

THE LARKIN ADMINISTRATION BUILDING REALIZED (Continued #11)

As mentioned in last month's article, June 8, 2017 marked the 150th anniversary of Frank Lloyd Wright's birth. It also marked, not coincidentally, the opening of the Larkin Gallery, located off the Seneca Street lobby. A repository of history of the Larkin Soap Co. (LSC), its products, premiums and related topics, it is open week days from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. for self-guided tours or contact me in Suite 210 or Scott Tempeny in Suite 200, to arrange for a guided tour.



We left off last month looking at the selection of Wright (FLW) as architect to design an administration building. The objective was to separate the business administration staff, personnel management, and mail order duties from the manufacturing buildings (701 Seneca Street complex) and the warehouse and shipping building (76 Exchange Street).

John D. Larkin, Sr. (JDL) wanted a clean safe environment for these employees and wanted them to be in a beautiful, efficient space. He also wanted the mail issued from them to be free of coal and manufacturing smudges.

So, it was in 1903 that this magnificent project was underway. Over the next few years the design was tweaked from time to time. The main building was to be a six story rectangle surrounded by balconies with a sky light in the roof creating a sunlit space and central court at base level. Light to the interior was augmented by a band of windows at every level and FLW-designed light fixtures.



At each corner of the building was a large pier extending outward from the main perimeter, thus breaking up the flatness of the exterior walls. They gave the structure a great visual and real sense of stability. But beyond the aesthetics, FLW brilliantly placed the stairwells and such systems as plumbing, electrical and what is considered to be the first air conditioning system. (Carrier's development of air conditioning was in progress, but FLW, using technics that Carrier would later perfect, actually accomplished the first built A.C. system.)



Since the building was surrounded by coal-burning trains and smoke-belching factory chimneys, a major objective was to not only control temperature within the building but provide clean air. So, air from the outside was pumped into the towers where it went through a cold water spray and filter, then heated to the desired temperature before being discharged into the interior.

The building itself was a masonry, brick and red sandstone with very little wood inside. As JDL had desired, it was a fireproof vault.

But it was not lacking in beauty. Both inside and out bore decorative murals, relief sculptures and inspirational mottos. FLW retained sculptor, Richard C. Bock, to design sculptures and relief for the exterior. Two decorative columns broke up the

front (Seneca Street) facade of the building between the much larger corner piers. At the top of them were crouched sculpted figures bearing huge globes while one of their hands grasped the end of an unfurled scroll bearing the name, "Larkin." On front and back of the Larkin Administration Building (LAB) was also a relief mural under which an open slit emitted water into a basin, creating a lovely water fountain.



The interior was also made attractive by relief compositions, inspirational mottos and geometric designs on walls and columns. A conservatory with live plants and vines on the top floor could be seen from the light court and balconies. It also provided respite during a walk through it on an employee's break.

However, the LAB was not to be just another pretty place, but functional as well. FLW made repeated trips to Buffalo over the three years the building was under construction, learning the business and procedures of the LSC. With a backdrop of

employee comfort and safety to inform him, FLW created the light court floor and balconies to accommodate the flow of mail, orders and other documents. According to Jack Quinan's "FLW's Larkin Building: Myth and Fact," in 1903, five thousand letters in six separate deliveries per day, six days each week, were received. That volume would only increase over the next few years. The balconies were organized to receive and process the orders and letters by state from which they came. FLW, most likely in collaboration with Darwin D. Martin (DDM), designed the walls of the balconies to house built-in card catalog drawers to hold orders and records pursuant to DDM's Cardex system.

Mail that required answering, like complaints or inquiries, were immediately responded to by clerks using graphophones, the cylinder of which was immediately transferred to a nearby typist for transcription. Orders were directed to other clerks for processing by the sea of clerks on the first floor. After each step of processing an Order, it got passed to the next desk for the next step. DDM and William Heath manned desks in the middle of the light court in the midst of all these workers to supervise them.

From his office beneath the south balcony, JDL kept a watchful eye. His sons, cashier and accounting staff were also located there, as was a marketing staff who selected premiums to be included in catalogs.



One would have expected the arrangement to be a cacophony of noise, but FLW anticipated the problem. His remedy was to use a new product, magnesite, that was spread like cement, on the floors and surfaces of desks, chairs and counters. When hardened, magnesite was attractive but more importantly, absorbed noise very effectively. To soften the floors for walking and standing, it was applied over a layer of felt.

A German scholar, Christine Schnaithmann, came to Buffalo by herself about eight years ago to research the history of the LSC for a graduate paper. Out of that

research came, among other writings, a paper on how well the architecture expressed and supported the work done by the LSC in the LAB. She quoted a 1907 article in "The Business Man's Magazine" by George Twitmyer. "There are the departments, each steadily, quietly, rotating about its axis, yet in perfect coordination with the rest, and each so delicately meshed to its neighbor that one helps the other and in no way interrupts its progress. It is enterprise, American enterprise, that drives the wheels; carefully organized systems and methods are the jewel bearings; good will, the lubricant."

FLW attached an annex to the east side of the main building to house more typists, but also administrative employees responsible for management of the entire company.

The Annex housed an attractive reception/waiting room furnished with leather furniture, a piano and throw rugs and embellished with a fireplace. Adjoining this area were to medical clinics for the employees.

FLW located a classroom for training office staff as well as a branch of the Buffalo Public Library and a YMCA room on the fourth floor of the Annex. What about feeding all those employees and guests? No problem. According to Quinan, FLW designed a restaurant on the fifth floor that could serve as many as 2000 people in shifts of up to 600 during the lunch hours. The restaurant doubled as a conference room by FLW's design of tables for eight with swivel tops that converted into benches.

Even cleaning was made easier by FLW's design of wall-hung toilets and desks with attached seats that folded under the desks, so that the floors could more easily be mopped.

DDM is quoted in the Fiftieth Anniversary Book" (of LSC in 1925), "Fifty Golden Years", saying, "Stand, if you please, one moment at 'inspiration point' with us...At the very top of the Administration Building. Look down, floor after floor through the great sunlit court. 'Tis then, only then, that you glimpse the soul of the Larkin business, for the teeming hive of industry below, is intent on service."

FLW considered the LAB to be his emphatic protest against the "tide of meaningless elaboration sweeping the U.S....(which was) being swept into one grand rubbish heap of the acknowledged styles, instead of intelligently and patiently creating a new architecture...Rebellious and protestant as I was myself when the LAB came from me, I was conscious also that the only way to succeed, either as a rebel or protestant, was to make architecture genuine and a constructive affirmation of the new order of the Machine Age." (FLW, Autobiography", 1943)

So, what I thought would be a two-part essay on the LAB, now has become three part. Next month, sadly, we will look at the demise and destruction of the LAB.

~From the Desk of Sharon Osgood