

Eye on Evanston: Thoughts on Design | George Washington Maher

Building Evanston's architectural legacy
by [Stuart Cohen, Design Evanston](#) March 18th, 2022

Have you ever wondered about the exquisite wrought iron fence, gate and stone steps at the corner of Ridge and Lake streets? They are all that is left of the estate that once stood there. It was built in 1901 for James Patten (1852-1928), Evanston's mayor from 1901 to 1905.

Patten, a successful grain broker, was known as the "Wheat King" when he cornered the wheat market, reportedly making \$2 million in one day. Patten was president of Northwestern University's board of trustees, and his heirs left his house to the university in 1938. The university sold it to Hemphill & Associates, who demolished it to build three speculative houses that still stand there today.



Patten Home, 1426 Ridge Ave. (Photo: Inland Architect/Wikimedia Commons)

The design of Patten's house was totally unique at a time when progressive Chicago architects were rethinking the elements of residential architecture. Built of enormous rough-edged stone blocks with openings classically composed and subdivided by round stone columns, the house had a covered stone entryway and a stone porch on the south side, balanced by a two-story round bay on the north. The house resembled an abstracted modern-day Renaissance palazzo. The architect of this extraordinary building was George Washington Maher (1864-1926).

In the 1890s Maher worked for Joseph Lyman Silsbee, one of Chicago's most respected residential architects, along with other apprentice architects who would become well-known: Frank Lloyd Wright; William Purcell, who like Wright would go on to work for Louis Sullivan,

becoming Sullivan's chief assistant; and Irving Gill, who would build modern, precast concrete houses in California. Historians often lump Maher in with the group of architects who became known as the "Prairie School."

This is a misunderstanding of Maher's work. While he shared an interest in making open floor plans, Maher's work was far more symmetrically composed, quirkier and idiosyncratic. His interiors were influenced by Louis Sullivan's decorative work.

Maher believed that the detail elements of each building should be internally consistent. He wrote about this in essays on his "motif rhythm theory," which involved the selection of a single nature-based pattern to be carried out in all the decorative elements of a house. These were inspired by indigenous plants and appeared in wood carved panels, mantle pieces, stained glass windows and wall stenciling as well as in cast metal work such as custom door hardware and light fixtures. Maher also repeated specific geometric shapes throughout his work, such as segmental arches which he used over doorways, window openings and fireplaces, as well as in the design of custom furniture such as cabinetry and chairs.



Patten Gymnasium, 2145 Sheridan Road. (Photo: University Archives, Northwestern Architecture)

While Maher was a Kenilworth resident, he made significant contributions to the city of Evanston and to Northwestern University's campus. His patron James Patten donated \$1.5 million to Northwestern and to other Evanston institutions, including the YMCA and Evanston Hospital. As Patten's architect, Maher designed Northwestern's Patten Gymnasium, built in 1908 with a gift of \$310,000.

The building housed a gymnasium, an indoor baseball diamond and a 10-lane running track. It was built with an arched steel truss roof. The building's front had an overall shape reminiscent of the entry canopies of many of Maher's houses. It was demolished in 1940 to make way for the university's Technological Institute. Maher also designed the Swift Hall of Engineering, completed in 1909, as a gift from the family of meatpacker Gustav Swift.



University Building, 1604 Chicago Ave. (Photo: sitevistamaps.com)

My favorite Maher building still standing in Evanston is at the corner of Chicago and Davis streets. It is the two-story "University Building," an office structure built in 1906 for Evanston real estate agent Charles Wightman.

The building is a simple rectangular volume, with limestone frames on its two sides. These are divided into thirds by two story columns similar to those that were on the Patten house. The second-floor windows between the columns are "Chicago Windows," a term coined to describe a large fixed central window with narrower operable double-hung windows on either side.

Perhaps the most interesting feature are the building's corners. Here the facades step in and then step out again as they turn the corner. This is referred to as a "reentrant corner," a design treatment that may be seen in the mid-century steel and glass buildings of Chicago's Mies van der Rohe.

Maher built 10 other houses in Evanston in addition to James Patten's. Along with his Northwestern buildings, in 1908 he proposed an unbuilt plan for the university's expansion that would have better oriented the campus to the lakeshore. Maher should be remembered as a

prominent early 20th century architectural innovator and one of the architects who helped make Evanston an architectural Mecca.

This essay expands on content that appears in “Evanston: 150 Years 150 Places,” 2015.

Design Evanston’s “Eye on Evanston” articles focus on Evanston’s design history and advocate for good design. Visit designevanston.org to learn more about the organization.

Source: Evanston RoundTable 3.18.22