for over twenty years. Photo by Richard W. Kenyon.

COVER:

The original main entry facing south toward Sheridan Avenue includes fragments from the Gage and Carson Pirie Scott entries, which Wells could easily have seen first-hand in Chicago. Photo by Richard W. Kenyon.

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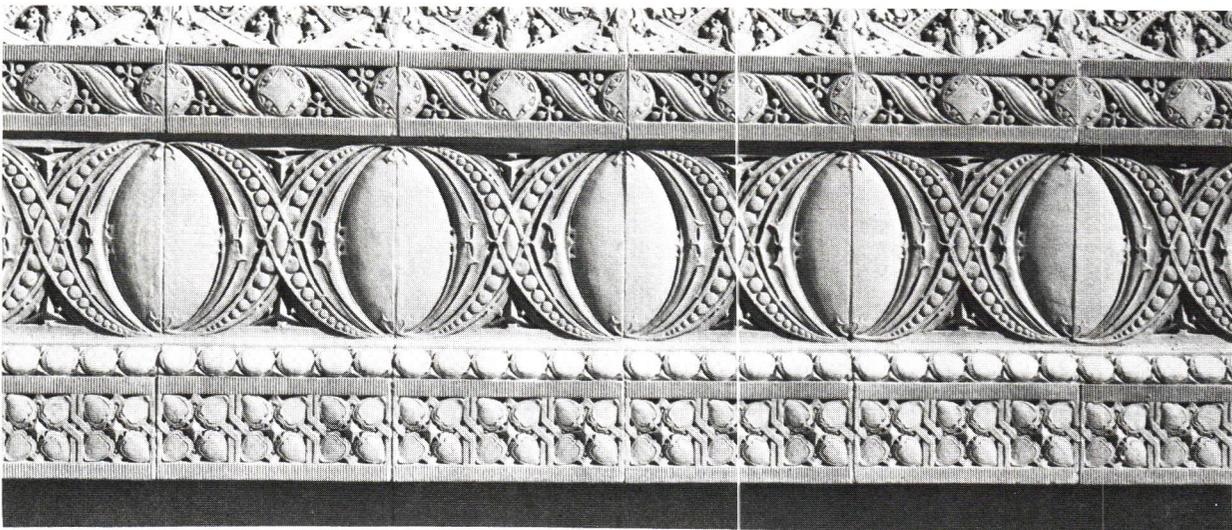
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This band of ornament surrounding the cast bronze entry is unique in Oklahoma City, and still arresting 62 years after its installation. Photo by the author.



From the EDITORS

The Chicago Stock Exchange no longer stands. As we write, it is being demolished, torn assunder by men and machines. Torn down and disposed of. At least most of it is being disposed of.

During the months, rather years, that so many fought the fruitless and useless battle to save the last of Adler and Sullivan's great office blocks still standing in Chicago's business district, we heard the attorneys and the hired lackeys of the money hungry speculators who finally won the battle tell us how the building and her parts were "really nothing but relics of a bygone era, worth nothing." Now as the wrecking ball swings, it swings carefully so as not to damage any of the delicate foliated ornament in metal and terra cotta so carefully detailed by Sullivan for this most splendid of buildings. For those magnificent decorations suddenly have acquired a great value. The wreckers have placed advertisements in the local papers to offer bits and pieces for sale to collectors, antique dealers and the ghouls who gather to pick the bones of the dead. Prices quoted are beyond belief. Those who fought so hard to save the building have no chance; it takes a day's pay to buy a set of the handles once used to raise one of the graceful double hung sash which were part of the famous "Chicago" window system brought to perfection in this and her sister structures in Chicago. The larger pieces go for prices only the rich can pay to buy a conversation piece. Where were they when money was so badly needed to fight the legal battle to save the building? Even museums hesitate when they hear the costs involved. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are discussed when thinking of the major large sections of the building.

The word is that a major eastern museum was willing to pay whatever necessary to obtain the entrance arch, and much of the surrounding terra cotta ornament, to be carried away and reassembled as a prize. The Louvre is rumored to have been in on the bidding along with others. Even some of those who joined in the fight to save the building in her dying weeks have expressed the opinion that such a disposition of the pieces would be appropriate and "good for preservation in Chicago." We disagree.

We fought on these pages and on every platform we could find for nearly three years to save the Chicago Stock Exchange Building. We now believe that since the building is being destroyed, as much of it as possible should be saved and kept here in Chicago. There are plans for a major expansion of the Art Institute of Chicago during the next several years and the Institute's architects have suggested that part of the expansion be the reconstruction, using as much of the original as possible, of the trading room of the Stock Exchange. The room would then become an exhibit in and of itself as well as a splendid space for other appropriate exhibits. At the same time, the architects are suggesting that the arched entrance of the Stock Exchange be saved and incorporated into the proposed entrance to the new subway serving the Art Institute which soon will be built in downtown Chicago. We applaud both of these suggestions.

It is our understanding that the trustees of the Art Institute are in favor of the plans outlined above. The Art Institute has only recently become interested in acquisition and preservation of our architectural heritage. They have demonstrated this in several ways, including the establishment of the Burnham Gallery of Architecture and by the installation of the Sullivan/Elmslie baluster panels from the Carson, Pirie Scott building in the grand staircase and gallery of the Institute. Several pieces of Wright furniture have also been recently acquired and exhibited. Much of this is due to a young man of imagination and creativity who has recently joined the Institute Staff.

We deplore the loss of Chicago's Stock Exchange building. The city will never be the same without her, but the saving of some portions of it and proper use of them will ease the hurt so many of us have felt. Perhaps we will be reminded that such barbarism in the name of progress must never be allowed to happen again.

William Wells:

Towers in Oklahoma

by Ronald Lanier Ramsey

Louis Sullivan produced only eighteen buildings in his last twenty-five years of life, almost one-sixth the output of his previous quarter century of practice.¹ Yet an eager group of younger architect/draughtsmen anxiously awaited this meager but magnificent outpouring of architecture and an increasing amount of prose. These they adapted in varying degrees to local conditions, producing an impressive number of both Chicago and Prairie School buildings during the years after 1900.² One such personality was William Wells, whose known work in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, during the years 1904-1914 properly belongs within this category.

William Abijah Wells was born 19 May 1878 in Seneca, Kansas, the son of Nemaha County pioneers.³ His father Abijah Wells had been admitted to the Kansas Bar in 1866, at the age of twenty-six. The elder Wells devoted his life to the practice of law and to various positions of public service, including four years as a member of the Kansas Court of Appeals.⁴ Capt. A. W. Williams, young Wells' maternal grandfather, had come to Kansas in

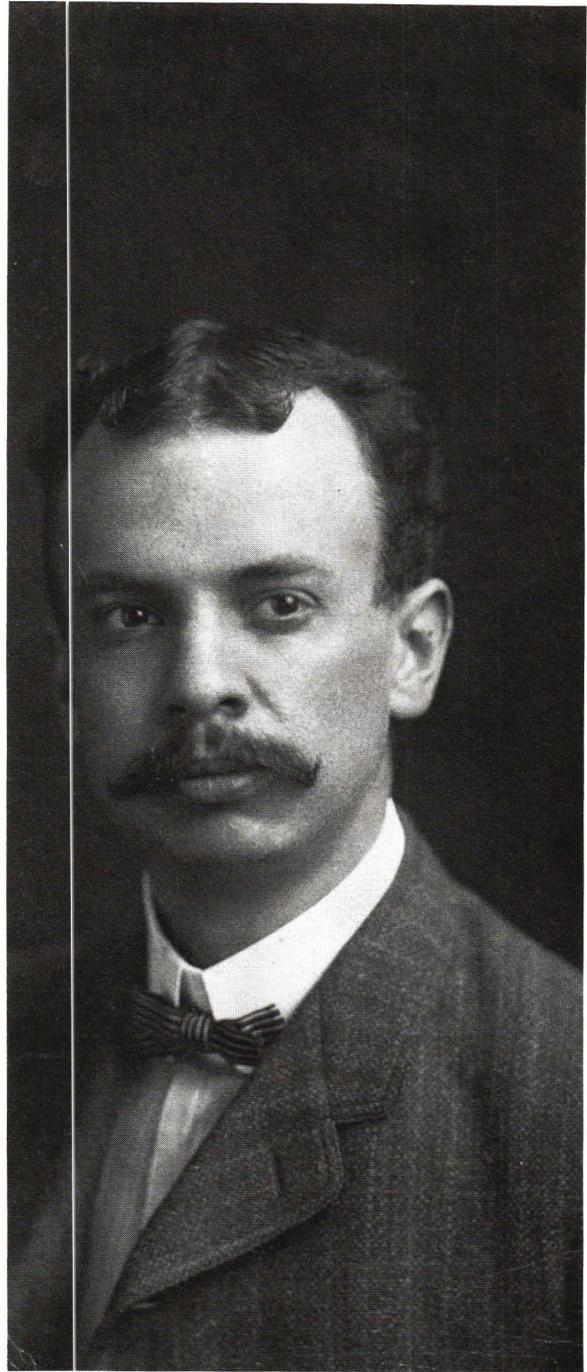
1 James Marston Fitch, *American Building: The Historical Forces That Shaped It*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1966, pp. 215.

2 These include among many others: Henry Trost (El Paso, Texas); Lang & Witchell (Dallas, Texas); Hubell & Greene (Dallas, Texas); and Henry John Klutho (Jacksonville, Florida).

3 Unidentified newspaper clipping sent to the author through the courtesy of Robert Dolling Wells, Mercer Island, Washington.

4 *Kansas*, Standard Publishing Co., 1912, III, pp. 904-907.

This paper was begun while the author was an undergraduate at the University of Oklahoma, and completed for graduate credit under the direction of Adolf Placzek at Columbia University. The author particularly wishes to thank Robert Dolling Wells for encouragement and guidance in the investigation of his father's architectural career. Mr. Ramsey is completing the graduate program in Restoration and Preservation at Columbia University and is currently an instructor in the Department of Architecture at North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota.



This photograph of William Wells, taken around 1905, was sent to the author through the courtesy of Robert Dolling Wells.

No. 1381

NAME *William Abijah Wells*

CHICAGO ADDRESS *c/o Frank Lloyd Wright, Oak Park*

HOME ADDRESS *Seneca, Kansas*

YEAR 1901-1902

DATE *OCT 21 1901*

REGISTRATION CARD ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

A registration card for the School of the Art Institute, indicates that Wells was connected for a short time at least with the Oak Park Studio of Frank Lloyd Wright.

1858 from Rochester, New York, by way of Iowa where he had been located for fifteen years "as an architect and builder in Marion, Linn County."⁵ Capt. Williams may have influenced the choice of his grandson's career.

Whatever the incentive, Wells' professional education began at Kansas University, Lawrence.⁶ He evidently did not complete any curriculum there, transferring after one year to Chicago where he attended both Armour Institute and the Chicago School of Architecture, a no longer extant division of the School of the Art Institute. Wells' registration card for the 1901-1902 academic year indicates as a local mailing address "c/o Frank Lloyd Wrights (sic), Oak Park."⁷ How long or in what capacity this association existed is not known. He had evidently been in Chicago some years before, since he joined the Architectural Club in 1898, though exhibition catalogues also locate him in Topeka, Kansas, and Moline, Illinois, during these years.⁸

William Wells' way to Oklahoma City early in 1904 had been smoothed by the earlier appearance there of an older brother.⁹ First reference to the

5 *History of the State of Kansas*, A. T. Andreas, Chicago, 1883, p. 951.

6 Unidentified newspaper clipping, *loc. cit.*; and a letter to the author from Linda Osborne, Certifications Supervisor, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, dated 2 November 1971.

7 Registration card, 21 October 1901, School of the Art Institute, Chicago. The Taliesin Associated Architects have been unable to confirm or deny this connection with the Oak Park Studio.

8 Letter to the author from George E. Pettengill, Librarian, American Institute of Architects, Washington, D. C.

9 *Oklahoma City Directory*, 1902, 1903, and 1904. Frank Wells had come to Oklahoma City as the law partner of his father and another brother Ira K. Wells. Frank then became a partner in a leading city law firm; Ira reputedly went on to hold the office of Attorney General in Puerto Rico.

then twenty-six year old architect's presence in that city is a newspaper account of the design competition for a new county courthouse:

After a three days session, in which the plans offered by sixteen different architects were considered, the county commissioners and citizens' advisory committee yesterday selected the plans of Berlinghof and Wells for the proposed \$100,000 courthouse which Oklahoma County will erect this spring.¹⁰

This is clarified by reportage of the cornerstone ceremonies:

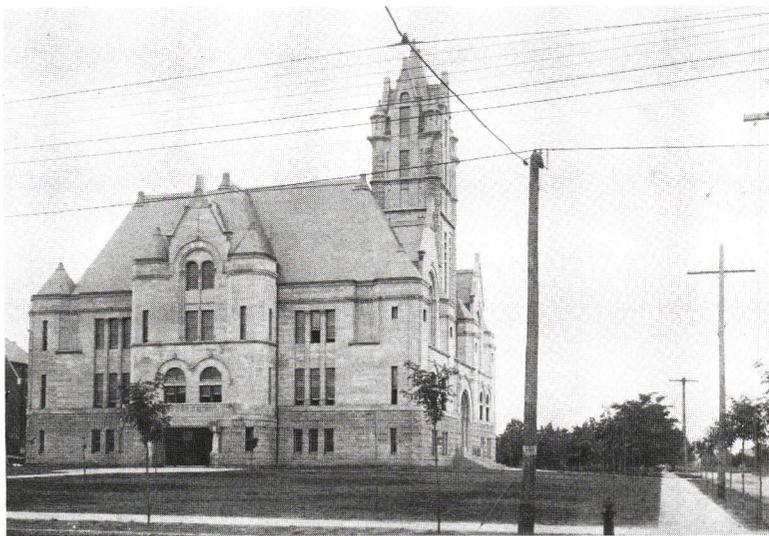
Mr. George Berlinghof (sic), whose home is at Beatrice, Neb., has formed a partnership with Mr. William A. Wells of this city, whom he trained in architectural work in St. Joseph, Mo.¹¹

The partnership must have been for this project only, since Berlinghof never established residence in Oklahoma City.

The Oklahoma County Courthouse (1904-1905, demolished ca. 1950) was designed in a chaste style transitional between the Richardsonian Romanesque and the Francis I. It had a rusticated basement, two full floors of court rooms, and an attic; a six-story tower rose above the main entrance on the West. Ornament was limited to discontinuous belt courses and diminutive engaged columns. Its regressive design characteristics can be attributed to a general cultural lag in Oklahoma Territory which was still somewhat raw, having been opened to settlement only fifteen years earlier.

10 *The Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City), 8 April 1904, p. 2.

11 *Ibid.*, 5 November 1904, n.p.



The Oklahoma County Courthouse, Wells' first known work, was constructed during 1904-1905. Photograph from the author's collection.



The Pioneer Building remains today as the earliest portion of the Bell Telephone complex in Oklahoma City.

By 1907, the year of Oklahoma's statehood, Wells had formed a partnership with Arthur J. Williams, an Englishman trained in civil engineering and architecture.¹² Williams was twelve years older and a more established figure in the community. Their first known collaboration was for the Pioneer Telephone Company.¹³

The Pioneer Building (1907-1908, extant) is steel-frame construction with golden-grey limestone sheathing. Its three-part vertical organization of base, shaft, and cap (1:4:2) was expressive of the interior arrangement when telephone equipment was housed only on the top two floors. In the middle section, paired double-hung windows are separated by a colonette which rises through four floors to burst into luxuriant stone foliage. Three such groupings separated by engaged octagonal columns are grouped within a shallow frame. This organization of alternating windows and columns grouped within a frame is the unit motif of the facade. Similarity with the Oklahoma County Courthouse reinforces the possibility of Wells as designer for both buildings. The columns are echoed in the top section where they are given plain capitals, and also in the ground floor, where they become round and the glazing pulls back to articulate them. Shallow relief decoration is reserved for the cornice and both entires, one of which is capped with explicitly Sullivanesque ornament — a fan remis-

12 Luther B. Hill, *History of the State of Oklahoma*, Lewis Publishing Co., Chicago, 1908, pp. 101-102.

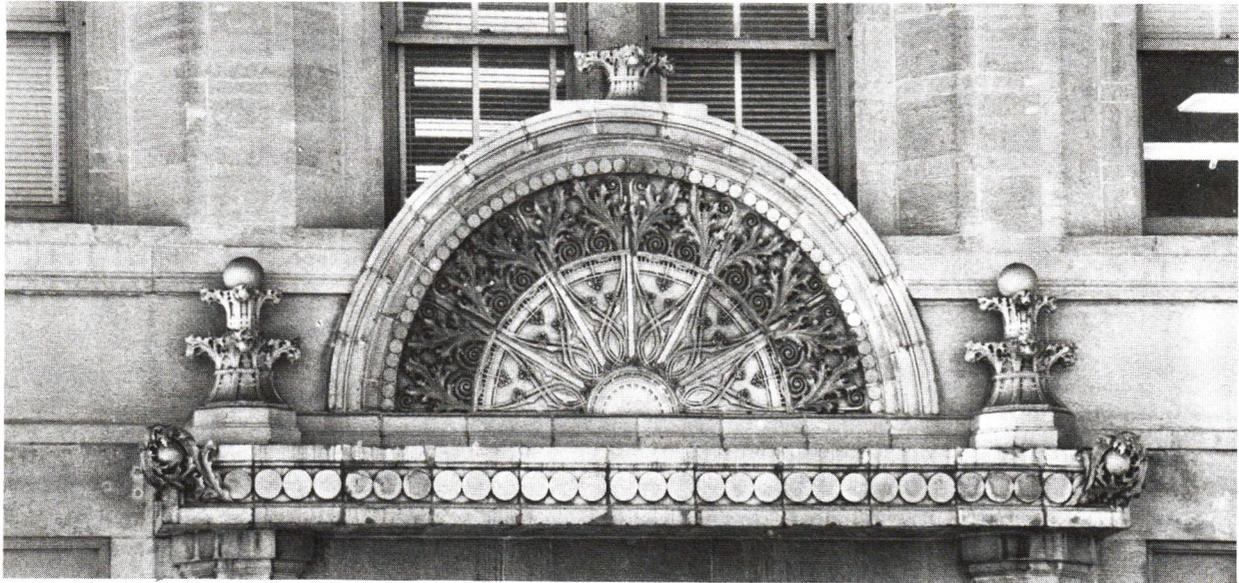
13 *The Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City), 7 June 1908, p. 3.

cent of the Bayard and Gage entries.

A second building produced by Williams & Wells is the Terminal Building, probably dating from shortly after the Pioneer. It is rather ordinary, sheathed in white glazed tile, fireproof construction being its principal claim to fame. The octagonal first floor columns and those of the Pioneer Building are similar, particularly the geometric treatment given to their tops. The whole betrays a forced economy of esthetic means more suitable to lesser commercial operations than to an office building.

The last known client of Williams & Wells was Col. Charles F. Colcord, subject of an early Oklahoma success story, whose fortune was being made in beef, oil, and real estate. When Col. Colcord and the co-owner of some property in downtown Oklahoma City disagreed on the proper way to develop it, the Colonel acquired full ownership and decided to erect an office building. Of the building's design and construction, he has written:

I then began to make plans for my new building, and took quite a good deal of time and did a great deal of investigating with my architect. We visited many cities and examined many buildings, in order to find the most modern and most effective plans, going as far west as San Francisco; to Atlanta, Georgia, Kansas City, St. Louis, Cincinnati and Chicago. This was to be the first big building in the city and I was anxious to make no mistake. When the big fire occurred in San Francisco I went out immediately afterward to see how their buildings had stood up to the fire and earthquake . . . and found that there were only eleven buildings



which had withstood the strain. These buildings, which stood out like lone trees on a prairie, were all built of reinforced concrete; the steel buildings had all gone down, melted and crumpled in the tremendous heat. I had been planning a steel building up until that time, but when I saw this I changed my mind and decided to build of concrete.¹⁴

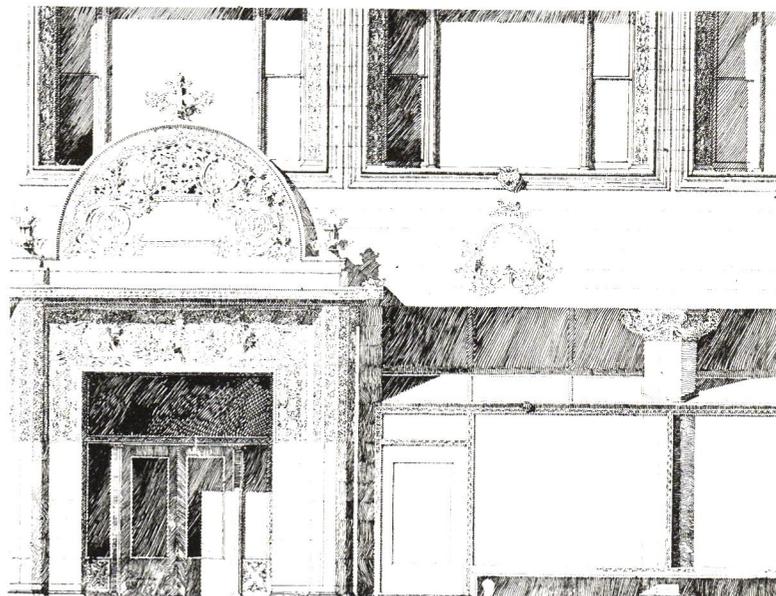
It is interesting social commentary to note that nowhere in this discussion does the Colonel mention the name of his architect.

The Colcord Building (1909-1910, extant) must be considered the finest of Wells' work in Oklahoma. Its twelve-story reinforced concrete structure is clad in limestone; and adheres very closely to Louis Sullivan's formula for skyscraper design — a subsurface level for mechanical services (and in this case an elegant cafe/restaurant which operated there for many years); a ground floor for retail activity; a floor immediately above this for related professional offices; nine typical office floors of identical, flexible plan; a top floor of executive offices and additional mechanical services. As designed, the Colcord was to have been U-shaped, with an entry court facing south, a fourteen-story tower at the head of this separating twelve-story east and west wings. Only the tower and east wing were built. The completed form would have been a composite of various Sullivan designs: the Schiller, Union Trust, and Guaranty Buildings.

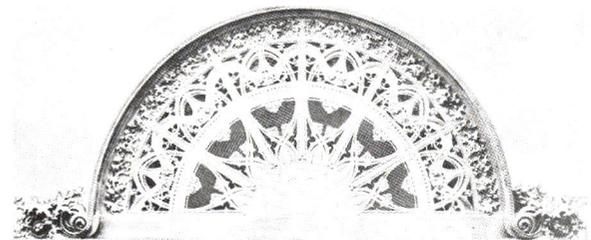
Decoration is almost entirely Sullivanesque, ranging from explicit adaptations to rather free interpretations without exact prototype in Sullivan's

14 Col. Charles F. Colcord, unpublished autobiographical manuscript, n. p., n. d. The pertinent section of this document was sent to the author through the courtesy of Mrs. Harriet Colcord White, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

The east entrance to the Pioneer Building on Broadway is derivative of Sullivan's entries for the Bayard and Gage Buildings. Photo by Richard W. Kenyon.



This detail is of ornament done by Louis Sullivan for the Bayard Building in New York City.

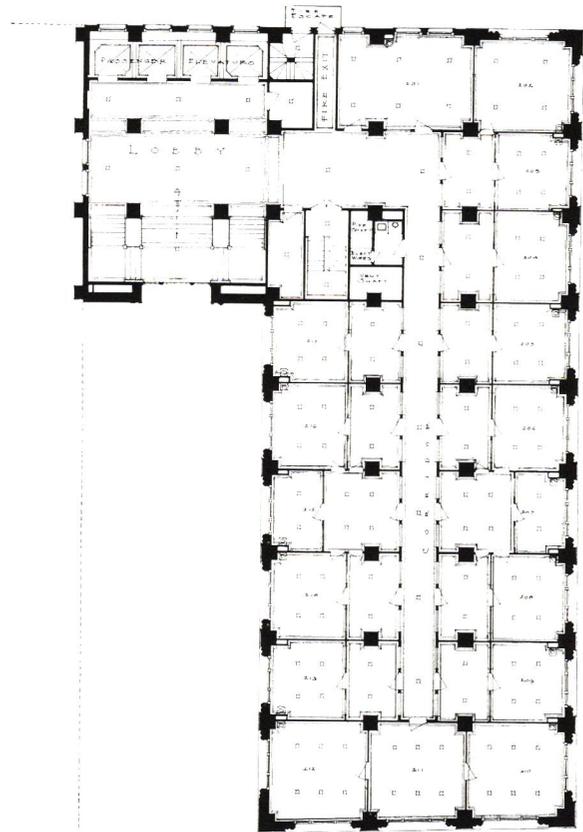
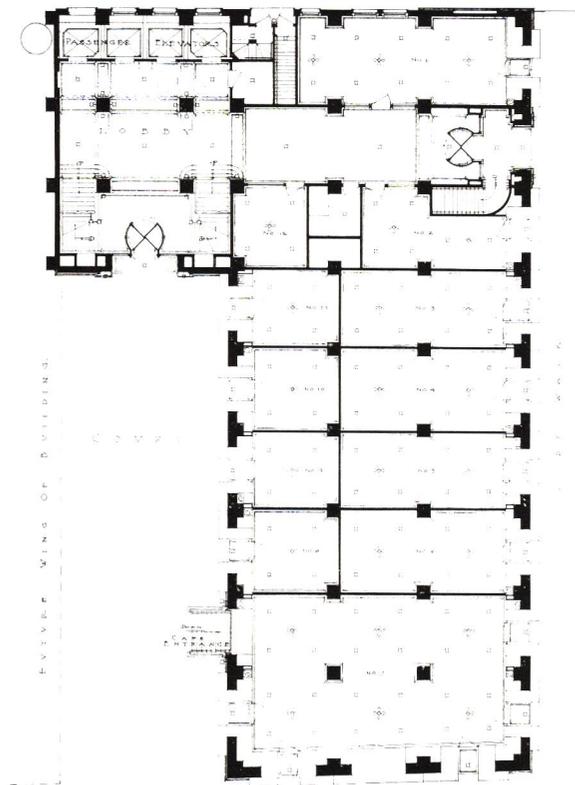


Sullivan is also credited with this ornament over the entrance to the Gage Building in Chicago. Elmslie may have detailed it.



oeuvre. Ornament at the second floor level, for example, is taken almost directly from the Guaranty Building, though Wells has made it more plump and pillow-like. The exquisite bronze entry and its stone frame, however, are more original. The bronze was probably cast by the Winslow Brothers Company, since that firm seems to have produced the elevator

Removal of the present ground floor canopy would do much toward restoring the Colcord to its original proposed appearance, as shown in this rendering from the rental brochure.



cabs and, presumably, grilles.¹⁵ These castings are so fine and without precedent in Wells' work that the models may very well have been made by Kristian Schneider, the artist-craftsman who had for more than twenty years translated Sullivan's two-dimensional drawings into three-dimensional reality.¹⁶ The nine typical office floors are completely unadorned; their white stone surface is merely punched with paired double-hung windows. At the twelfth floor similar paired windows above a continuous sill course are separated by plump colonettes with bulbous capitals. This rhythm of windows and capitals reveals a proportioning system not discernable below. Above this is a flat projecting cornice with acroteria. The south facade of the tower is decorated at the fourteenth floor similar to the Schiller Building — an arcade framed by a broad

These typical floor plans from the original rental brochure show Wells' foresight in planning a building which has rarely fallen below 95 per cent occupancy.

band of large-scale ornament, capped with another flat projecting cornice.

In the first recent published appreciation of the Colcord Building, the author has observed our difficulty in imagining its original impact:

Early photographs of Oklahoma City make the point, though: in the foreground horses, wagons and piled masonry buildings — in the background the upward thrust of the white Colcord tower that 'holds its head in the air, as a tower should,' and as Sullivan described his own Auditorium of 1889.¹⁷

The partnership with Williams was dissolved, and Wells alone occupied the thirteenth floor tower office in 1910 immediately after the building was completed. Whether he was able to look out on additional designs from his own hand is not known — this is Wells' last known work in Oklahoma City.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Oklahoma City Times*, 15 October 1964, n. p.

¹⁸ Letter to the author from Robert S. Uhls, Director of Building Inspections, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, dated 24 February 1971. Director Uhls indicates that a fire in 1915 destroyed all building permits for the period in question. It is difficult, therefore, to ascribe dates to Wells' known-buildings and to determine structures he may have done in other stylistic vocabularies.

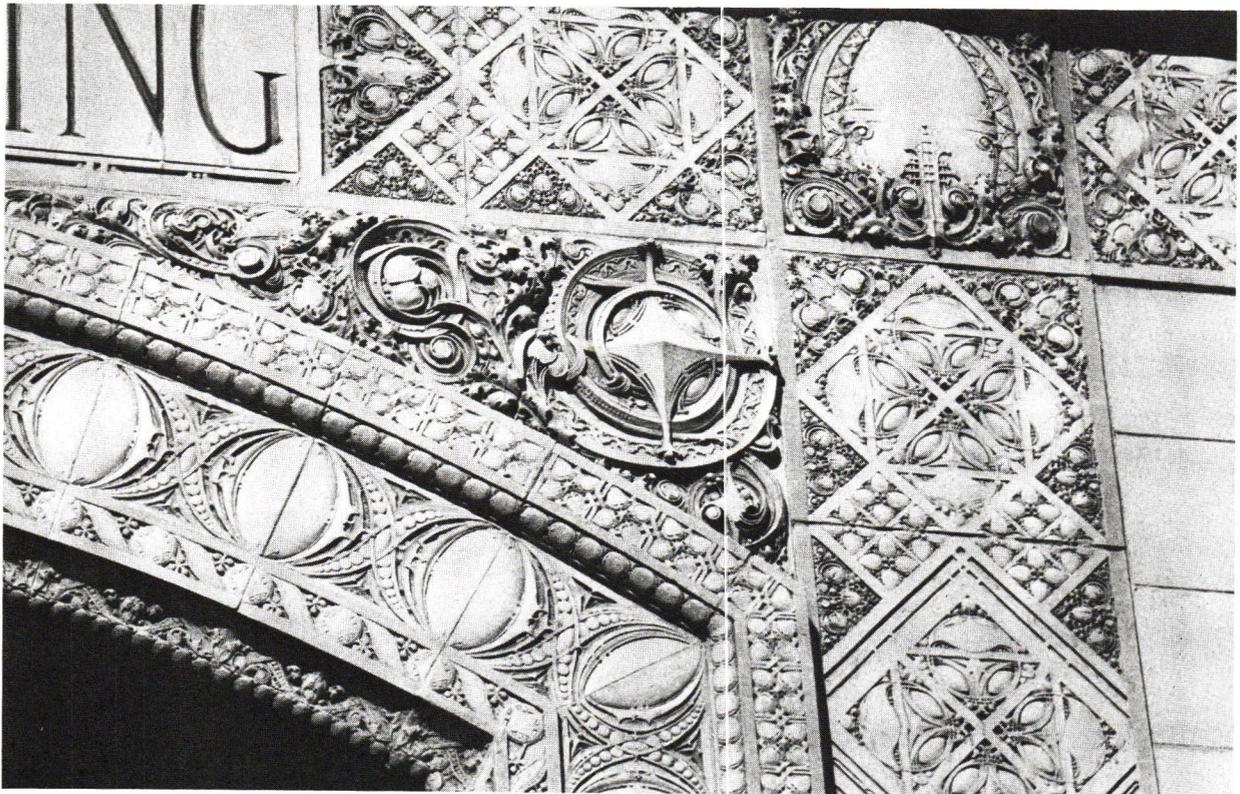
¹⁵ Letter to "Mess. Winslow Bros., W- Harrison Ave. 46 & 47 Sts. (sic), Chicago, Illinois," dated 14 June 1914, Colcord Archives (misc. "W" correspondence), University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman, Oklahoma. Leonard Eaton has indicated in a letter to the author that a connection with elevator cabs is not probable, even though cabs are the subject of the correspondence mentioned above. On the inside cover of the September 1903 *Inland Architect*, however, is an advertisement simultaneously presenting "The Winslow Bros. Co./Chicago" and "The Winslow Elevator & Machine Co./High-Grade Electric and Hydraulic Elevators."

¹⁶ Hugh Morrison, *Louis Sullivan: Prophet of Modern Architecture*, W. W. Norton Co., New York, 1935, pp. 200-201.



Wells' variation of the Guaranty Building ornament is more full and rounded. The "CFC" on the shield commemorate Charles F. Colcord, the original owner. Photo by Richard W. Kenyon.

This is very skillful ornamentation in the manner of Louis Sullivan. Photo by Richard W. Kenyon.



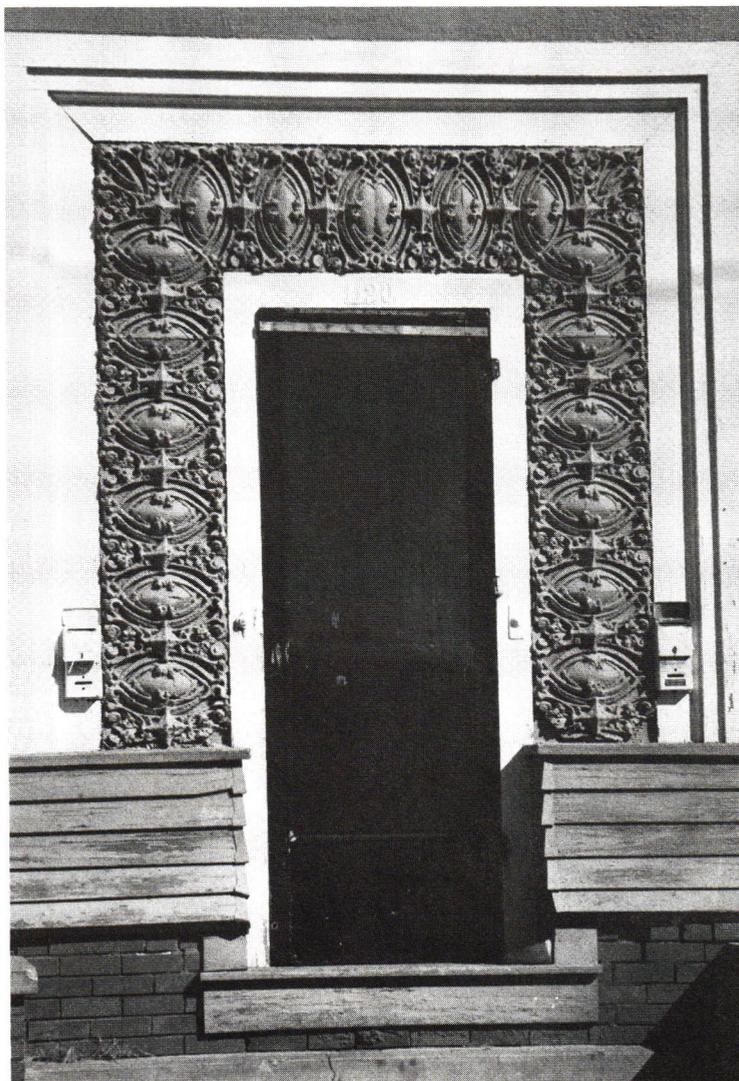
There are three residential projects with which he may be connected, however.¹⁹ The first is a group of three houses at North Central Avenue and East Park Place. The main house stands on the corner, with minor (possibly rental) houses adjacent on both streets. Edward H. Graham was located in the smaller house at 1118 North Central Avenue in

19 According to information pencilled on the reverse of an old photograph supplied by Robert Wells, a residence was designed for an unknown client and location in Dallas, Texas. Mr. Harold Box, a Dallas architect involved with the production of *The Prairie's Yield: Forces Shaping Dallas Architecture From 1840-1962*, has been unable to shed any light on this possibility.



The Graham residence is today in the center of an urban renewal district. Photo by Richard W. Kenyon.

This decoration at the side entry, though badly caked with paint, appears to be made of coarse plaster reinforced with some kind of natural, fibrous material. Photo by Richard W. Kenyon.



1908. The following year Mr. Graham moved into the main house at 300 East Park Place.²⁰

The houses are two-and-one-half story frame construction with narrow clapboard siding which flairs slightly at the brick foundations. Both street facades of the principal house are symmetrical. Its original color scheme may have emphasized the continuous head and sill strips of the second floor windows. False heads on the first floor add height to the windows, which have been placed near the floor. Heavily detailed porches and entries are outlined with crude Sullivanesque ornament, the principle connection to Wells as their author.

Another residence at 229 N. E. Eleventh Street has only one small white glazed medallion as a clue to its authorship. The general proportions, however, are similar to those of two residences: one by Henry Trost in El Paso, Texas; and the second by George Maher in Oak Park, Illinois, only two doors south of Frank Lloyd Wright's Studio.

The third residence may have been built for Frank Wells at 1329 North Central Avenue in 1910 or 1911. It would have been logical for this successful lawyer to select his younger architect-brother; the house has recently been destroyed, however, with no visual evidence yet located.

William Wells remained in Oklahoma City until 1914, at which time he and his family moved first to Hollywood, California, for two years, and then to Spokane, Washington, where Wells died 1 October 1938 after many additional years of architectural practice.²¹ The one public building, three commercial structures, and five residences which have thus far been attributed to his ten years in Oklahoma City are remarkable works in the history of Oklahoma architecture. But, moreover, they are the visual evidence of a mysterious man whose part in the phenomenon of the Chicago School needs to be better understood.

Due to a lack of documentary evidence, this understanding will be difficult to establish, leaving unanswered a number of questions: How many other young men and women were drawn to Wright's Oak Park Studio or perhaps even to Sullivan's draughting room? And how did each of them rationalize continuing his practice in historically derivative styles after having worked with the ideas of Sullivan and Wright?

It would be a mistake to cast any or all of them as zealots burning with the message. Wells undoubtedly produced more traditional designs other than the nine which have been discussed above. His later

20 *Oklahoma City Directory*, 1906, 1907, and 1908.

21 Unidentified newspaper clipping. *loc cit.*



This residence now serves as the Walnut Street Cultural Center. Photo by Richard W. Kenyon.

work in California and Washington, though now unknown, will probably conform to James Marston Fitch's analysis of the abrupt change in esthetic standards then taking place.

(It) was not to be explained in terms of esthetics, but of basic changes in American society. The end of the century saw the substantial completion of the modern structure of monopoly and its absorption of the Chicago capitalists. When they exchanged local partnerships for national trusts, they did more than acquire Wall Street's stocks and bonds; they also exchanged the last remnants of their provincial democracy for Wall Street's ideology.²²

This process inevitably spread throughout the Midwest, then West and South, making that much more remarkable the careers of men who had come under Sullivan's influence. William Wells was certainly not the least of these.

22 Fitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-210.

This small bit of terra cotta seems out of place on an otherwise plain facade. Photo by Richard W. Kenyon.



Book Review



Francis C. Sullivan, Architect.

THE PRAIRIE SCHOOL, *Frank Lloyd Wright and His Midwest Contemporaries*, by H. Allen Brooks. University of Toronto, 1972, 374 pp., 247 photos and drawings, cloth, \$25.00.

This splendidly produced and well-written book is accurate and comprehensive far beyond anything yet published about the contemporaries and students of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright. The design of this elegant volume is almost beyond criticism. Its size, nine inches square, makes it very convenient to handle and its arrangement, with notes alongside the text and illustrations inserted as they are mentioned, renders one's journey through its lucid and almost novel-like text as easy as it is informative. Whether the chapter title pages with their handsome but somewhat Art Nouveau designs are appropriate introductions to the work of this American movement is a question not so easily answered in the affirmative. Considering its nearly three-hundred and fifty pages of text, the book is remarkably free from mechanical defects: there are a few self-evident typos not worth even calling to the reader's attention, several misplaced notes (pp. 291, 294, 295), and a couple of plans not taken directly from the *Western Architect*, as the captions state, but indirectly from plans specially redrawn for and published in the *Prairie School Review* (pp. 289, 293).

If there is a fault with the writing it may be that because of Brooks' flowing style, his important points seem sometimes to lack sufficient emphasis and the reader may find himself having to read each chapter several times before he entirely grasps the points being made. A short summary of the contents may therefore be useful. In the introduction

Brooks describes the style and discusses the evolution of the term, "Prairie School." Chapter one is devoted to a study of sources, namely the Arts and Crafts Movement, the vogue for bungalows, and the homemakers' magazines, and to the effects of these on the school's development. Chapter two focuses on the group of young architects having offices at Steinway Hall in Chicago whose loose association was the beginning of the school, and on the activities of several organizations, the Chicago Architectural Club and the Architectural League of America, which around 1900 served the group as organs for proselytizing their ideas both verbally and visually. In chapter three Brooks introduces the older members of the cast and reviews their work up to the 1902 Chicago Architectural Club exhibition. A look at Wright's Oak Park studio, with further introductions, and a study of the renderings made there comprises chapter four. The rest of the book, except chapter nine, is devoted to a study of the work of Prairie School architects through four chronological periods: 1903-1909, 1909-1912, 1912-1914, and after 1914. The last chapter takes up the probable reasons for the demise of the school. Many readers will already have been introduced to various sections of the book through the author's numerous articles in various journals, all of which are now effectively incorporated into the text.

Certainly it was a most difficult task for Brooks not only to investigate the work of the fifteen or so architects associated with the school, but as well to evaluate the results and weave them together into so integrated and readable a text. Thus it is with a certain reluctance that I confess I find the treatment in chapters five through seven a bit cut-up for so

short a time period, especially as the chronological divisions don't seem to correspond with any obvious visual changes in the work of most of these architects. As a result, it is difficult to follow the development of any single architect. Furthermore, because the illustrations follow the text — which of course helps make the text so readable — it is very difficult, once the text is finished, to use the book as a quick reference. The problem is especially vexing when trying to relocate, without taking time to use the excellent index, a verbal passage or an illustration, as it must be sought in three different chapters whose total length is slightly over two-hundred pages.

Yet, despite this possible defect in organization, the book is a well-conceived and highly successful study of this extremely significant group of early modern midwestern architects. It is only in questions of interpretation and emphasis, always ripe for scholarly argument and, in this case, certainly not affecting the overall high value and usefulness of this complex study, that I would want to offer a few somewhat divergent points of view.

It seems to me that in his attempt to establish the exact meaning of the term "Prairie School," Brooks does not arrive at an entirely clear and comprehensive definition. Although he never uses the word "style," it is evident that Brooks looks upon the work of the Prairie School architects as forming a cohesive whole at least partly by virtue of common visual attributes. But in describing these attributes, he seems fairly well satisfied with conventional categories. He quotes Irving Pond approvingly: "In imitation of a certain broad and horizontal disposition of lines individually employed, a school of design has sprung up, for which its authors claim the title 'American.' The horizontal lines of the new expression appeal to the disciples of this school as echoing the spirit of the prairies of the great Middle West, which to them embodies the essence of democracy (pp. 4-5)." To this Brooks adds that "the word 'line,' however must be interpreted in its broadest possible sense since it affected virtually every aspect of residential design — the disposition of the single mass or composite massing, the shape of the low, long hipped or gable roof, the horizontal banding of windows, the emphatic belt course or shelf roof between the storeys — which often continued on one side as a lateral porch — and the broad, often forward-set foundation upon which the building was securely placed (p. 5)." Reasoning from this stylistic paradigm, much of the work of the Prairie School architects is not easily fitted to the model. Eventually one is led to such statements as the one by Brooks who, when speaking of George Maher's

Kenilworth Club, writes, "this is the closest of Maher's designs to the work of the Prairie School (p. 109)." Indeed, given the conventional stylistic criteria, some of Wright's own work may not seem very close to the work of the Prairie School.

If this group of early modern architects is indeed a school, then some more general stylistic definition is needed to give unity to their work. It cannot be one that speaks only in terms of the horizontality of the prairie nor only in terms of residential buildings. In fact, Brooks does discover just such a unifying stylistic concept in the paper entitled "Pure Design" delivered by Emil Lorch to the 1901 convention of the Architectural League of America. According to Brooks, it was the effect upon Wright at hearing this paper and the discussion following it that, "helped Wright apply his early Froebel kindergarten experiences to the practical requirements of building (p. 40)." Brooks summarizes Lorch's paper: "The fundamental idea behind pure design was that all architecture is based upon an abstract, geometric order. To design a building, therefore, the architect must first analyze the component parts — each of which could be expressed by one or more geometric shapes — and then 'compose' these parts so as to establish the basic massing of the building (p. 39)." Brooks adds that upon Wright the concept of pure design "made a deep impression and through his subsequent work the essence of pure design was transmitted to the world (p. 40)."

While it may be that Wright's work after 1901 served as the agency of transmission, it is very unlikely that he first learned of the concept either from Lorch or from his Froebel kindergarten toys. As far as the Prairie School is concerned, pure design, with either the name or the theory, was discovered by Sullivan in Richardson's Chicago work of 1885-86 — in Glessner House and the Marshall Field Wholesale Store. The full effect of Sullivan's encounter with Richardson did not reveal itself, however, until the autumn of 1887 when, in designing the Ryerson Tomb, Sullivan substituted for Richardson's heavily-textured rock-faced surfaces, his own crisply-defined, smooth-surfaced geometric masses. It was through this discovery of "pure design," as Lorch would later call it, that Sullivan was able by using elementary geometrical shapes to lay aside the strong hold of historic architecture and move forward to an original and personal style of architecture. Of course, as we are all aware, Sullivan's poetic vision would not long tolerate an architecture of such formal simplicity. After several years of experimentation (Walker Warehouse, Falkenau Flats, KAM Synagogue, Cold Storage Warehouse) Sullivan managed in the Getty

Tomb, planned in the autumn of 1890, to combine a design of great geometric purity with his new system of ornament and thereby, in his own words, to raise the work "at once from the level of triviality to the heights of dramatic expression."

For whatever his reasons, Brooks never quite takes what seems to me the next logical step which is to assert that it is pure design, and not the horizontality of the prairie, that really binds together the work of these early modern American architects. Surely it is the sharply defined geometric mass — circular, polygonal, rectangular — combined with an emphasis on surface and on the continuity of the straight line that, as woven throughout the works of these Prairie Architects, gives to their buildings a stylistic unity whether or not these are residences and whether the emphasis in them is horizontal, vertical or mixed. And, as these stylistic attributes are of a general nature, there is within them sufficient latitude to account for the various sub-styles developed by George Maher, Robert Spencer, Walter Griffin, George Elmslie, Frank Wright, Louis Sullivan and the others.

Thus I disagree with Brooks who believes that Wright learned his version of pure design from Lorch. To me it seems obvious that Wright learned it from his "leiber meister," Louis Sullivan. Already in Wright's own house of 1890, he had organized its Queen Anne forms into compact sharp-edged geometric units as seen in plan, elevation and mass. After that, in the various buildings that Wright designed before his personal style matured in 1900-1901, there is nearly always apparent the discipline of pure design. Emil Lorch, a cousin of the George Elmslie who became Sullivan's chief draftsman in 1893, also presumably learned about pure design from Sullivan, either directly from the master or indirectly through Elmslie. These lessons in pure design were surely learned visually, not verbally, as Sullivan, who ordinarily reserved his writings for more mystical appeals, never speaks of "pure design." Lorch, of a more academic mind, and for a long time the head of the architecture department at Michigan, may, however, have been the person who first thought of translating this visual concept into verbal terms.

While Brooks is no doubt correct in concluding that the term "Prairie School" will stick — and that we are therefore stuck with it — the term will only have meaning if under that appellation we include all the midwestern attempts at developing an early modern style, beginning with Sullivan's mature work and embracing the architecture of such otherwise peripheral figures as George Maher and Hugh Garden. We should also try to invent some term

other than "prairie style" — which Brooks spares us but is nonetheless much used — to denote the abstract geometric vision that binds together each of these individual efforts at creating a new style of architecture in the American Middle West during the three decades after 1886.

Brooks also seems to slight other potentially significant factors which, if properly explored, might very likely serve to explain more thoroughly the origins, meaning and significance of the Prairie School. For example, we hear very little about Joseph L. Silsbee, the first teacher of Wright, Maher and Elmslie. Brooks' only serious mention of the man and his relation to the school seems to me entirely too brief: "Wright as late as 1894 occasionally worked in Silsbee's mode, while Maher's designs . . . showed a profound indebtedness to Silsbee until the mid-nineties (p. 34)." Yet it was most likely Silsbee as much as it was Sullivan who, through Wright, Elmslie and Maher, strongly affected the work of the younger men of the school. Silsbee, as opposed to Sullivan with his Beaux-Arts background, came out of the American picturesque movement and it was therefore surely he, not Sullivan, who transmitted to the younger men their conceptions of space, mass composition and materials. Indeed, in slighting Silsbee, Brooks is led to statements like "the truly significant contribution of Wright and his contemporaries (a new concept of interior space) was ill-understood and often not accepted (p. 343)." But in fact the Prairie architects' conceptions of a flowing, highly integrated irregular interior space were not new and came to them almost certainly through Silsbee from the American picturesque movement. What was new, of course, was the remarkable manner in which Wright, Elmslie, and sometimes Maher, as well as those architects like Griffin, Drummond and Van Bergen who had been trained by Wright, evolved, perfected and integrated picturesque space into their personal architectural styles.

The irregular and/or highly complex massing of buildings by Prairie architects was also learned from Silsbee, not from Sullivan. The latter's ideas, which were formalistic as regards both massing and space, descended from one tradition while Silsbee's came from another. Neither tradition, however, despite assertions sometimes heard to the contrary, was either modern or historic, as the buildings of Mies and Le Corbusier during the 1950's — the one highly formalistic and the other manifestly picturesque — so emphatically demonstrate.

The kinds of materials and, in essence, the colors and textures employed by Wright and those Prairie architects usually considered the more typical, also

seem to derive from Silsbee. He possessed a more primitive or organic sense of materials than did Sullivan and it was this that, in the work of Silsbee's pupils, became the unplanned, dark-stained boards and shingles, rough stucco, mottled bricks and autumnal color schemes usually associated with Prairie architecture. But Sullivan's affection for more sophisticated materials was not lost on the same architects who, especially in their non-residential work, frequently turned to Sullivan's architecture for guidance.

It was Wright especially who, by blending into his uniquely masterful style the geometry of Sullivan and the picturesqueness of Silsbee, managed to pull everything together for himself, his colleagues and their students. That Elmslie should not have strayed as far as Wright from Sullivan's models is entirely reasonable given his much longer apprenticeship with the master. That Maher's vision was so different in many ways from those of both Wright and Elmslie seems also easily explained by his not having known Sullivan's work as directly as the others.

But it is obvious that the evolution of the Prairie School cannot be explained wholly in terms of Silsbee and Sullivan as the later work of Maher, Spencer and Garden, to mention only a few names, seems clearly to suggest. Certainly there was an interaction during the years after 1900 between early modern architecture in America and in Europe. To be sure, Brooks touches upon these connections, but his remarks such as "in search of forms more appropriate to his theory, Maher looked seriously at contemporary European design, particularly Germany, Austria and England (p. 105)" remain tantalizing but unresolved in their brevity. Perhaps it is too much to expect that in this pioneering work Brooks would have had the time and energy to study those relationships in careful detail. In any case, they are certainly there, and need eventually to be worked out by someone as they obviously bear upon important questions such as, for example, the degree of originality in the work of the Prairie architects.

Brooks also says little about serious desire of the Prairie School architect, most fully realized in Wright's work, to design entire aesthetic environments: the building, its furniture and its furnishings. That Sullivan had stepped out in this direction is well-known. But whether Wright, Elmslie and the others were entirely inspired by Sullivan to go beyond his example (which I think unlikely) and to design not only the fixed accouterments of the architectural environment — such as doorplates and stencils — but also such transitory elements — as

furniture and rugs — remains unanswered. Certainly in this area of design the American version of the English Arts and Crafts Movement provided considerable stimulation. But this is not necessarily the entire explanation, nor does the interest shown by Wright and others in the Arts and Crafts Movement mean, as Brooks seems to imply, that the Prairie School was a part of, or came out of, that movement.

Architects had been designing furniture and furnishing throughout the nineteenth century, especially when there was the revival of an historic style like the Greek or the Gothic, for which sympathetic furnishings were not readily available. Yet every time a nineteenth-century architect designed furniture and furnishings it is obvious that neither he nor his work can have been a part of the late nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts Movement. Furthermore, the idea of the Arts and Crafts ordinarily implied hand fabrication and self-fulfillment as intrinsic part of the movement. It is not enough, therefore, to argue as Brooks seems to, that the Americans could reject these vital aspects of the Morris program — as Wright assuredly does in his lecture of 1901 on the "Art and Craft of the Machine" — and yet somehow remain mentally and physically a part of the movement. That the catalogues of the Chicago Arts and Crafts Society were largely filled with handicraft objects designed and executed by amateurs strongly suggests that the ideas of Morris were in fact as basic to the American movement as they were to the English.

Perhaps the concern of the Prairie architects for the Arts and Crafts Movement was partly the result of self-interest. Certainly it was the Chicago Arts and Crafts Society that helped awaken potential architectural clients to the benefits of an artistic environment thus making it much easier for the Prairie architects to have their way with their clients in designing furniture and furnishings. It is also possible that the founding of the Chicago Society in 1897 provided Wright and the others with the impetus needed to begin designing furniture and furnishings in order to realize in their work integrated artistic environments. But whatever the case, I am not convinced that the relationship of the Prairie School to the Arts and Crafts Movement or to early modern architecture in Europe is quite as clear and uncomplicated as Brooks seems to imply.

There is one other area in which I think Brooks does not quite do justice to the Prairie School. This concerns the ultimate significance of this midwestern branch of early modern architecture. Although Brooks tries, perhaps somewhat half-heartedly, to associate certain late works of Purcell & Elmslie

with the International Style of the twenties (pp. 302, 306), he never really makes the connection very clear. But if Purcell & Elmslie were indeed heading that way, which I doubt, the validity of their work, most of which seems to lead in other directions, would hardly be enhanced. Brooks might also have called attention to the early expressionistic elements in the work of Griffin after 1910 and Wright after 1913. But the truth is, of course, that none of these factors, whether noticed or not, have much bearing on the lasting importance of the school. The work of these architects, Wright and possibly Griffin excepted, simply had little effect upon later developments in architectural design. Thus, instead of searching for a few tenuous links connecting the Prairie School to later architecture, I think Brooks would have done the group greater justice by emphasizing their achievements as unique aesthetic solutions to the nineteenth-century quest for a new architectural style. That their solutions did not ultimately win the day does not devalue them in the slightest as potential solutions. It is not really important that their visual ideas died without having had much effect on the evolution of those modern styles that finally triumphed over historical architecture. What is important, as I see it, is that the Prairie architects had the imagination and stamina to create all that they did in spite of increasing resistance to their work, and that the physical embodiments of their beautiful and individualistic artistic visions are still here for men to see and enjoy. We are all richer because of the Prairie School, regardless of its slight influence on later architects, and I wish Brooks would have said so more clearly and with greater verve.

Yet, despite my divergent views in matters of emphasis and interpretation, Brooks' study is, when taken as a whole, a solid and sweeping introduction to the work of America's first school of modern architecture. Its appearance should stimulate increased interest in the publication and preservation of these early works of modern architecture. Now, while there are so many of these buildings still extant and of them, many in nearly original condition, there is yet time for the preparation of thorough and meaningful monographs on each of the architects involved, of documentary catalogues of their buildings, and of studies with detailed catalogues of the furniture, furnishings and decorative details that graced so many of them. To all those whose interest would embrace the originality and beauty of buildings and furnishings by the Prairie School of Architecture, this book is emphatically recommended.

Reviewed by Paul E. Sprague
The University of Chicago

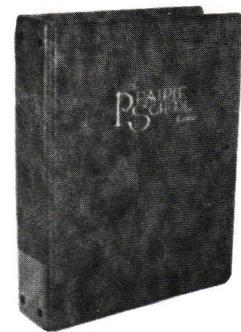
Preview

The next two issues of *The Prairie School Review* will be devoted to a symposium on the Chicago School of architecture sponsored by Northwestern University in 1969. Winston Weisman presents a statement on the term "Chicago School" in the first issue. An opposing view is presented by Carl Condit along with comments by other panelists in the second issue. The symposium was moderated by Sir John Summerson with Carson Webster as the guest editor.

There will not be space for book reviews in the forthcoming issue.

Our readers are invited to suggest or submit articles for possible publication in *The Prairie School Review*. Often the editors are able to assist in the preparation of articles or illustrations. Furthermore, we maintain files on all phases of the Prairie School and its practitioners. We appreciate receiving obscure bits of information and will return any material submitted if so desired after we make copies for future reference.

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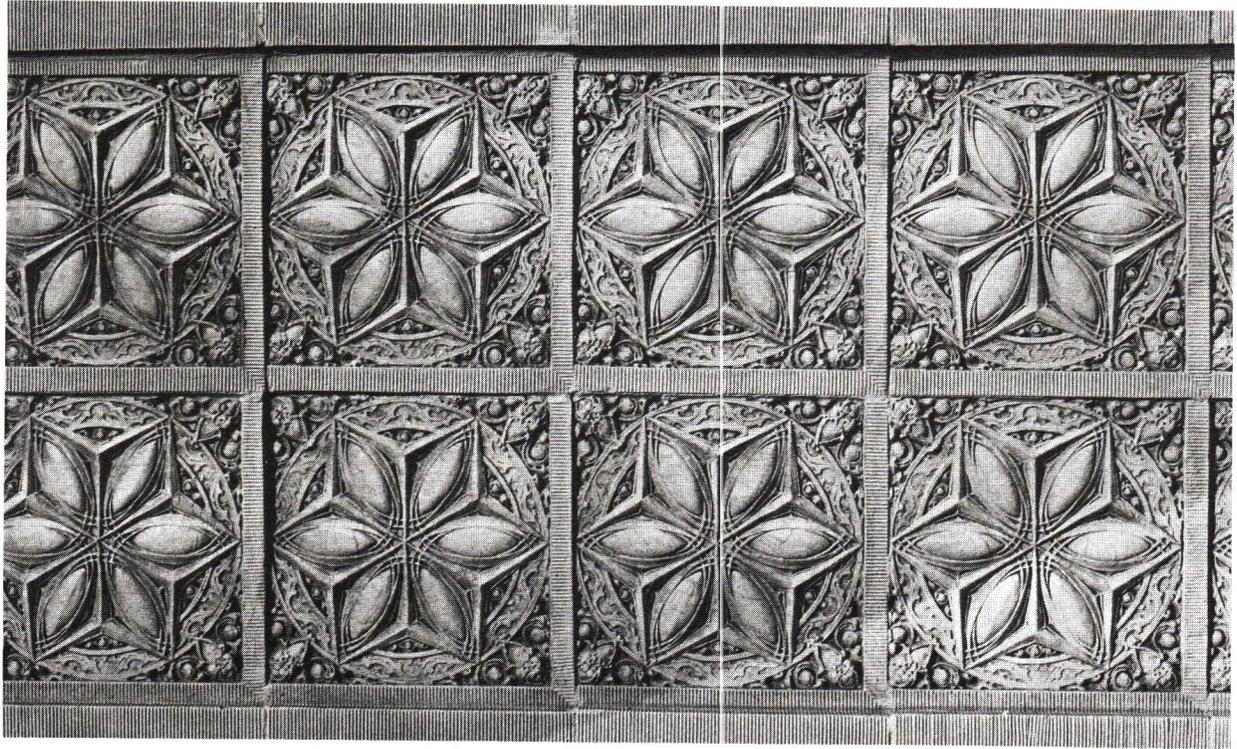
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