

Architect's style is like a 'melting pot'

By Jacqueline Savaiano

DURING THE early years of this century, Frank Lloyd Wright had an office in Steinway Hall, near Van Buren Street and Michigan Avenue, Chicago.

In the same building worked a fledgling architect named Ephram Norman Brydges, who eventually blazed his own trail to fame in the Chicago suburbs.

From 1912 to 1950, Brydges, who died in 1956, was showered with commissions for schools, hotels, churches, and private residences for Chicago Board of Trade businessmen. His buildings are a pleasant, unified blend of features from different architecture styles.

SCROLLWORK ON arched doorways capture a Gothic flavor, while stucco and beam work, inside and out, is reminiscent of a Tudor style. The red-tiled roofs show a Spanish influence. French doors open into rooms, porches, and gardens with esthetic arrangements of native greenery and stones.

The highlight of Brydges's homes is in the living room. "He loved to build a home around the fireplace," said Trudie Woodruff, the architect's youngest daughter and one of four children.

"The living room is the most important room because it's where you live. Family and friends gather around the fireplace," she said, sipping some coffee in front of a fireplace that she "had to have" in the living room addition of her Glenview tract home.

WOODRUFF REMINISCED about her childhood in the Elmhurst home that Brydges designed for both his family and office. "We would notch out how old we were on the fireplace as we grew older," she said of the 18-foot-tall stone fireplace surrounded by an 8-foot tile hearth.

Towering above the fireplace was a cathedral ceiling with beams decorated with hand-stenciled designs painted on linen by Brydges and his three daughters. A coat of arms motif embellishes an antique gilt iron chandelier, built-in leaded glass bookcase, and leaded glass doors, all imported from Europe.

"We would have ice cream socials on the porch in the summer," Woodruff said. From there, they could enjoy a view of the rock garden and shrubbery adorning the exterior of the house still standing at 257 W. St. Charles Rd.

E. Norman Brydges Further 2010

After a short tenure with the Nimmons and Fellows architecture firm, Brydges opened his own business. He is noted as an architect for schools and churches, including the following: Episcopal Church of Our Savior, Elmhurst; Grace Episcopal Church, Oak Park; St. Matthews Episcopal Church, Evanston; Glen Ellyn Junior High School [now the civic center]; Glenbard West High

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School, Glen Ellyn; addition and remodelling of Longfellow Elementary School, Wheaton; and Lincoln, Hawthorn, Roosevelt, and Eugene Field elementary schools, all in Elmhurst.

HE ALSO designed the Oak Park Arms Hotel, and the Hotel Ritz, the Garfield Arms Hotel, and St. George Hotel, all in Chicago.

Overseeing all aspects of construction, Brydges was a "perfectionist, a stickler for detail," Woodruff said. "He designed with grace and beauty what the person wanted. He once had a wall torn out in a school because it wasn't to his specifications."

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— Trudie Woodruff

In addition to public buildings, Brydges worked on homes for businessmen with the Chicago Board of Trade. He remodeled the Elmhurst residence of Winfield S. Day, and was believed to have designed the Villa Park summer home of James K. Riordon.

THE PLUM of his projects was the Arthur W. Cutten country estate, a 15-room house, an adjoining one-bedroom servant coach house with three-car garage below, and a gate house, all overlooking 800 acres from atop a hill at the time it was built around 1912.

Located just west of Finley and Butterfield roads, Downers Grove, the estate is a "sensitive blending" of Mediterranean Revival, Prairie, and California bungalow styles of architecture, said John Thorpe, senior architect with Robert A. Bell Architects, Ltd., Oak Park.

This design analysis was made on the currently neglected Cutten home last summer in a building condition report for the Du Page County Forest Preserve District, who purchased the estate and is considering it for their new headquarters.

ACCORDING TO the report, qualities that are similar to Wright's Prairie homes include the cross-shaped plan created by wings extending to the terraces; wide overhangs; window and door groupings; horizontal accents that appear to be window sill extensions, created by brick trim; and trellis work.

In vogue around this time was the Mediterranean Revival style, from which were adopted ideas for the terraces, porches, the tile roof, and arched window openings.

Made of granite from the area, heavy stone piers and a large chimney reflect the California bungalow style.

If it were built today, plaster walls and all, the 20,000-square-foot space, including house and garage, would cost an estimated \$900,000. It's easy to see why. The interior is detailed with the finest that money could buy. Many items are European imports.

Quarter sliced oak dominate the walls in the den and foyer, and also is used for the living room ceiling beams and dining room trim, which is offset with brocade panels.

LIGHT FIXTURES are adorned with Wedgewood cameos of a nymph frolicking with Pegasus. Sunlight and the beauty of the south garden with pergola and urns can easily be seen from the French doors. One leaded glass pane per door is detailed with a coat of arms or flowers.

There are eight French doors in the living room, two of which flank the focus of this home: the fireplace. Scrollwork is etched into this massive, polished cement fireplace.

"Dad would say 'A home is an investment in your happiness,'" Woodruff said.

IF THERE'S any truth to the saying "Money buys happiness," then the Cutten estate could yield many joyful hours. →



The Arthur W. Cutten estate in Downers Grove is the plum of Ephram Norman Brydges' works in the far western suburbs. It's a blend of Mediterranean Revival, Prairie, and California bungalow styles of architecture, as shown through the terraces, cross-shaped floor plan, and heavy stone piers and chimney. Inside, quarter sliced oak beams and French doors show the architect's attention to detail in the living room, pictured here as it looked decades ago.

