

Purcell-Cutts House Reference Information

This is a reference for information on the house and objects within it to be used on tours as appropriate. For further information please consult the *Historic Structure Report* (which is a report of the house prior to restoration in 1990), as well as the Prairie School interactive program, “Unified Vision: The Architecture and Design of the Prairie School” <http://archive.artsmia.org/unified-vision/>, and *Progressive Design in the Midwest* (Olivarez and Wegener, 2000)

Exterior

- Narrow Lot and Set Back

The lot is only 150' x 50'. In order to overcome this difficulty, Purcell located the house toward the rear of the property so that the front lines of the structure were fifteen to twenty-five feet to the rear of the adjoining homes. (The house has a thirty-foot setback—this also allows neighbors to enjoy Purcell's front garden from their porches, and he enjoyed their gardens from his back porch.)

- Colors

The colors of the exterior are earth tones of tan stucco and dark brown trim, complimented by a ribbon of brick red and sage green stenciling just below the eaves.

- Seven Foot Eave Projection

The larger than usual projection lends a sense of horizontality to the narrow structure and lot. This projection was originally undersupported; the restoration included inserting new steel supports and re-stuccoing (see Kronick, “The Underachieving Cantilever”).

- Cypress Trim

The dark trim is the result of the *jin-di-sugi* treatment, a method of artificially aging cypress wood. (The piers at the windows in the front of the house are spruce.) During restoration, the wood trim was stripped and restained. (Over the past few years, several water-damaged fascia boards were replaced, and a 2018-2019 project to remove the current opaque stain and refinish the cypress with a more sympathetic transparent stain is in process by Chiral Arts LLC.)

- Windows

The ribbon windows in the living room and upper story opened up wall space to receive natural light wherever possible. Note there are windows of varying sizes and similar designs throughout the house, though no two windows are exactly alike. The basic design of most of the windows can be read as an abstracted plant, or perhaps a box kite—no known interpretation exists. E.L. Sharretts's Mosaic Art Shops in Minneapolis built the windows to Elmslie's designs. In 2016, a group of second-floor windows and sashes in the guest bedroom, morning room,

master bedroom, and bathroom were conserved by Midwest Art Conservation Center (art glass) along with Chiral Arts LLC of St. Paul (wood sashes).

- Reflecting Pool and Fountain

The pool can be seen as referring to the organic nature of water and Purcell's childhood at Island Lake, Wisconsin with his grandparents. It also helped to visually broaden the width of the property. The "knitting needle-sized jet" fountain added a sense of movement. The pond was filled with "yellow succulents" and lily pads. Purcell wrote that he found the tinkle of the fountain pleasant on hot nights (see *Historic Structure Report* - "Explication of Lake Place"). The Cutts family filled in the pool after they purchased the house; however, the fountain and reflecting pool were rebuilt as a part of the house's restoration.

- Landscaping

The landscape architect was Harry Franklin Baker. Not all of his plan was carried out; during the restoration the Institute and restoration architects MacDonald & Mack found his list and plan, but not the code to match the two, so the present plantings are a mixture of plants from the list and those that are low-maintenance for practicality.

- Sawn Wood Elements

Monogram atop the wooden lattice at the side of the front door has the monogram "ESP" for Edna Summy Purcell. (This has also been interpreted as "P&E" or a musical cleft for Edna's musical background.) The panel near the front column is inscribed, "Gray Days and Gold." This was a play on the name of Purcell's maternal family name and referred to the fact that Purcell was raised by his grandparents, William and Catherine Gray. It also refers to the subtle tones of Prairie School architecture, and the "gold" given to Purcell by his father without which he could not have completed the house. The wood panel was sawed in Chicago, where Elmslie felt it could be done to his satisfaction. In 2005, to preserve them from the elements, the two identical sawed-wood elements were removed to Mia and accessioned separately (2005.122.1,2). The reproductions now installed at the house were painstakingly made—by means of laser technology instead of a fretsaw—following Elmslie's original design (preserved in the William Gray Purcell Papers at the University of Minnesota).

- Peek-a-Boo Windows

Note that one faces inward, the other outward. They are a playful element in a house Elmslie nicknamed "the Little Joker."

Entrance Hall

- Painting of William Cunningham Gray

This was the first painting to be introduced to the house. This portrait of Gray was painted by **Lawton S. Parker**, a successful artist in part because of Gray's

encouragement and patronage. W.C. Gray had been the influential editor of the Presbyterian weekly “The Interior” and was well known for his progressive, humanistic views. The scene portrays Gray in his camp at Island Lake, Wisconsin, and was purportedly (though never proven to be) exhibited at the Chicago Hall of Fame during the World’s Colombian Exposition of 1893. It is permanently mounted to the wall and framed with sawed wood trim. Luckily, Mrs. Cutts’ plans to remove the painting in the 1960s never materialized, though she had permission from Purcell to cover the painting with removable materials (Purcell did not want the painting back, saying “it wasn’t a particularly good portrait.” See *Historic Structures Report* - “Explication of Lake Place.”) The painting was repaired and cleaned by Jim Horns during the restoration in the 1980s.

- Tall Case Clock

This 19th-century clock belonged to the Cutts family and remains in the house under the conditions of Anson Cutts, Jr.’s will.

Living Room

- Below Ground Foundation (Sunken Living Room)

The sunken design puts the large windows at about ground level, creating another organic element that unites humans with their environment. The sunken living room/elevated dining room layout was arrived at after much experimentation by Purcell and Elmslie; many drawings were sent between Purcell in Minneapolis and Elmslie in Chicago (see *Historic Structure Report* - “Explication of Lake Place”). The prow is the result of their solution.

- Tented Ceiling

The tented ceiling unifies the sunken living room and the elevated dining room. The morning sun reflects on the water of the reflecting pool and up to the ceiling.

- Art Glass Windows

The windows throughout the house were done by **Sharretts’s Mosaic Art Shops** (Minneapolis), which accepted the job with a bid of \$500 for the entire house. There are over 80 art glass windows and bookcase doors in the house; note that no two designs are exactly alike.

- Decorative Wood Trim

On the lower level of the house the wood is oak with a colorless wax filler (originally lavender fill as described by Purcell). On the second floor less expensive birch was used. The trim is ornamental, but also acts to unify the sunken living room with the raised dining room and these areas with the rest of the house. The trim also directs the eye to the central focal point of the house, the fireplace, where the trim system is most elaborate. The wood was cleaned and waxed during the restoration.

- Paint colors and stencils

The color of the walls is sometimes described in Purcell's notes as a "light sienna", and at others as a "rose chamois". The walls were repainted in a more muted, salmon-y color to match the faded wall color as found in the fireplace mural. The wall color was mixed on-site, painted on and then textured with a stippled stain to bring out the subtle plaster irregularities. This work, and the repainting of the stencils, was done by Alex Wilson. Subsequent texturing and stencil work has been carried out by Nick Doyle of Chiral Arts LLC.

- Fireplace Mural

Purcell first contacted artist Miles Sater, brother-in-law of Walter Burley Griffin, who prepared a sketch for a mural portraying Canadian geese. Purcell rejected this sketch, and a year later contacted artist **Charles Livingston Bull** after seeing his work in several publications. Many of the plans for the mural that Purcell had contemplated up to this point involved scenes of water fowl and Bull's design carried on this theme. The wide wood trim arching above the fireplace was already in place, so Bull had to make use of it in his design. The scene shows Louisiana herons (common to Minnesota) about to land. This again evokes the water imagery present throughout the house without actually showing any water. On Elmslie's suggestion, the mural shows two moons in different evening phases. This is meant to suggest the passage of time. Note how well the colors complement the overall color scheme of the house and the inlaid art glass and iridescent glass, which is also part of the design. The mural was cleaned by Jim Horns during the restoration.

- Piano

Edna's father was an upper-middle-class Chicago music publisher. Edna Summy Purcell attended Wellesley College and majored in music. Though the piano seen here is not original to the house (it belonged to the Cutts family), Edna did have a baby grand piano in this spot. Originally a natural mahogany color, the Purcells had it refinished in a "matte rose chamois" color to complement the color scheme of the house. Edna played the piano when they entertained guests. She possibly also gave her two young sons beginning lessons.

- *Chicago River* painting by **Albert Fleury**

This painting was purchased by Purcell in 1914. Fleury allowed the Purcells to pay in three installments to make the purchase price of \$150 more affordable. The painting is currently on loan from the Northwest Architectural Archives.

- Electric Lighting

The lights were designed by Elmslie and made in Chicago by **Robert Jarvie** and are original to the house. Electric lighting was common in Minneapolis at the time.

- Furniture

The cabinetry, seating and furniture were all organic, mutually important parts of the interior decorating plan. Purcell and Elmslie found that pre-existing furniture owned by their residential clients often clashed with their designs, yet many could not afford to buy new furniture strictly for aesthetic reasons. Purcell ran into much the same problem with his new home. In order to decrease the impact of pre-existing furniture, Purcell and Elmslie designed built in furniture and a minimum of well designed new pieces. The "system of built in desks, bookcases, and thirty feet [sic] of luxurious window seat in the living room supplied a large factor of furniture." (See *Historic Structure Report* - "Explication of Lake Place")

- Reproduction Furniture

The "Surprise Point" chairs are reproduction of the originals designed by Elmslie and built by craftsman **Sandor Nagyszalanczy**. The chairs are crafted of mahogany and were used throughout the living room, especially the desk of the writing nook. An original chair was retained by Purcell and given with his papers to the Northwest Architectural Archives. It is currently on loan to Mia. The chairs by the hearth are also reproductions from photographs, as is the fern stand. The standing lamp was reproduced from the original, formerly in the collection of Mrs. David Gebhard.

- Writing Nook/Library

The most significant of the built-in furnishings designed for the house, this area was intended to provide privacy for writing and reading while maintaining an integral relationship to the rest of the common area. The desktop is illuminated by the low, horizontal window; flowers were planted outside. Note this is the only window in the house that provides such a clear expanse of glass and a non-

geometric design (a stylized tulip). There are several decorative pieces here in the Arts and Crafts Movement style, including a ceramic candlestick from the Handicraft Guild of Minneapolis. (See Appendix C list of objects and artists.)

- Prow

The prow is another focal point of the house, giving the impression of a ship moving through the water. The art glass doors on the bookcases echo the art glass window designs. Note the heating vent disguised as another bookcase door (far right, as one is facing the prow), which creates a symmetrical appearance.

- *Nils and the Goose* sculpture

Purcell contacted sculptor **Richard Bock** because he was interested in purchasing a piece of Bock's he had seen in a store window. Purcell was already familiar with Bock's work because one of his sculptures was placed in the fountain of the home he designed for his father in 1909; the Charles A. Purcell House in River Forest, IL. Bock replied that the entire group had already been sold, but that he would like to create something for Purcell that would work better for the space. Bock was familiar with the Swedish children's book *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, by **Selma Lagerloff** (1907), in which the title character has a fanciful ride over the countryside on the back of a giant goose. The sculpture was not complete in time for the photo shoot of Purcell's house for the The Western Architect in 1915. Bock furnished the substitute piece of the kneeling faun that is seen here in the photographs on the sideboard. Purcell was quite pleased with the patinated plaster sculpture of Nils in full flight. He paid Bock \$100 for the work in four installments. Although the Purcells took the sculpture with them when they moved, Purcell's papers indicate that most of his possessions were destroyed or damaged in a train wreck during another move in 1920, and the *Nils* is believed to have been lost. Purcell had Bock make an uncolored duplicate for his Portland, Oregon home. The Nils sculpture now at the Purcell-Cutts House is a reproduction of this second original version. In 2002 Bill Skodje made the reproduction after studying Purcell's duplicate sculpture in Portland, which in 2001 was still in the Oregon home.

Dining Room

- Dining Room Suite

The dining room suite, including the table (with two removable leaves), sideboard, and six chairs, is a modern reproduction of the dining room suite George Elmslie designed for Mrs. William H. Hanna's home in Chicago.

The original Hanna suite was made in 1915 by John S. Bradstreet and Company of Minneapolis, a prominent firm in interior design and furniture manufacturing. The original dining room suite, which was on view at the *Minnesota 1900* exhibition during the summer of 1994, was never actually used in the Edna S. Purcell residence. It was only in the house to be photographed for a spread in The Western Architect (see period photograph on display in the house). Purcell had

not designed a dining room suite specifically for his home; the suite that **was** used by the Purcells in the house had been brought from Purcell's apartment on Humboldt Avenue. (This suite, designed by Purcell, is represented by the two green-stained chairs in the dining room.) The Hanna suite, which had just been finished and was on its way to Chicago, was thought to be more appropriate for the photo than the heavier, dark green Purcell suite. Purcell was not satisfied with the Humboldt suite, and felt Elmslie's design to be more appropriate for his house.

The reproduction Hanna suite was modeled in every aspect on the original suite, which Purcell later called their "most highly jeweled set." Indeed, the combination of severe angularity and lavish decorative detail surpasses any known furniture designed by Purcell and Elmslie. The entire suite is mahogany stained a rich reddish brown shade.

The linear design following the edges of the table, leaves, and sideboard was created with wood inlay stained in many different colors. Each corner of the table and leaves is punctuated with two inset pieces of iridescent glass. The rods near each of the table legs and sideboard are silver-plated. The six chairs contain art glass inserts in the cresting rail, each with a different color scheme. The triangular design within these inserts is echoed in the actual shape of the backs of the chairs and the drawer pulls of the sideboard, which in turn recall the "surprise point" chairs designed for the Purcell house. The sideboard has been faithfully reproduced with a secret drawer in the back. Please do not attempt to operate this feature, and do not open the leaves of the table as it stresses the table.

The plain raisin-colored upholstery fabric of the chairs is the only aspect that is not a faithful reproduction of the original suite. A suitable patterned fabric, similar to that seen on the original suite in the photograph, has not yet been located. The present fabric was chosen for its neutrality and may be changed in the future.

After Mrs. Hanna's death in 1929, the original suite was sold, eventually making its way to California, where it entered the last lender's collection in the 1970s. In 2011, Mia acquired the original Hanna Suite, now 2011.3.1-6, which is on view in Gallery 302. In 2013, with generous donations from Purcell-Cutts House docents and others, the chairs of the original Hanna Suite were reupholstered in a sympathetic patterned fabric.

This suite was produced in Santa Cruz, California by nationally-recognized woodworker **Sandor Nagyszalanczy**. The art glass inserts were produced locally by **Monarch Studios**.

- Lighting

The light standards are original to the house.

- *Island Lake* painting by Lawton S. Parker

This painting is on loan from the Northwest Architectural Archives.

Back Porch

- Oriental “Island and Bridge” theme of the Porch

Note that one must cross a “bridge” to get to the main portion of the back porch. This is similar to Japanese gardens that use ponds and bridges and are primarily used as places of contemplation and rest.

- View of the Lake

When the house was built there was a view of the lake (though other homes had been built along the parkway), carrying on the water and bridge theme.

- Use of the porch

The family dined on the porch in the warm months. They could also have read (the porch is electrified for reading lamps), and summoned the maid with the call button on the south porch wall. Note the leaded glass roundel over the light well in the ceiling (a reproduction by **Monarch Studios**); the original is in the Prairie School gallery at Mia.

- Note that the garage was added by the Cutts family in the 1920s in sympathetic Prairie Style.

Kitchen

The kitchen is remarkably intact owing to the lack of changes made by the Cutts family during their residence. It was originally built with thicker walls and added insulation so that the maid would not disturb the Purcells and their guests.

- Appliances

The gas stove and icebox are not original to the house, but are contemporary examples of what the Purcells would have used. There would also have been some electric appliances coming into use at this time. For instance, Purcell’s notes indicate that an electric toaster sat at the end of the hearth at breakfast and jams were brought down into the living room for breakfast around the fire (see *Historic Structure Report* - “Own House Notes”).

- Cabinets

The cabinets are birch with a cherry finish. They retain their original hardware. Note the numerous pull-out cutting boards.

- Magnesite counter tops and flooring

Magnesite is the generic name of a commonly used material for service areas of houses during this period. Made of magnesium oxide, sawdust and pigment, it was troweled into a mold like cement; backsplashes were added for ease of cleaning. It often went by the trade name Keene’s Cement (aka Fama

Stonewood), and can be found in reproduction form at the studio of the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio in Oak Park, IL.

- Note stairs and side access door for deliveries, access to the basement and to the phone closet, so the maid could answer the phone without disturbing the family.

- Foot Operated Automatic Door

The pocket door has two foot-operated pedals on the floor (one in the kitchen, and one in the hallway). When pressed, a unique spring-loaded system would operate to open the kitchen door, thus freeing the maid's hands to hold serving trays, etc. This system is no longer in operation.

Landing/Maid's Door

- Change in woodwork

The trim and woodwork changes from oak to less expensive birch at the landing leading to the second floor.

- Light Fixture on Landing

These are standard globes painted on the inside for added texture, then massed like a cluster of grapes.

- Maid's Room

The maid's room is kept closed during tours, but you could point out that there are stairs leading up to the room from the door, putting the room on the same level as the rest of the second floor, while still maintaining the feeling of a separate entrance. The room also contains a sink, closet and good lighting for close work such as darning or embroidery. The room is very small (approximately 10' x 12'), but comfortable and well designed.

Top of Landing

- Linen closets

The closets contain built-in drawers.

- Magnesite Counter

The counter has built-in storage below.

- Note the original stenciling in upper right corner facing the master bedroom.

Guest Room

- Reproduction Furniture

Purcell designed this painted suite of bedroom furniture for the house of his father, Charles Purcell (see photo in room). This painted furniture seems

influenced by the English Arts and Crafts Movement and is similar in design to the dining suite chairs downstairs, also designed by Purcell.

- Note closet with sink.

- Photo of Anson Cutts, Sr.

This photo remains in the house under the terms of Anson Cutts, Jr.'s will.

Master Bedroom

This large space was designed so that it could be united or divided by the grass cloth covered wooden panel in the center of the room. The left portion of the room was called the “morning room” because it is located on the east side of the house. After some remodeling in 1915, this later became the sleeping area for Purcell’s second adopted son, James.

“Morning Room”

- Grass Cloth Folding Divider

This is the original grass cloth cover. This was the Japanese-inspired solution to closing off or opening up the space.

- Hearth

The small hearth on the north wall is raised for ease of use—and as a reference to a campfire—just like the larger version downstairs.

- Chair is a Stickley reissue (reproduction) armchair.

- Sleeping Car Bed and Desk

Part of the 1915 remodeling project, the “Pullman-style” bed was designed after the Pullman cars Purcell rode in as a boy up to northern Wisconsin. He was always disappointed that he could not look out the window while lying in his berth, so he added these two small windows at eye-level. Note the desk continues the use of built-in furniture and the drawers under the bed for built-in storage (see *Historic Structure Report* - “Own House Notes”).

- Floor Storage Compartment

These are cedar lined for storage of woolens and were ingeniously inserted into the floor just above the tented ceiling, which produced a “dead space” on either side. (You may open the hatch door to show this compartment.)

- Trophy Case

These golf trophies were won by Anson Cutts, Sr., and remain in the house under the terms of Anson Cutts, Jr.'s will.

Purcell’s Bedroom

- The bed currently on view is a Limbert bed from the time period of the house, but is not original to the house. The Purcells had twin brass beds in this room.

- Sleeping Porch

It was commonly thought during this period that a good deal of fresh air was necessary to one's health, thus many people embraced the practice of sleeping outdoors. This was also more comfortable during the hot summer months. The Purcells were avid adherents to the fresh air theory, and the sleeping porch was mentioned by Purcell to Elmslie in a letter as a given Amenity (see *Historic Structure Report* - "Explication of Lake Place"). The twin brass beds the Purcells owned could be rolled out onto the porch - the threshold of the porch folds down for this purpose (and up to prevent drafts in Winter).

- Closet

The closet is very functional, with storage for hats, shoes, etc. Note the window for ventilation.

- Japanese Wood Block Prints

These have been removed and reproductions will be installed in the bedroom in the near future. According to house lore (not verified), these were given to Elmslie by Sullivan, who later gave them to Purcell as a wedding gift.

- Maid Bell

Note the button for calling the maid if needed.

Bathroom

- Original fixtures

The fixtures are original except for a part of the toilet.

- Magnesite flooring

This is the same material used throughout the house.

- Curtains

There would have been sheer curtains on the windows.

Basement

- Furnace

Purcell chose a Peck-Williamson underfed bituminous coal system with extra large ductwork to force more fresh air through the house. The Cutts changed to a gas furnace in the 1940s.

- Humidity Control System

Purcell added an automatic humidifier system to the heating plant that heated fresh air from the outside and added moisture to achieve 65% relative humidity (see *Historic Structure Report* - "Own House Notes").

- Maid's Bathroom

The maid's bathroom originally had only a tub; the shower was added by Mia.

- Laundry Areas

The original wash tub/sinks have been replaced with a modern version. Part of the basement would have been used as clothes drying rooms and for ironing, and also for trunk and coal storage.