THE GARDEN WALL

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THE STATE OF THE HOUSE
SPRING 2004

Completion of the brick thresholds in the living room and study, skylight glass, a replastered bath and final brick work.

After an initial abortive effort, the living room threshold was redesigned and enough bricks manufactured to complete the task. Once the correct bricks in an appropriate color range were acquired, interior and exterior brick floors were given saw cuts down to the concrete mat inside and terrace slab outside. Excess mortar was removed, fully exposing the slabs. A thermal break between the two slabs was added below the threshold, a feature that previously had not existed. Besides traditional masonry tools a laser level and immense patience were employed to set the bricks at the prescribed height. Maintaining tight tolerances are difficult as bricks in wet mortar tend to migrate.

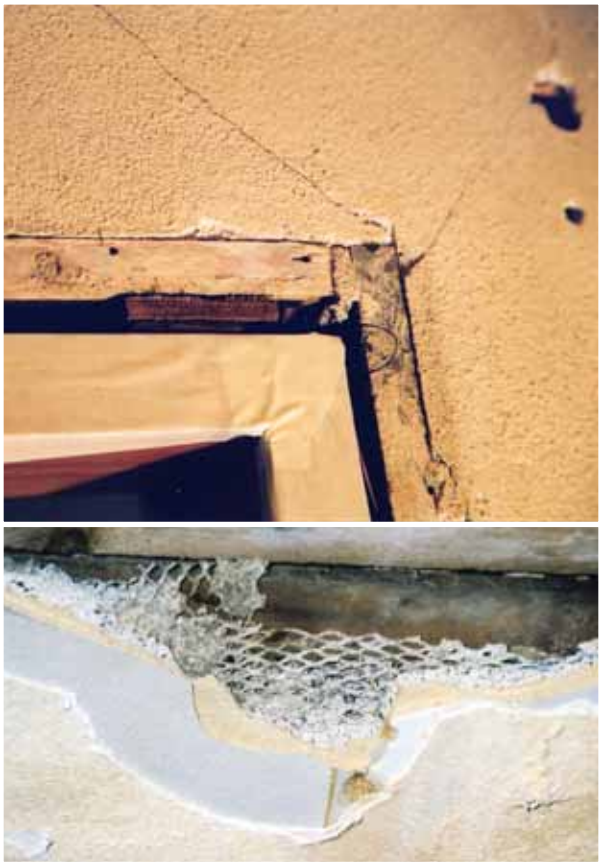
Following is a photo essay on spring restoration accomplishments at the Willey House.

Cutting the living room brick floor to accommodate the new threshold.

Setting the living room brick threshold. Bricks must be level, plumb and in alignment with the grout lines on the existing floor.

PLASTER

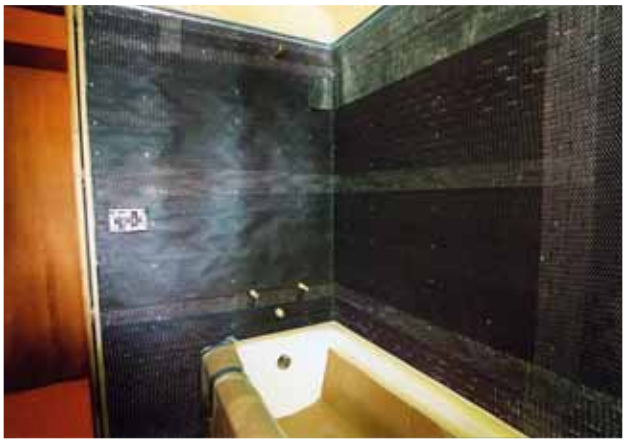
The Willey House interior was never intended to be painted. The restored bathroom boasts the only plaster walls in the house utilizing the exact process that Wright had specified. Color pigment is integrated directly into the top coat of the plaster, an honest use of materials without the artifice of paint. Although this process is what Mr. Wright called for in the house specs, something went wrong in the initial application that caused the walls to be painted by the Willeys even before the cabinetry was built. If there is such a thing as a silver lining to water damage it is this. There was enough plaster damage in various parts of the house to make investigations into the original plaster color and paint history fairly simple. Here is what we learned. From room to room there was a great deal of variance in the procedure used to color the plaster as well a variance in the color itself. The living room utilized a relatively thick, between ½" to ¾" color layer of plaster directly over the scratch coat, while the bedrooms had only thin skim coat over the second or brown coat of plaster. Samples were taken from several rooms to arrive at the final match color.

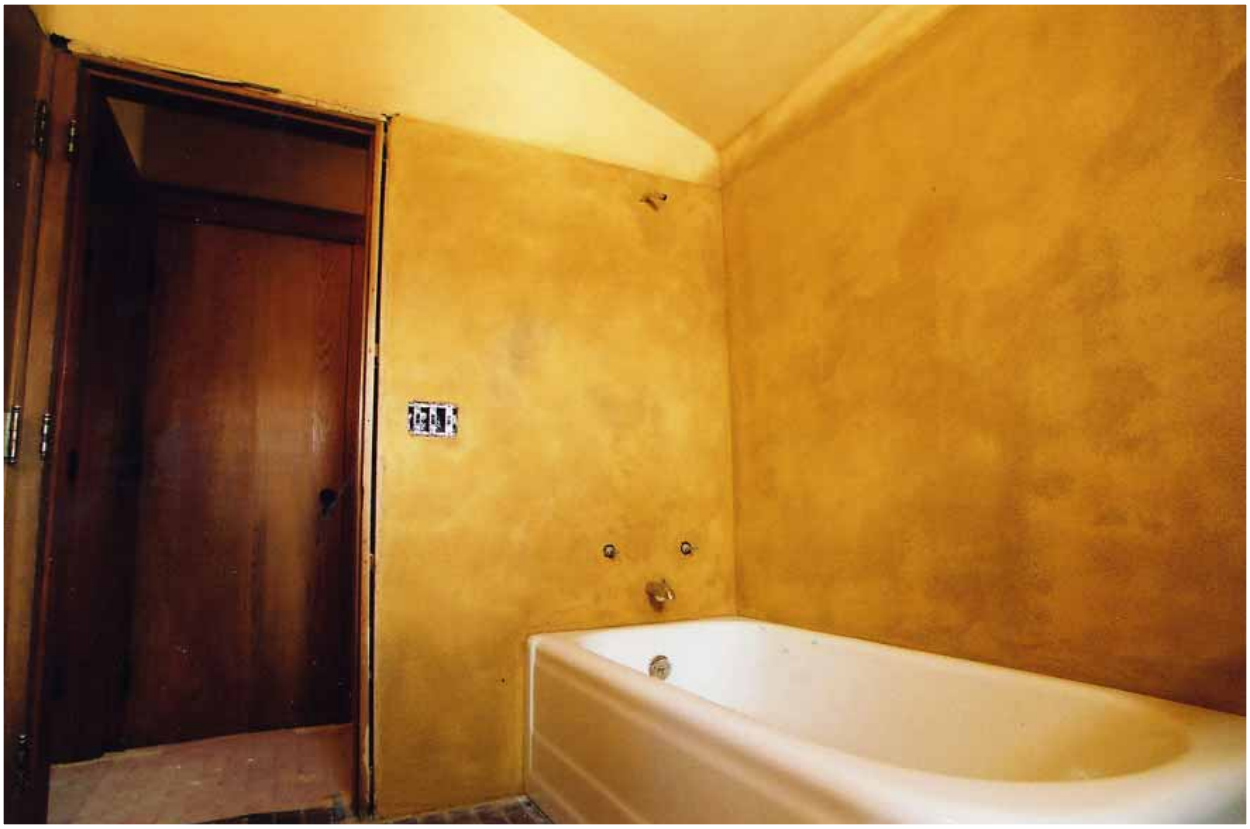


Top: patch of original plaster in the master bedroom closet; middle: original colored plaster on door framing; bottom: layers of plaster showing previous repairs and original color coat.

BATHROOM CEMENT SURROUND

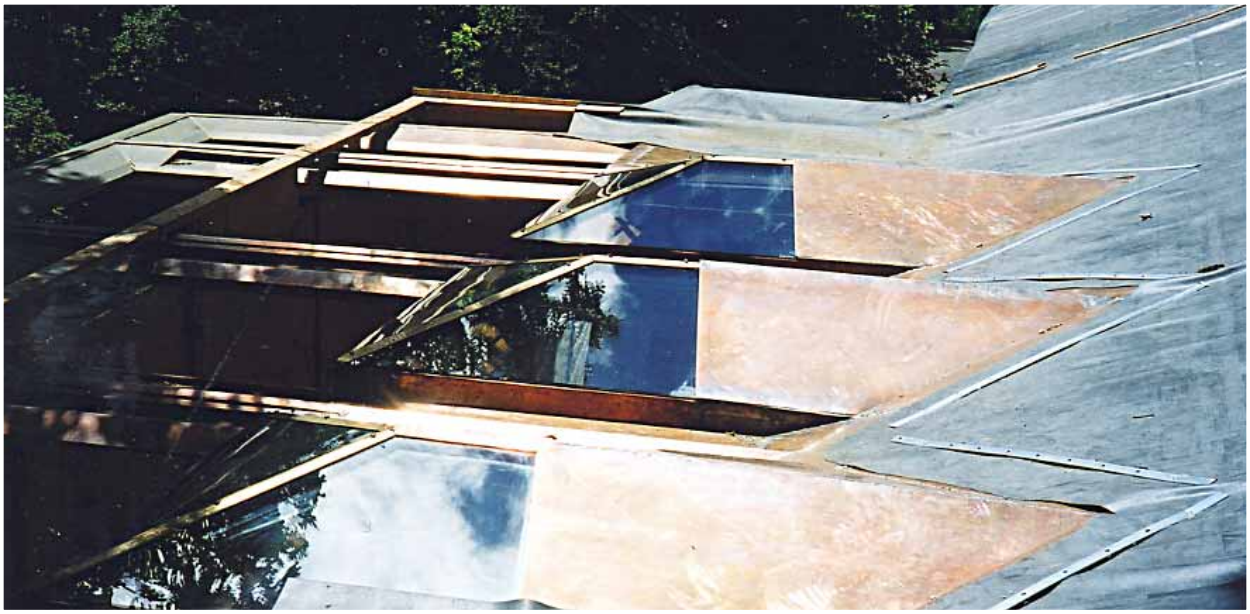
The shower surround is made from a colored cement plaster. The original was a match to the exterior cement soffits. The restored surround is made with integrated pigment but is smooth for practical reasons. It was executed by a craftsman who fabricates cement sinks and countertops.





NEW SKYLIGHT GLASS

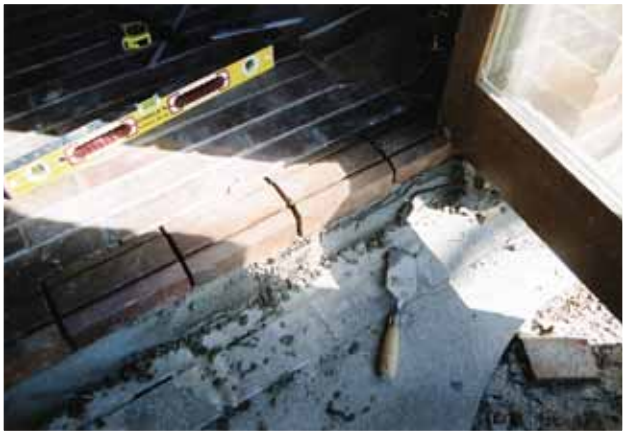
Glass was fabricated for the new skylights. The quality of fabrication did not meet our standards and so the glass is being remade. Seeing light once again through the skylights is amazing, even through the temporarily imperfect glass.

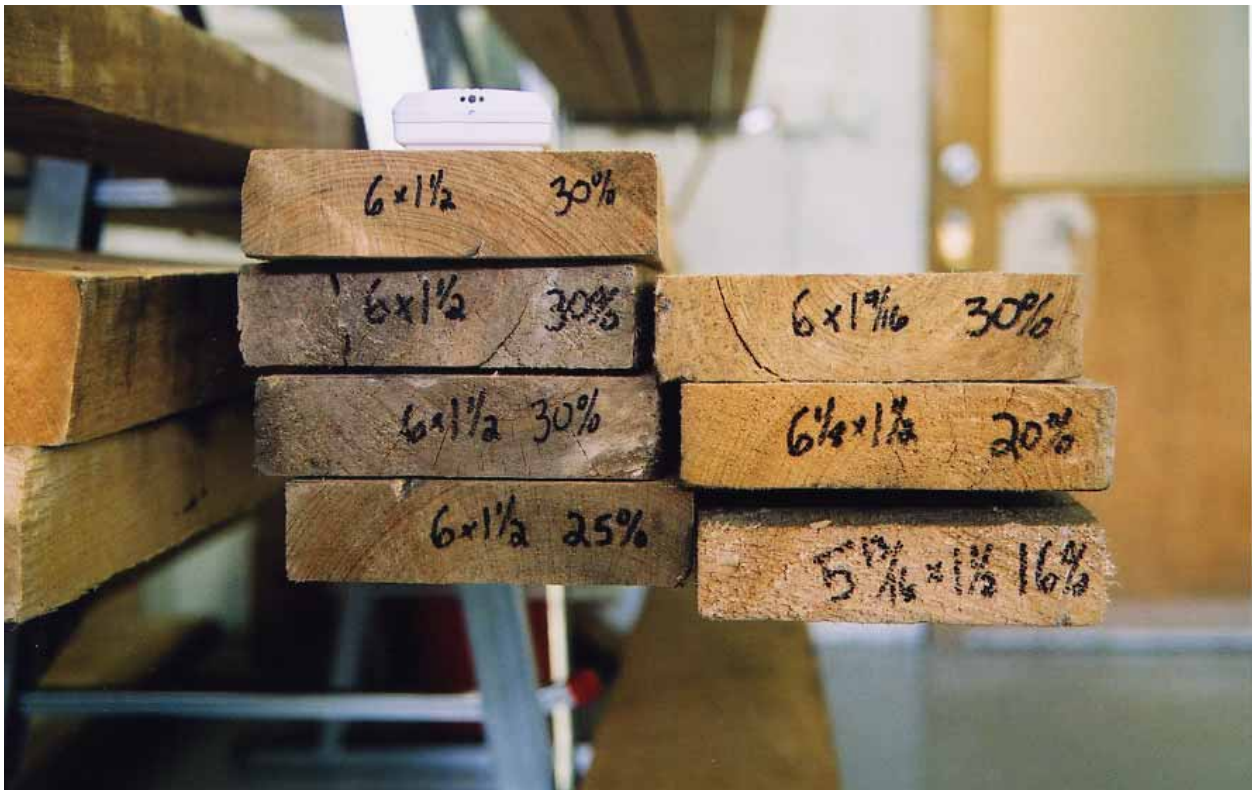


Newly fabricated threshold bricks arrive and are set in place.

STUDY THRESHOLD

The study floors run in a straight longitudinal fashion, as opposed to the diagonal of the living room floor. The threshold bricks are therefore a different design from those in the living room. Each brick is made in three parts.





CYPRESS MOISTURE CONTENT

Most modern red tidewater cypress (taxodium distichtim) is river recovered. The benefit of this is that some ancient old growth logs can still be accessed. Thousand year old trees cut a century ago have been preserved in low oxigenated cold water river bottoms. The density of the wood increases significantly through water pressure. However, these logs are so saturated that even after they are milled the lumber requires up to a year to air dry. Kiln drying doesn't seem to work. And even the air dried product often arrives far too wet to work with. By the time the wood drys down to the desired 6 to 8% moisture content half of it is likely to shrink, check, split or warp, and the already expensive material doubles in cost.

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