force of their work. It is, perhaps, a particularly American story.

Calvin’s stylistic innovations depended on his technical skill. Garrison describes such things as how Calvin eliminated the visible corner post in rooms; made wainscoting so that the shrinkage and expansion of boards would not cause them to split; and erected neoclassical columns out of staved wooden construction. Carpenters understood how to apply their skills to satisfy their clients’ changing stylistic desires. Calvin’s skills extended to the design of plans, and here the relationship of house plans to family and social life makes for a fascinating story. Calvin’s plans were variations of the typical New England arrangement of central fireplace, central hall, and side-entry plans, often with double parlors that were a mark of status for many New England families. But Calvin was adept at adapting those plans to specific circumstances, and Garrison, alert to those adaptations, shows how the rear parlor in one house could symbolize bourgeois gentility and also functionally connect the house’s front entry and rear portion.

Calvin’s son George continued to innovate in his early houses but then became a building contractor. In the early 1850s the railroad was helping to strengthen a long-distance economy, and the book indicates how this economic change affected not only the Stearns’ family business but, by extension, the overall organization of the building professions and trades. An outcome was the rise of the professional architect. One of the most telling stories is that of a summer house designed by Richard Upjohn, for which George acted as contractor. With the architect in New York, the client in Savannah, and the building in Brattleboro, Vermont, the relationships between the parties were not easy. There were numerous disputes, which might be ascribed to the architect’s ego, the builder’s pride, the client’s desire to get what he thought he was paying for, or simple miscommunication. But the other story is that of an architectural profession struggling to emerge, and traditional craftsmanship struggling to survive. Partly this is a question of language itself. The meaning of the word “chamber,” for example, was interpreted differently by the architect and builder. Such differences among people working apart from each other occasioned the need for greater specificity in building documents. This kind of textual mediation was a principal issue in the bifurcation of the architect from the builder.

Garrison’s close readings, along with continually insightful interpretations, give us a vivid picture of the building culture of New England between the Revolution and the Civil War. While describing the careers of two people, this book tells a much larger story of a profession, a place, a region within a nation. It is an important contribution to our knowledge of the human processes through which the built world gets its shape.

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David Gebhard with Patricia Gebhard, editor

Purcell & Elmslie: Prairie Progressive Architects
Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 2006, 192 pp., 107 color and 76 b&w illus. $29.95, ISBN 1-4236-0005-3

Among the many midwestern American architects who heeded Louis Sullivan’s clarion call for a new architecture, which he variously termed modern, democratic, and American, were the disparate pair of George Grant Elmslie (1869–1952) and William Gray Purcell (1881–1965). Headquartered in Minneapolis, the partnership of Purcell, Feick & Elmslie, later Purcell & Elmslie, lasted from 1909 to 1921. One of the most prolific and diverse firms of the Prairie School, it left a legacy of distinct building types cast in a personal, simplified, decorated manner that seemed perfectly to capture Sullivan’s ideal. These included residences—from cottages to country estates—as well as banks, city halls, churches, and that quintessential American building form, the county courthouse. Indeed, the Woodbury County Courthouse in Sioux City, Iowa, stands as one of the great monuments of American architecture.

Surprising as it may seem, until now there has never been a scholarly monograph dedicated to the work of Purcell & Elmslie. In this beautiful book, with a minimum of text and a generous assortment of modern color photographs and historic images in black and white, Patricia Gebhard has rescued, edited, and made available the long-awaited manuscript of her late husband, David Gebhard.

With eight chapters divided into three parts, the text presents as part one the nineteenth-century background to Purcell and Elmslie’s architecture and brief biographies of each man. Part two is devoted to the work of the partnership. Part three presents the late work of each architect and a discussion of the firm’s contribution and influence. These are followed by a building list and a short bibliography.

Purcell, a midwesterner as gregarious as his Scottish partner was taciturn (and as much of a pack-rat as Elmslie was tidy), was a natural proselytizer for the new architecture. Born in 1881, Purcell was a relative younger compared with Elmslie, George Maher, and Robert Spencer, or even William Drummond and Walter Griffin. Purcell lived long enough, to 1965, to serve as a direct link, like Barry Byrne, between the architecture of America’s Progressive era and the first generation of scholars examining that work in the 1950s and 1960s.

Among these, in addition to H. Allen Brooks and Mark L. Peisch, was David Gebhard, who received a doctorate in 1958 from the University of Minnesota. Gebhard’s dissertation on Purcell and Elmslie followed a correspondence begun with both Purcell and Elmslie in 1951 and, after the latter’s death the following year, one that continued at great length with Purcell until 1964. Purcell also made his extraordinary archive available to Gebhard, and eventually, with Gebhard’s help, entrusted its care to the University of Minnesota. This situation contrasted
greatly with Brooks’s lack of access to Wright’s records at Taliesin and, for Peisch, with the apparent disappearance of Griffin’s archives in Australia.

In 1965, Gebhard’s article “Purcell and Elmslie, Architects” appeared in *The Prairie School Review.* Excerpted from his thesis and including an annotated list of standing buildings prepared in 1960 for an exhibition he curated at the Roswell (New Mexico) Museum of Art, it was to remain Gebhard’s major publication on Purcell & Elmslie. Although he and Paul Sprague subsequently engaged in a heated debate in *The Prairie School Review* about the role of Elmslie in Sullivan’s office, Gebhard published little more about the subject before his untimely death in 1996. Rather, his career took him to the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he became a leading authority on California architecture, an indefatigable defender of its buildings, and the keeper of one of the largest collections of architectural drawings by Californians. In addition to organizing more than twenty-five architectural exhibitions, many of which brought important forgotten designers to light, Gebhard served as president of the Society of Architectural Historians from 1980 to 1982.

The subject of Purcell & Elmslie has had its champions and scholars. Brooks devoted considerable space to their work in his classic study, *The Prairie School: Frank Lloyd Wright and his Midwest Contemporaries* (1972). Craig Zabel, whose dissertation — “The Prairie School Banks of Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis H. Sullivan, and Purcell and Elmslie” (University of Illinois, 1984) — was prepared under Walter Creese, published several essays on Elmslie, while the work of Mark Hammons has made material similar to that presented here available for some time. As Patricia Gebhard notes, Hammons is currently writing a major text on Purcell & Elmslie, for which she hopes the present book will serve as a prelude. More recently, Ronald Schmitt devoted much attention to Elmslie’s public buildings in *Sullivanesque: Urban Architecture and Ornamentation* (2002). Finally, a sumptuous coffee-table book appeared in 2006 by Dixie Legler, with photographs by Christian Korab, titled *At Home on the Prairie: The Houses of Purcell & Elmslie.* At 192 pages, it also includes a building list and quotes extensively from the Purcell Papers, located at the University of Minnesota.

What to do with Gebhard’s manuscript, unrevised since 1965, must have been a puzzle. Should it be lightly edited, substantially revised, or something in between? The first option, with limited updating, was selected. The spirit of the text harks back to the era of its first writing when affinities between the European movements and Prairie School were newly revealed and Gustav Stickley and the American Arts and Crafts movement were rediscovered. Gebhard’s text also reflects the mid-century modernist ethos that historical reference is morally wrong. Much, however, has happened in the intervening decades. Original research has broadened the record of the Prairie School’s achievement, and thus of Purcell & Elmslie’s place within that movement. Possibilities for interpretation encompass a variety of wider visions. These later developments, absent from Gebhard’s book, might have shed new light on the complex relationship between the Prairie School’s decorated modernism and the contexts in which the movement flourished for a time and, ultimately, foundered.

Nearly every page is illustrated with a noteworthy modern or historic photograph, without exception of great value. But the images are not always obviously related to the text, while illustrations that seem necessary are nowhere to be found. Thus, for images of Purcell’s first published project, done in 1903 while he was in Sullivan’s office, and a bank he designed two years later for Reno, Nevada, the reader is referred to the May 1904 issue of *Brickbuilder* magazine, on the one hand, and the 1905 catalog of the Chicago Architectural Club on the other, two publications not likely to be in the library of the average reader.

It is not mentioned that Purcell’s memory was notoriously fallible. As an example, Purcell’s tale of Wright’s offer of his Oak Park practice in late summer 1909, as Wright scrambled to prepare for his year in Europe, has left us with the only first-hand account of this astounding event of international significance, an account repeated in numerous retellings in books on Wright. Yet, Purcell presents the events as if he and Elmslie were already partners in Minneapolis the day Wright arrived, as if Wright were offering his practice to Elmslie, his contemporary and eventual bête noire, in addition to the young Purcell. In fact, Elmslie was still employed by Sullivan in Chicago until early December. That Purcell immediately contacted Elmslie about Wright’s offer is certainly plausible, but the assurance with which Purcell includes Elmslie in the events has prevented subsequent authors from questioning his account. That Gebhard, the leading authority on Purcell and Elmslie, is equally accepting is less understandable.

As it stands, *Purcell & Elmslie: Prairie Progressive Architects* is at once a wonderful introduction to a vital and imaginative architectural firm, a handy resource guide for scholars, a treasure trove of unknown images, and a long overdue tribute to its author, David Gebhard, one of the country’s most distinguished architectural historians and preservation gadflies. For these we owe great thanks to Patricia Gebhard.

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Notes

3. For a further discussion of Purcell’s meeting with Wright, see Paul Kruty and Paul E. Sprague, *Marion Mahony and Millikin Place: Creating a Prairie School Masterpiece* (St. Louis, 2007), 10–11.