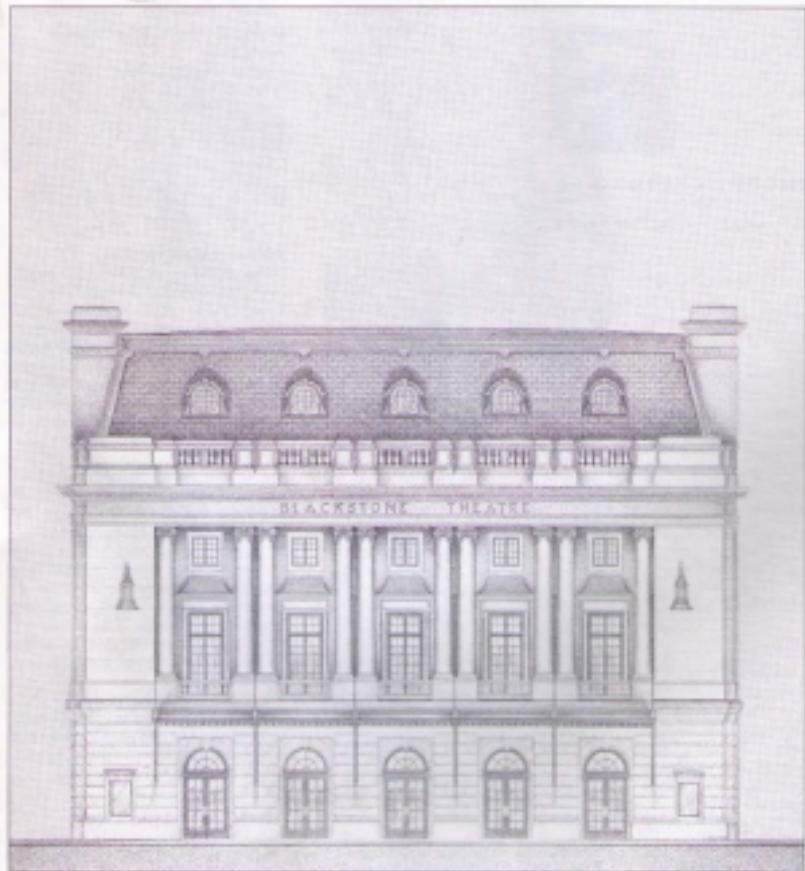


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Dwight Heald Perkins

1867-1941

By Eric Emmett Davis

An architect should constantly develop and grow during her or his career in ways that are not limited to technical knowledge or portfolio building. As a result of my continuing investigations into the history of our city's architecture, I happened upon an architect who was centrally involved in a broad range of activities allied with our profession, who had gone out of his way, repeatedly, to do the right thing for the city, who did so at a high level of quality, and who was influential to and influenced by his peers, the great architects and planners that shaped Chicago. As I began to follow him, to discover his history, I was confronted with the galling fact that, basically, nothing had ever been written about him other than contemporary accounts. What I did find suggested that it was assumed that he and his legacy would be picked up by those who would come along shortly and write history. Surely, he would not be overlooked.

By and large, he was. His good friend, Frank Lloyd Wright, saw to it that most of the histories of their time were centered upon the accomplishments of the Sage of Taliesin. Wright's work towers over the period, and rightly so, but it casts a shadow. Some scholars, most notably H. Allen Brooks, have looked into the darkness and found such luminaries as Walter Burley Griffin and Howard Van Doren Shaw, but the search for heroes continued to focus on Frank. It is my hope that those who consider Dwight Heald Perkins will use a different standard; that he will demonstrate an alternate role model for architects to emulate and a different path for historians to take.

Dwight Heald Perkins had a remarkable career: as an architect, a planner, a social visionary, and, above all, a citizen. So far, he is referred to mainly as a minor figure who did some schools (notably, Carl Schurz High School, the only school that is a city landmark). The exhibition at Gallery 400 is a step toward remedying that. It is also an attempt to present his life and his work as a model of how one architect can have a profound and lasting effect upon the quality of life in an entire city, in a way that reflects as much concern with the living of life as it does

with the creation of form.

Perkins was born in Memphis, Tennessee, was raised in Chicago, studied architecture at MIT, worked briefly for H. H. Richardson, and returned to Chicago in 1888 to work for Burnham and Root. He carried out John Wellborn Root's final projects, including the Monadnock (after Root's death in 1891), as Burnham was on the South Side overseeing the Columbian Exposition. He started his own firm in 1894 with Burnham's gift of the commission for a new building for the Steinway Piano Company.

He took an office on the eleventh floor of Steinway Hall, opened a studio in the attic, and invited his Progressive friends to share space with him. Robert Spencer, Irving and Allen Pond, Myron Hunt, and Frank Lloyd Wright took him up on the offer, and together they formed a cooperative studio that became the nucleus of the Prairie School. Projects such as the Abraham Lincoln Center (1896-1903), by Wright and Perkins, were typical of the projects produced by the group. Walter Burley Griffin joined them in 1900, coming to work for Perkins straight out of the University of Illinois. Perkins' cousin Marion Mahony, who had worked on the drawings for Steinway Hall, became another member, only to marry Griffin and follow Wright and him to Oak Park by 1902. Perkins produced a

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variety of designs during this period, including Hitchcock Hall, at the University of Chicago, two settlement buildings akin to Hull House, and the Langdon Apartments, a housing project that provided light and air within a tenement-block neighborhood.

Perkins and Jena Jensen were commissioned in 1902 to create the first plan for a unified and expanded city park system. Their Report of the Special Parks Commission, published in 1904 (Figure 1), was later folded into Burnham's better-known 1909 Plan of Chicago. Among other features, it proposed what became the Cook County Forest Preserve. Perkins campaigned lifelong for more parks and playgrounds, to relieve the plight of the urban dweller, especially the immigrant poor. It is this civic, urban aspect of his work that distinguishes him from most



"Father of the Forest Preserve," Dwight Heald Perkins. An exhibition opening April 5 at UNC's Department of Architecture Gallery 400, 400 S. Peoria St., will undoubtedly help to change the minds of those who think of Perkins as a "minor figure" in Chicago's architectural history. Eric Emmett Davis, who co-curated the exhibition "Dwight Heald Perkins: Social Consciousness and Prairie School Architecture" tells his story to Focus readers. The exhibition is on display through May 10. You may call 996-6114 for information.

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Fig. 1 - Existing and Proposed Park and Forest Preserve lands. From the Report of the Special Park Commission, 1904, by Dwight Heald Perkins.

of the rest of the Steinway Hall crowd, the group that followed the Arts and Crafts movement out of the city and produced the bulk of the world's Prairie School Architecture in the suburbs. Perkins' work took to heart the socially progressive aspect of the Arts and Crafts, best exemplified by Hull House, and used it, and later the Prairie School, to enrich life in the city with fresh air, nature, and architecture that reflected this breaking out from within the city.

Another prominent example of his civic intent was his school architecture, that for which he is best known. He became Architect for the Board of Education in 1905 (headed at the time by Jane Addams) and set out to not only reorganize a corrupt and backward department, but to reinvent educational architecture. From 1905 to 1910, he produced more than 40 schools, some of them outright revolutionary (including the Grover Cleveland, Lyman Trumbull, and Carl Schurz designs), with such radical developments as toilets for the children on every floor and natural playgrounds for every school. He also gave lectures at conferences for most of the nation's major school districts and produced numerous treatises on his design philosophy, some of which are still excellent references for school designers. All of this, of course, was too much for Chicago's political world to handle, and he was removed from office in 1910, after a publicly-ridiculed kangaroo court found him guilty of "insubordination" for not patronizing the proper contractors and suppliers.

Proof of the breadth of his acceptance by the rest of the public world came



Fig. 2 - The main dining hall of Cafe Brauer (the Lincoln Park Refectory). Perkins and Hamilton, 1908. The Lincoln Park Zoological Society, the Chicago Park District, and the Levy Organization are working together to restore the facility and re-open the upstairs restaurant.

when he returned to private practice. Perkins, Fellows and Hamilton produced hundreds of school buildings, all across the Midwest, in the following 20 years. In addition, Perkins designed parks and park buildings in Chicago. One of the best of these was the Lincoln Park Refectory, known popularly as Cafe Brauer (Figure 2). It contains some of his finest decorative design work, natural forms rendered in masonry, a transformation of the aesthetic of his former employer, John Root.

In addition to his school and park building work, most of the professional efforts of the rest of his life were spent in the planning and securing of nature preserves, especially the Forest Preserves that he had originally proposed in 1904. The final realization of the Forest Preserves took three legislative acts, including a suit by Perkins himself to test the constitutionality of the final Bill, but by the early thirties most of the land had been acquired. By this time, his health had deteriorated (he had gone deaf by 1927), but he was prominent enough to be asked to give advice on the layout of the model town portion of the Century of Progress Exposition, especially its park, playground, and school.

His son, Lawrence Bradford Perkins, had become an architect and benefited from his father's presence on the letterhead of his new office, Perkins, Wheeler and Will (later Perkins and Will); the interview for his first major commission, Crow Island Elementary, was granted largely because Dwight had done almost all of the other schools in Winnetka.

Dwight Heald Perkins retired to Pasadena, California, and died, on a sketching trip in New Mexico, in 1941. His life and career form a paradigm of the possibilities for self-effacing civic achievement, in stark contrast to the image of the effete courtier pursuing an idiosyncratic vision. High quality design informed his work to improve our city with quality housing, parks, and schools; he saw it as his responsibility, a moral imperative. The exhibition, and hopefully all future scholarship on him, will form an attempt to establish him in such a role - the architect as citizen.