



Behind the Scenes of the Hollyhock House Renovation

By Nic Cha Kim

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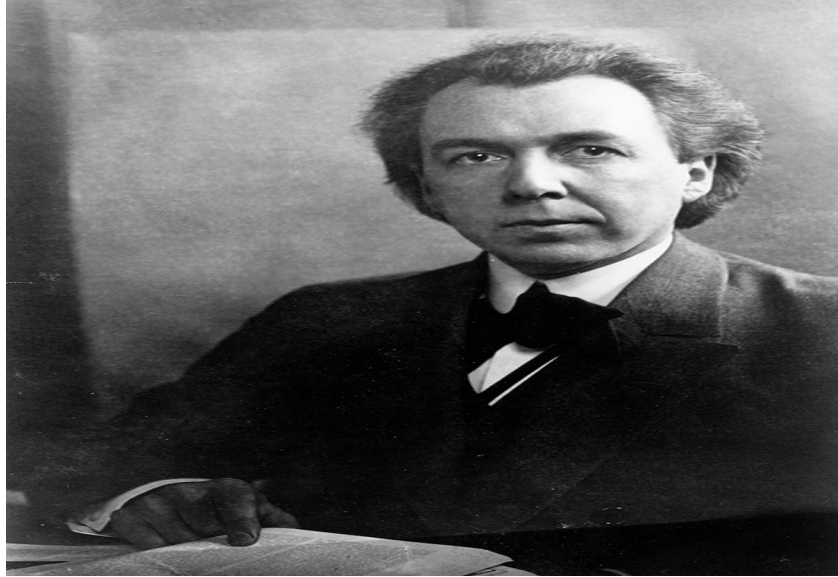
After years of renovations, architect Frank Lloyd Wright's first project in Los Angeles, the Hollyhock House, has recently reopened to the public. The restoration of the house, built in 1921, cost more than \$4 million to repair water damage, among other effects of architectural attrition.

KCET's Nic Cha Kim recently met up with Hollyhock House curator Jeffery Herr to discuss the details of the extensive renovation.

Why is Hollyhock House so significant in context to Frank Lloyd Wright's career?

Frank Lloyd Wright, of course, had a very long career and architectural historians have divided that career up into five phases or five periods, if you will. Hollyhock House is the first house of his 2nd period. It's a transitional house in that sense. You see a lot of his prairie-style design work carried over to Hollyhock House. But Hollyhock House did a couple very important things. First of all, it gave Frank Lloyd Wright the first opportunity to explore that Japanese aesthetic of dissolving the interior and exterior walls or the wall between the interior and the exterior because it's the first time he was able to design a house in a climate that didn't have a freeze thaw cycle.

It's also his first house in Los Angeles and it set the tone for future work that he did for himself. In other words, it gave him a springboard for rethinking the way people live and how they use their homes. It also influenced names that you'll recognize, Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra, who went on to become major architects in the California Modernism Movement. The upshot of all of this is Hollyhock House is one of the earliest laboratories for really what became the ranch style house in America.



Why is it called Hollyhock House?

It's called Hollyhock House because it was Aline Barnsdall's favorite flower. She asked Frank Lloyd Wright to use the design in her house and he did in a super way. What he did was make an abstract design. The vertical plant with the square flower blocks coming off each side. He not only used that in the architectural ornamentation of the house on the exterior, but in the interior, you can see it in furniture, in textiles, and you can even see it in the floorplan of the house.

Who was Aline Barnsdall?

Aline Barnsdall's money came from oil but she sold her oil interests to her sister immediately upon inheriting them. So her interests were all theatrical or performance or philanthropic or political radicalism, if you will. So what you have here, though, is a typical sort of Frank Lloyd Wright designing for a space more than for any kind of broader agenda -- whether it's a social entertaining or any other kind of personal agenda that the owner or the person that commissioned this might have.

How long did the renovation take and how much did it cost?

We were closed for about three years, but there was an additional year of planning and approvals that were required in order to get to the construction phase of this. Our grants totaled almost \$4.5 million for this particular restoration program. The primary goal was to make the house water-tight. If your house isn't water-tight, you're going to lose most of the fabric and of course this house has always had a problem with leaking roofs and clogged drains. So that was the primary impetus for preservation here. It allowed us though to do a lot of the restoration of details that had been erased over time -- erased because of damage, erased because of taste, or just lost due to nothing more than simple pragmatism.



Hollyhock appears to be a Mayan Temple to me, those lasted a thousand years. Why is Hollyhock House so brittle?

Mayan temples probably lasted even longer but you have to remember they're built of monumental stone. Hollyhock House is made of hollow clay tile covered with stucco. Yes, there's concrete used in it, but even concrete is not a permanent type of building material. And as wonderful as pre-Columbian temples are in terms of their design, all you see is the exterior profile. What Hollyhock House has is a very intricate interior design scheme, designed for residential living, not a tomb meant to be used by a mummy.

What work remains in the restoration?

We will never be done. First of all, everyone that has owned a house knows it takes continual maintenance. Once you do a roof, in 15-20 years, you're likely to have to do it over again. The other thing about this house is that it's a very special house. It's a Historic National Landmark and it's also been nominated by the U.S. for the UNESCO World Heritage status. That puts it in a very elite status which means anything we do has to be done with a great deal of care. You can't just unilaterally make a decision and decide to execute it. It takes a village if you will, but more than that it takes a lot of thought and that translates to considerable extra dollars to make something happen and make it happen that is consistent with preservation standards.

What's next [for us] is our forecourt. It looks like a parking lot and indeed in 1921 it was meant to bring cars and visitors into put to the house, but it wasn't like it looks today so our Foundation, the Barnsdall Art Foundation, is getting ready to mount a capital campaign. We have a historic structure report that has been drafted. We're in the process of approving that so we know exactly what to do. That's also part of the way you would treat a Historic National Landmark like this. What that will do is create what real estate people would call curb appeal. You walk in and it will look like a grand estate house as opposed to something that's a little bit on the industrial side.

What will the public notice as updates to the house?

If the public comes in and says this is great what did they do, that's the best thing that can happen in a restoration program. You really don't want it to be obvious that it's new or that it's been changed. I think we've achieved that to a great extent. People who've been to Hollyhock House before will notice a difference but if you've never been here and indeed many of the people that have been through the house since we reopened on February 13th of 2015 walk in and their comments are range from "this is amazing" to "this is enchanted" and that's the kind of reaction that's very gratifying and that's what you really want.



What do you think Lloyd Wright would say about the changes you've made?

Lloyd [Frank's son] had a very interesting relationship with this house. He did the first renovations in 1946, which were for a particular client, The Olive Hill Foundation. The client had a certain say in what those changes were. And the city of LA... it wasn't that they were abdicating responsibility but at that point in time, Hollyhock House, while being special, was not quite as special as public perception of it is today. Lloyd came back in the 1970s at the request of the city to do a restoration and he made what he did was reverse some of those changes he made in the 40s and reversed them back to 1921, but he didn't reverse all of them and we don't know whether that had to do with budget, the client, the city, or his own preference but we have done in this particular restoration is follow Lloyd's lead from the 70s and reverse some of those other changes back to 1921. I'm going to take a guess and say, "he's say 'yeah, right on.'"

What made the fireplace unique?

Frank Lloyd Wright of course did some extraordinary things with this particular fireplace. Fireplaces are always the center of the home. Here it not only becomes the center, but the theatrical focal point. One of his masterworks is this bas-relief, this made of cast concrete. Of course, it utilizes his abstractions of the Hollyhock flower and it becomes a modernist landscape. Lots of people put paintings above their fireplaces. This sort of out does that. What you see it not just the bas relief above the fireplace. He emphasizes it with a pool. A place for water. We don't have water today for a number of reasons but again, you have the water. Above it, you have a skylight, so it's this entire theatrical *maison* scene, as it were. And of course, it incorporates the 4 elements: earth, air, fire, and water.

Wright liked to do total environments. For Hollyhock House, Aline Barnsdall commissioned furniture for the dining room and Living Room. The monumental sofas here, which are not easily moved. In fact, they're immovable. What you have is not something set up for conversation, but something that is designed for viewing his own masterpiece.



What was the design inspiration behind the chairs?

This was designed exclusively for Hollyhock house. You can see that the shape of the table is hexagonal, which mirrors the design of the filigree in the wall paneling. The chairs are also part of that Hollyhock inspired design. If you take a look at the back of the chair, you can see he has abstracted that design. It doesn't look anything like the concrete Hollyhock but what it looks like is a bit like human vertebrae. Of course, it's the spine of the chair so you have a visual pun.