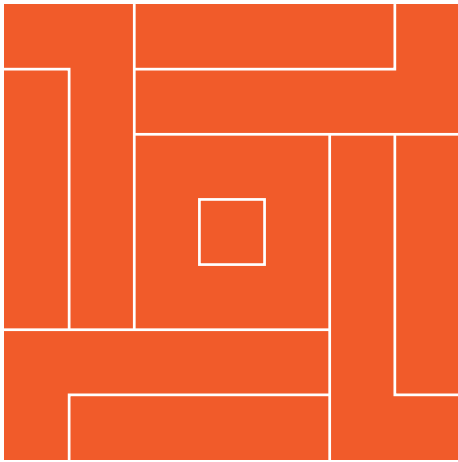


T H E G A R D E N W A L L



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THE STATE OF THE HOUSE SUMMER 2007

Furniture conservation, preserving the physical evidence of lives led.

THE WOODEN FURNITURE

One of the most startling things we recognized when Stafford built the reproduction tables and dining chair was the marked contrast between the crisp perfection in every edge, leg and corner of the reproduction pieces in contrast to the worn-round edges of the originals. This was an instance when the new pieces, pristine as they were seemed false by comparison to the old. They lacked the patina, history and humanity of the originals. They also lacked the ages of grime and abuse that the originals had sustained. The question in furniture conservation is where to draw the line between cleaning, repair or restoration versus the erasure of historical evidence, character, the soul of the piece.



Dirt and grime accumulate through use and must be periodically removed. In the case of the Willey House furniture we follow a strict regimen of thorough cleaning once every 74 years give or take a decade. Finishes, if not maintained with regular waxing become worn and stained. Decades of use literally wear the soft grain of the veneer tops away in pockets which then fill with dirt and grime only to be sealed in by subsequent polishing. The removal of dirt, grime and old wax are legitimate cleaning tasks for a conservator. The essential idea, in most situations is to remove any residue above the level of the original finish while leaving that finish intact. Defining the task of conservation becomes less obvious when the damage to be corrected runs deeper, when the scope extends beyond cleaning surface finishes.



Each piece of cypress furniture was labeled and photographed from all angles.



Damage from using one of the stools as a plant stand.

Shelf bottoms of stools are heavily worn.

Veneer edges are chipped.



Cypress is soft. Corners are dinged. Exposed edges are rounded over and dented.



Typical splinter damage to a stool leg.



Splinters occurred despite metal glides.



Heavy furniture is scratched and gouged. Dirt and oils are obvious in places where the pieces are routinely handled.



Back of chair leg worn from dragging.



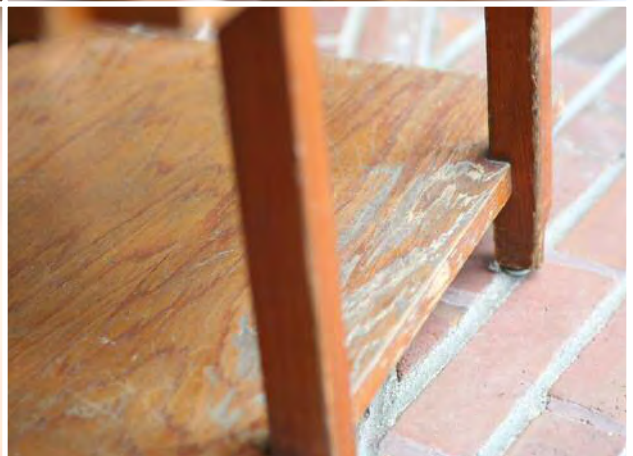
Chair sustained scratches with significant wear on exposed edges.



Shelf below seat worn from feet.



Splintered leg and nylon glide.



Corner wear.

Heavily worn veneer.



The end table suffered from severe water damage. A significant percentage of the veneer is raised or missing.



Water stains on sides and legs of table.



Even table bottom shows water staining.



An atypical material dimension, table back is constructed from 1 inch plywood.



Through tenon.



Curious construction of solid boards and cypress veneer plywood.



Dining table surface shows the wear of 70 plus years of continuous use.



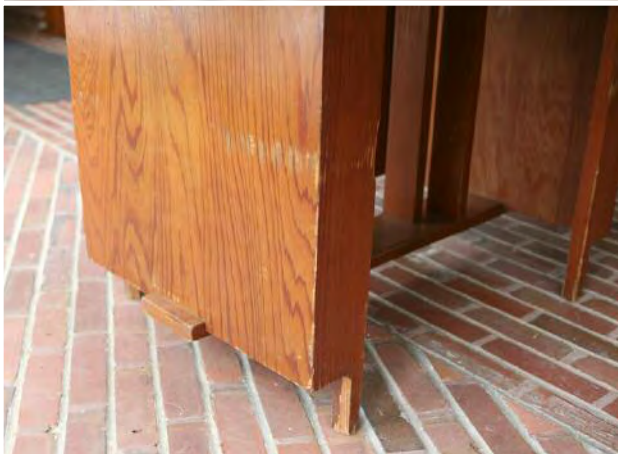
A repaired area on the top of the dining table probably caused by burning candle wax. Was it while hosting Mr. and Mrs. Wright one evening in the '30s? Or did it occur during a period when the house was inhabited by interloping vagrants? The chipped edge veneer on the chairs and stools, did it begin during the Willey's tenure in the house or was it caused by the fidgeting feet of small children when the Burrises raised three small kids here? And what about the splintered leg bottoms? Most likely caused by dragging the soft cypress across the brick floors, first creating cracks before prying off large wedges. Every one of these and hundreds of other chips, cracks, scraps, scratches, gouges and breaks represent decisions to be carefully considered. It is the joint responsibility of the owner/curator and the conservator to make each and every call. Typically a point in time is determined to restore the furniture to. That date often helps to inform what action should be taken to achieve a restoration reflecting the likely state of the piece at that time. The more one knows about the history of the piece the more accurately it can be reflected in the work of the conservator.



Visible signs of an early repair of a candle burn, sanded out then stained to match somewhat.



Original sharp edges rounded smooth through use.



Wear pattern where chair contacted the table.



Dining table from below.



One leg is separated at the corner. Note miter with one plywood side and one solid side.



Every table leg shows damage.



Vintage cypress is patched into damaged leg sections.



Attempts are made to match grain patch to damaged area.



Patches are worked down to original leg proportions.



Wax is used to fill areas too small to patch.

Furniture conservation has been one of the most difficult and frustrating aspects of the entire restoration process. It has been largely driven by an upcoming exhibition featuring several of the pieces, to be presented this fall at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The deadline forced us to consider things we could have happily put off for years. There is so much consternation in every judgement. If I am certain of anything, it is that we will not be right in all of our decisions. The beauty of this process is that every act of conservation is reversible in the event that time proves us wrong. Nevertheless, decisions have been made and many are reflected here in photography. Each of the six stools and two dining chairs were numbered and photographed before and after conservation by local conservator, Dick Sorenson.



A stool after conservation. Surfaces cleaned, legs patched. Age, history and character still evident.



Stool corner.



Stool shelf.



Stool legs.



Conserved chair.



Finish cleaned.




Legs repaired.



Most of the furniture post conservation, ready for documentation.



The original cushions for dining chairs and ottoman were upholstered in a broad-weave blue fabric. In the 1970s they were recovered in a near florescent orange accented with black vinyl piping and in the late 1980s or early 1990s they were upholstered again in a Schumacher Taliesin Line patterned blue fabric. The last two generations utilized foam rubber cushions inside. We are having the cushions remade in the original cotton batting and horsehair. 



Cushions were sew shut.



Cotton muslin inner cover.



Horsehair and cotton batting.



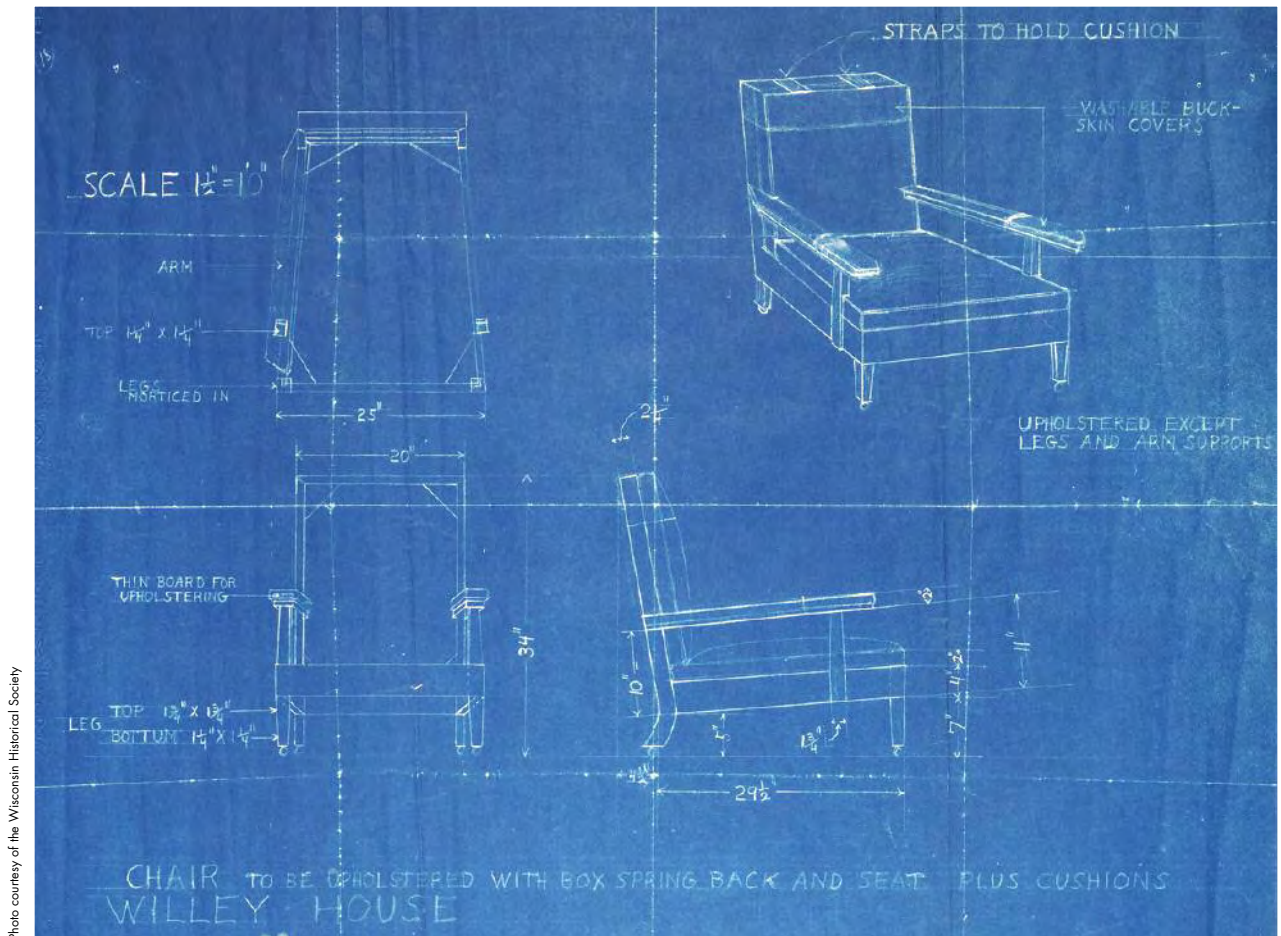
The original horsehair cushions on top of a much later foam pad.



1970's chair pad with vinyl piping.



Drawing of the upholstered chairs.



THE UPHOLSTERED CHAIRS

It was a happy day when I discovered a Frank Lloyd Wright drawing for upholstered chairs in the John Howe Collection of the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison. The drawing was labeled "Chair to be upholstered with box spring back and seat plus cushions, Willey House". Six of these upholstered chairs came with the house, as did various stories of their origin. No vintage photo from Nancy Willey's photo album, the Architectural Record of November 1935 nor from the January 1938 Architectural Forum showed these particular chairs. It was only when a former Taliesin apprentice, John Geiger sent me a photo of himself as a young architecture student visiting Nancy at the Willey House and sitting in one of the chairs that I was able to see with my own eyes proof positive that these chairs were indeed original to the house. And only after finding the blueprinted drawing for the chair in Madison did it become clear that the chairs were designed by Wright.



One of 6 upholstered chairs shown here without cushions.



The first reference to the suggested upholstery for the chairs was curly mohair typically used in the manufacture of Teddy Bears. It appears in a letter from Nancy to Gene Masselink dated December 19, 1937. She wrote;

"Dear Gene,

Will you please ask Mr Wright if Taliesin wants two of the chairs which Mr Jenkins has just completed.

I remember that he said, over a year ago, that Taliesin was going to get some of those chairs made for itself. Mr Jenkins has our six nearly ready. The price is \$65 each, which includes \$20 each, for the covering in eggshell curly mohair. I'm sure the price is fair enough, but however, it does add up to alot; so that if Taliesin wants to take two, I wouldn't mind a bit!"



Profile view of chair.



In a letter dated December 23rd, 1937 Nancy wrote to Gene Masselink

"Dear Gene,

A word about the chairs again: I wrote to Mr Jenkins asking if he could send the chairs without the mohair covering. He replied that he could and would. (By using strong muslin instead.) I am writing this just to say that now you are on your own for the two chairs which Taliesin is going to take and I suppose you should indicate to the Jenkins Company how you want them: whether the mohair cover as planned, or the fur that was being talked about while I was at Taliesin last. (I believe that now all six chairs have just the muslin covering.)"



Chair with original down-filled cushions, sans covers.



From the front.

In a letter from February 4, 1938 Nancy wrote to Wright;

"Our chairs arrived last week. Six of them! Evidently, our friend, L.N. Jenkins Co., did not wish to divide the order. However, it is alright; we are indeed very happy to have six chairs. Thank you for your willingness to help us out. It is a wonderful chair. We love it.

I was horrified at first when I saw the woodwork. It is dark stained, and probably mahogany or cherry. I certainly had expected our light cypress, and thought of course that it was a terrible mistake. But Malcolm calmed me down and suggested that perhaps you had good reasons. Your own chair was dark. I have gotten quite used to it now: the effect is to make the framework of the chair quite inconspicuous."



Later era foam cushion.



Seat and back down cushions are different shapes.



By the time they came to us the chairs had been subjected to a very humid environment for years. As a result the internal padding will need to be replaced and the seat springs restrung. The original back and seat cushions were constructed out of down-filled, form fitted cotton inner cushions. They can be effectively laundered and do not need any reconstruction. A second set of cushions had been fabricated at some point out of foam rubber. Although much more recent in age than the down-filled counterparts they had deteriorated beyond use.

Final images of the reupholstered furniture will be featured in a Fall Restoration Journal when all conservation and upholstery is complete and ready to display.

Excerpts from the Willey/Wright correspondence courtesy of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives.



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