



The only book to contain details from the extensive office records of the firm of Purcell and Elmslie, as well as from letters, unpublished writings, notes and personal conversations with William Gray Purcell and George Grant Elmslie, this comprehensive volume encompasses the history of the firm, from their residential designs such as the Purcell-Cutts House in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to commercial buildings such as the Merchants Bank in Winona, Minnesota, to civic buildings such as the Woodbury County Courthouse in Sioux City, Iowa.

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Among his publications are *The Architectural Guidebook to Los Angeles* (Gibbs Smith, Publisher, revised edition, 2003), and *The National Trust Guide to Art Deco in America* (John Wiley, 1996).

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Purcell & Elmslie

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PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE ARCHITECTS

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Organic, honesty, and democratic were the terms most often used by Prairie School architects in reference to their architecture. The new architecture of the early 1900s was in essence the culmination of a tendency toward indigenous expression that had been inherent in America since the seventeenth century.

The initiators of this progressive philosophy were Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, whose works and writings are the most widely known. In fact, they are so well known that there has been a tendency to dismiss the others who worked and produced in the same period as copyists or minor innovators. Such is far from the truth as the firm of William Gray Purcell and George Grant Elmslie adequately indicates. They made significant contributions that were important not only in their own day but remain important in the fabric of our towns today. The most productive of the Prairie School firms of the time, Purcell and Elmslie included in all their thinking the conviction that a building does not end with its simple structure but reaches its final and logical culmination in the clothing—color, situation and natural environment together with its decoration of glass, terra-cotta and other textural materials.



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DETAILED STAINED-GLASS WINDOWS LOOKING
FROM THE LIVING ROOM INTO THE SUNROOM OF
THE POWERS HOUSE, MINNEAPOLIS, 1910.

Chapter 8

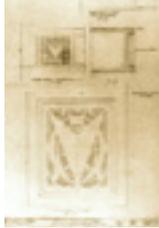
Contribution and Influence of the Firm



Before looking at the firm in a present-day context, it is of interest to consider their immediate influence on their contemporaries. The work of Purcell and Elmslie had some influence throughout the Midwest, later on the West Coast and possibly in Europe in the 1920s. An examination of dates and designs will aptly demonstrate that even Sullivan's banks from 1910 to 1920 relied heavily on similar Purcell and Elmslie designs. Other architects, particularly William Steele, who had worked under Elmslie in Louis Sullivan's office and who hired Elmslie to work with him on the Woodbury County Courthouse, were affected by the commercial work of the Purcell and Elmslie firm. Small stores, banks and libraries scattered throughout the mid-western states attest to the effect of the excellent solutions the firm had developed during the second decade of the twentieth century.



ELMSLIE ADORNED THE LIVING ROOM OF THE PURCELL-CUTTS HOUSE IN MINNEAPOLIS WITH THESE METAL PENDANT LIGHTS HE DESIGNED.



ABOVE: TABLE DESIGN DETAILS.

RIGHT: ELSLIE CUTOUT WOOD DESIGN.

FACING: THIS OAK DINING TABLE AND CHAIRS WERE DESIGNED FOR MRS. T. B. KEITH BY ELSLIE IN 1910.

To satisfy their concept of total design, the strict geometry of the interiors required an equally strict geometry in furnishings to make a unified statement. Thus, like other progressive architects, the firm was confronted with the difficulty of providing furniture that would harmonize with their buildings. They often used Craftsman furniture designed or inspired by Gustav Stickley. Neither Elmslie nor Purcell was enamored with these fumed oak designs, but they felt forced to use them for lack of anything else. Whenever they could prevail upon a client, they included furniture of their own designs. Some of these were built-in seats, tables, desks, beds and chests, but they also produced a variety of individual freestanding pieces of furniture not only for their houses, but also for their offices and commercial buildings, beginning with the Catherine Gray House, Minneapolis, 1907.

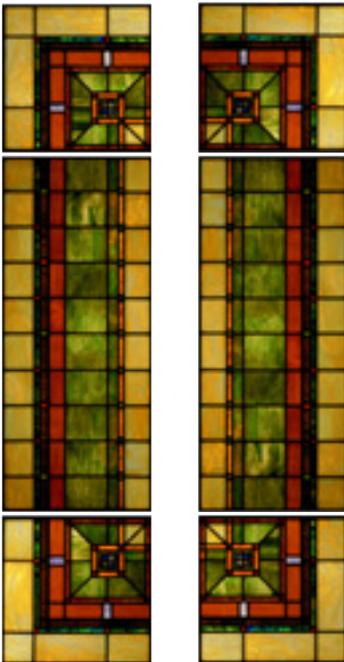
As with their buildings, they were often overly concerned with problems of form in furniture as opposed to its utilitarian needs. Yet, they were successful in satisfying the needs for both form and use. A secondary consideration was their desire for simplicity as a reaction to the clutter and disorganization of much late-nineteenth-century architecture and design. Their furniture tended to be emphatic in its rectilinear forms, but as in Elmslie's omo-



ment there was often a visual opposition between rectangular shapes and light curvilinear patterns.

Generally the final design of their furniture was by George Elmslie, although both men carried out much of the preliminary exploration in design. Before Elmslie entered the firm, Purcell designed several pieces of furniture for his father's house in River Forest, Illinois, 1909, and for the Catherine Gray House in Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1907.

Elslie's experience in furniture design was more extensive, for while working with Sullivan he had been able to plan much of the furniture for the Babson.



The plans for the most impressive of all their banks, the Merchants National Bank of Winona, were begun in 1911 with the structure being completed in 1913. This bank building was the largest completed by the firm and is comparable in all respects to Sullivan and Elmslie's bank at Owatonna. It isn't possible to improve on Brooks's description of the building:

"The result was a brilliant design, one largely determined by the space-enclosing steel frame which supported the great multicolored walls of glass. This frame, with its broad metal spandrels across the top, was sheathed in brick—the verticals and horizontals of these piers and lintels establishing an abstract interplay of forms that was in itself dramatic. The enclosure read as four superimposed planes: the most deeply recessed was the glass screen, further forward was a one-story (adjusted to human scale) with its entrance and small office windows, then the monumental corner piers and, finally, the almost free-standing paired piers which support the broad steel core lintels. The precision and clarity is striking. It is a dynamic design, springing from the earth, and thus radically different from Sullivan's bank at Owatonna with its static, cohesive shell of brick resting high upon a pedestal."⁸

The interior is a simple unified space lighted by the two magnificent stained-glass windows and skylight. The use of brick on the lower walls with the rows of horizontal teller windows keeps the human scale. The terra-cotta decoration on the walls, capitals of the brick piers and arch over the entrance is Elmslie at his best. Surprisingly, despite the publicity surrounding the completion and opening of the Winona Bank, interest in it did not attract many new clients for the firm.

During the next few years, Purcell and Elmslie were able to secure commissions to design only two small banks and to remodel an older bank structure.⁹ Although limited in size, these two small Prairie banks, Madison State Bank, Minnesota, 1913, and First State Bank of LeRoy, Minnesota, 1914, are good examples of the partners' approach. In fact, the LeRoy bank could be considered the best of all their small country banks. The design suffered a bit from too rigid an economy, for it was built for less than \$10,000. Yet, the proportions, the interior layout and, above all, the humanly oriented scale of the design made it a highly successful building.



FACING: MADE BY MOSAIC ART SHOPS AND DESIGNED BY PURCELL, THESE SKYLIGHT PANELS WERE PART OF THE PRINCIPLE SKYLIGHT INSTALLATION OVER THE TELLER CAGES IN MADISON STATE BANK.

ABOVE: MADISON STATE BANK TELLER BOOTH AND SKYLIGHT.

LEFT: MADISON STATE BANK, MINNESOTA.