

Eye on Evanston: Thoughts on Design | Dwight Perkins, architectural pioneer and conservationist

by [Stuart Cohen, Design Evanston](#) July 21st, 2022

Dwight Perkins, while not as well known today as other Evanston architects such as Daniel Burnham, was no less important in his impact on 20th century American architecture.

Perkins was the founder of a multigenerational Evanston family of architects, artists and authors. His son Larry was the founder of the giant architectural firm of Perkins and Will. Larry Perkins and his partner Philip Will, also both lived in Evanston.

My late friend Wilbert Hasbrouck was working on a monograph on Dwight Perkins at the time of his death and all his research is at the Ryerson and Burnham Library at the Art Institute of Chicago, as is the unpublished manuscript *Perkins of Chicago* written in 1966 by Eleanor Ellis Perkins.

A copy of this manuscript is also at the [Evanston History Center](#). A wealth of donated professional drawings and correspondence is in the “Perkins Papers,” an archive of Dwight Perkins materials at the [Chicago History Museum](#).

Dwight Perkins’ (1867-1941) early architectural work included Chicago settlement houses. His family was friends of Jane Addams and Ellen Starr, the founders of Hull House, and they were active supporters of the settlement house movement.

However, Perkins’ greatest contribution would be to transform the design of public school buildings. Born and raised in Chicago, Perkins went to school in Boston at Massachusetts Institute of Technology: MIT. He married a talented art student, Lucy Fitch, whom he met in Boston.



Kearney House (1911) 2610 Lincoln Street. Credit: Jack Weiss

At this time Fitch's sister moved to Evanston but Dwight and Lucy stayed in Boston. After graduation he worked in Boston for the famous architect H. H. Richardson.

Finally returning to Chicago he worked for Burnham and Root, becoming John Wellborn Root's chief assistant. In 1892-3, during Burnham's absence as the supervising architect for the Chicago World's Fair, it was Perkins who was left in charge of Burnham's office.



Perkins House (1904) 2319 Lincoln Street. Credit: Jack Weiss

While Dwight and Lucy first lived in Chicago, Lucy prevailed, and they moved to Evanston in 1904, building a house on Lincoln Avenue next to Lucy's sister. Perkins maintained an apartment in Chicago so he could vote in Chicago elections.

Perkin's as an education architect

In 1905, at the urging of friends, he took the civil service exam, applied for, and was appointed to the position of Chief Architect of the Chicago Board of Education. His job entailed the design of new school buildings as well as enlarging existing structures.

Two of his school buildings, Grover Cleveland Elementary School and Carl Schurz High School have been designated Chicago Landmarks. Perkins' schools were revolutionary, not just for their unusual modern "Prairie School" appearance but for the changes and innovations they included. These innovations are standard in today's schools.



Carl Schurz High School (1910) Chicago. Credit: Flickr, Eric Allix Rogers

Chicago school buildings typically had no outdoor playground space. This was an important feature of all of Perkins' schools. His classrooms featured walls of tall windows improving classroom light and ventilation. He widened hallways. Toilet facilities were typically located in the basement of multistory school buildings but Perkins incorporated them into the plan of every floor. Schools did not have auditoriums or assembly spaces. Perkins argued for them as useful not only to the students and faculty but to the local community.

Perkins also set out to eliminate graft from the construction process by separately letting all the contracts for construction through his office. Before Perkins, no-bid contracts had been frequently awarded to members of the school board. Perkins had taken the position as Chief Architect under the progressive Chicago mayor Edward Dunne, who had appointed reformers such as Jane Addams to serve on the Chicago Board of Education.

Under the subsequent administration a new board headed by Alfred Union sought to oust Perkins claiming that his buildings were too nice, too expensive, used extravagant materials (brick, cut stone and terracotta) and that his failure to heed the Board's demands amounted to insubordination.

Perkins refused to resign and demanded a public trial at which he could present evidence. The newspapers had a heyday and one newspaper cartoonist depicted Union, a well-known alcoholic, haranguing Perkins from inside a bottle of rum. In the end, the trial lasted only several days and in exchange for Perkins' resignation, the board dropped all the charges against him.

The trial had garnered so much public attention both locally and nationally that Perkins was able to open a national practice specializing in school buildings along with John Hamilton, who had also worked as an architect for the Chicago Board of Education.

Their practice boomed and Perkins, along with subsequent partners Fellows and Hamilton, went on to build Evanston's Lincolnwood School (1911), Oakton School (1913), and Evanston Township High School (1924).

Earlier, in 1893, when Perkins left Burnham and Company, Daniel Burnham who had promised to help Perkins begin his practice was instrumental in getting Perkins the commission for Steinway Hall, with Lyon & Healy the Chicago distributors of Steinway Pianos as the main tenant.

In Steinway Hall, Perkins built an office and attic drafting room for himself on the top floor which he shared with Frank Lloyd Wright, Wright's friend Robert Spencer and Evanston architect Myron Hunt. Collectively they employed Walter Burley Griffin, Marion Mahony, Burch Burdette Long, and a handful of others all of whom were important players in the history of Chicago's architectural revolution at the beginning of the last century.



Café Brauer (1908) Chicago. Credit: Victor Grigas, CreativeCommons

Perkins, in addition to the houses and schools he designed in Evanston, should also be remembered for his Prairie School masterpiece, the Lincoln Park South Refectory (1908), known as Café Brauer. Perkins was a lifelong conservationist and along with landscape architect Jens Jensen he was the moving force behind the founding of the Cook County Forest Preserve System now encompassing almost 69,000 acres. When he died in 1941, fellow Evanstonian, architect, and historian, [Thomas Tallmadge](#) wrote, “Mr. Perkins injected into the design of the schools of Cook County, science of a high order and a certain amount of idealism and originality. ...In Chicago when we think of Dwight Perkins...we think of him as a citizen and patriot almost before we think of him as an architect.”

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