Purcell and Elmslie, Pioneers in Architecture

Among several interesting projects now being conducted in architectural history here in the Southwest is a study by David Gebhard, Director of the Roswell Museum and Art Center, of the early 20th century progressive firm of William Gray Purcell and George Grant Elmslie. This architectural firm was organized in 1909 and continued in existence through 1922. Its headquarters were in Minneapolis, but it maintained other offices in Chicago, Philadelphia and in Portland, Oregon. Before Elmslie entered the firm he had acquired a wide background as the chief designer of Louis Sullivan from 1894 to 1909. He is now credited with the design of a number of Sullivan’s late buildings including the well-known bank at Owatonna, Minnesota, which was built during 1907 and 1908. Purcell, too, was a product of the liberal, progressive forces of the American Midwest, and was especially affected by the architecture of the “Chicago School” of the 1880’s and 90’s. He had worked briefly in the office of Sullivan and was a close friend and colleague of the major European and American progressive architects of the period. Although the work of the firm was limited in quantity, they helped to set the stage for the eventual victory of contemporary architecture by their rejection of blatant and empty eclecticism of their period. Their experiments in open planning, in the use of new mechanical equipment, in the design of ornament, and in planning of furniture represented a radical break with the past, and in many ways anticipated the major trends of present day design.

An exhibition of their pioneer work is now on display through September in the Paul Horgan Gallery of the Roswell Museum and Art Center. This exhibition was originally organized for the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in 1953, and subsequently it traveled throughout the East and Midwest. Later this year, and in 1960, the exhibit will be on display in various cities on the West Coast. The first of these showings will be in October at the School of Architecture of the University of California at Berkeley. In addition to the exhibition Dr. Gebhard has completed for publication a detailed study of Purcell and Elmslie and their contribution to 20th century American architecture. Arrangements are being made to publish this study through the University of Minnesota Press in 1960.

“When we mean to build we first survey the plot, then draw the model; and when we see the figure of the house then must we rate the cost of the erection.” — William Shakespeare, II - II Henry IV
Service Building for the Bason Estate, Riverside, Illinois 1915-1916

William Gray Purcell House, Minneapolis, Minnesota 1913