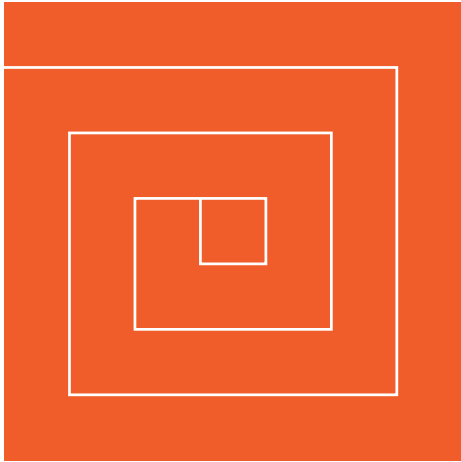


T H E G A R D E N W A L L



WILLEY HOUSE RESTORATION JOURNAL VOLUME 4 ■ ISSUE 4 ■ FALL 2005 ■ ■ ■





THE STATE OF THE HOUSE FALL 2005

At three and one half years into the Willey House restoration a perceptible light is visible at the end of the tunnel. Cabinet fragments found disassembled in the garage help to paint a picture of the original kitchen, cypress plywood is at last attained, allowing a foray into the building of furniture and cabinetry.

The 1934 kitchen was a visible extension of the living and dining room. The fact that the kitchen (termed a work-space by Wright) is separated only by a screen of window glass and shelves makes it an expression of the whole of the living quarters. It is nothing like a sequestered Prairie house kitchen. It is in fact, much closer in spirit of later Usonian kitchens that were sometimes zoned rather than enclosed spaces.

In the winter of 1974 former Taliesin apprentice John Howe was commissioned by the third owner to update the kitchen. The outcome is an efficient late Usonian design complete with conical brass knobs, door-length piano hinges and coppertone appliances. The Howe kitchen was the only thing resembling a finished room when we began the restoration. We took much comfort in it. But the problems with the present kitchen are many. The wrong materials have been used. Stained birch plywood and particle board replaced the cypress and cypress plywood of the original. The appliances were relocated for functionality but the line of cabinetry dominating the south wall which originates in the living room is now interrupted by a refrigerator. Therefore, with the body of the house now restored, the designed and as-built configuration of the kitchen will be reinstated along with improved lighting (the original plan was underlit), utilizing correct materials (linoleum and cypress), and furnished with vintage appliances. The importance of which was stated years ago by a former inhabitant of the Willey house who noted that Wright's architecture is difficult to place in time. The vintage appliances will give context to the forward thinking design of the 1934 house. Just don't expect ice cubes in your drink if you visit. 🍷

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



Partially reassembled lower cabinetry for the south wall of the kitchen.



Counter edge meets closet door frame.



Note free-standing broom closet door frame.



Drawers and fragments of wood edged linoleum countertop.



Dovetail joint on drawer.



New old stock under counter sink.



Veneer flitches come stacked as cut from the log.



Veneer comes in sandwiched bundles of twenty flitches.

CYPRESS PLYWOOD

Many promising leads for the manufacture of cypress plywood took us only down circuitous paths and dead ends. Locating good old-growth Tidewater Cypress is challenge enough. Sourcing old-growth cypress plywood seemed mythical. Fortunately, this fall a source for old growth veneer was confirmed. The veneer flitches were 12-14 inches wide and 12 feet long. The flat sawn grain pattern was if not perfectly ideal, most definitely adequate for our needs. A vacuum table was acquired and Stafford and Josh began laying up their own cypress veneer over shop grade birch plywood cores.

First tests produced small pieces for use in furniture. Then on to the next degree difficulty, solid wood-edged cabinet doors for the storage room. A process identical to the one used in the kitchen and dining room cabinetry. The storage room experience will help perfect the process and lessons learned will be applied to the restoration of the kitchen cabinetry. 📐



Veneer grain as compared to an old-growth board.



Vacuum table for the manufacture of veneered plywood.



Plywood core with solid cypress edge.



Cabinet doors with cypress veneer in vacuum table.



Two large veneer flitches stitched together with tape.



Vacuum table in use.



Veneered cabinet doors dry in vertical position.



Plywood cabinet doors with solid cypress edges.



FURNITURE

One reproduction dining chair (of which there are two originals) has been executed in cypress and cypress plywood. The test was largely successful and taught Stafford a great deal. It dispelled at least one myth. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer once wrote of the Willey house furniture that it was designed to be built on-site by the contractor. Looks however, as we have learned time and again can be deceptive. The simple appearance of these chairs belies a complicated design that is a challenging undertaking even in a fully outfitted cabinet shop. The seat of one of these chairs alone is composed of ten pieces of wood, all component parts precisely fitted together to create a singularly uncomfortable dining experience.

Eventually, all of the built furniture will be replicated to protect the originals from further wear and tear. All un-built furniture designed by Mr. Wright for the Willey house will be executed in the near future. 📐



Dining chair being assembled.



Seat of dining chair.



Chair is glued and clamped. No nails are used.



Reproduced dining chair side by side with an original.





Back view of chairs.





Sample board showing test patches of tinted shellacs on cypress veneer.



Top contenders for matching new veneer to old darkened and patinaed wood.



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