

Editor's Notes

By Kelli Andre

Have you ever found yourself looking at an historic building and wondering "what's the inside like?" Or seen an interesting house and wondered if the owners would think you were crazy if you rang their doorbell and asked for a tour? If you have, you're not alone. We all have an innate desire to learn more about things that intrigue us, especially things that we can't see from the right-of-way on the street!

In this issue of *The Minnesota Preservationist* we highlight people and companies who make their living restoring historic interiors. From refinishing historic woodwork to conserving iconic murals, we are profiling those who ensure the view on the inside is as impressive as the exterior.

The preservation of interiors is fodder for debate among preservationists. What constitutes an interior, and are interiors protected by listing in the National Register of Historic Places? Can an interior be listed on its own? Or must an interior listing coincide with an exterior listing? Are there local and/or national protections in place exclusively for historic interiors? I recently posted these questions to the Forum Listserve, an online discussion forum utilized by preservationists nationwide (the listserve is a benefit of being a National Trust Forum member; learn more at <http://www.preservationnation.org/forum/>). The responses I got were interesting; I even received someone's master's thesis on this very topic!

As it turns out, the protection of historic interiors is left to the discretion of local governments. In New York City, their local Landmarks Law allows for the designation of interiors separate from exteriors. These spaces have to be "customarily open or accessible to the public" or must be a space to which the "public is customarily invited." Such spaces tend to be banks, theaters, restaurants, office building lobbies, and civic or institutional buildings like museums and libraries. The City of Philadelphia recently passed a similar law allowing designation of historic interiors, provided that the spaces are open to the public as a part of normal business operations, or, that the space was originally designed to be open to the public.

A bit closer to home, the City of Minneapolis does allow for the designation of interiors, though it usually coincides with exterior designation. An exception (there's always an exception) is the former Forum Cafeteria/Scotties on Seventh/Goodfellows restaurant, which is an interior designation only. In contrast, the City of Saint Paul does not designate interior spaces.

As New York's and Philadelphia's laws exemplify, the protection of historic interiors is often limited to public spaces and largely excludes private residences. Why? One of the benefits of a public space is that it is exactly that: public. They are easier to monitor and it is easier to discover

inappropriate changes. As one of the Forum responses so aptly stated, access should be key to the designation of interiors. One of the basic, driving principles of historic preservation is to preserve our past for the benefit of all people. It could be argued that if the public, who is supposed to benefit from preserved places, is not given equal access to the space, it would seem unjustified to designate that space.

The other side of the equation is that private residences are often subject to the whims of passing styles, technology, and resident needs. This makes it extremely difficult to find an historic interior in its original state. The American value for private property rights makes it even harder to require a homeowner to maintain an interior in its period of significance, as the regulation would not pass the public benefit test.

Frank Lloyd Wright's Little House is a thought-provoking case study on the significance of residential interiors and the need for protective preservation tools. The house once graced the shores of Lake Minnetonka in Wayzata; when the owner wanted to demolish the house in the early 1970s, the rooms were systematically dismantled and sold. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York owns the living room; the Minneapolis Institute of Arts owns the hallway. The Little House exemplifies Wright's concept of "organic architecture," in which the building, setting, interior, and furnishings are inextricably related. Few would argue that a Wright-designed house is not significant, yet one has to wonder if the living room, or even the hallway, retains the significance they are praised for without existing in the context of the entire house and its setting. Are interiors and exteriors

inextricably bound together, or can one be historically significant without the other?

The preservation and protection of interiors raises more questions than it answers: What exactly constitutes an interior? Does an interior simply mean the physical form of the room, the space inside its walls? Does an interior include the furnishings? And without furnishings, does the room possess the same significance (assuming that the furnishings are of the same period of significance as the room)?

The National Register of Historic Places has remarkably little to say about interiors. No separate criteria exist for the designation of interiors as they are typically included with exterior listing. In Minnesota, according to the State Historic Preservation Office, an interior has never been approached as distinct from an exterior, and there are no Minnesota interiors listed individually on the National Register of Historic Places. As for the protection of significant historic interiors, anyone familiar with the National Register sadly knows that listing does not guarantee the protection of a building or space.

Although I realize I've posed more questions than I've answered, I felt the need to address the more academic side of interior preservation. The articles that we feature in this issue beautifully highlight various methods to preserve and restore interior elements, but the topic of protecting these spaces warrants more discussion—far more than we can devote in this magazine. Feel free to delve into the topic on your own—and keep me posted—I'd love to hear what you discover.