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Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House Returns to Its Roots

By Ann Kats

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Blouin News says:



In Los Angeles during the 20th century, houses reigned supreme — the Schindler House and the Case Study Houses are but a few of the modernist residences that continue to define the city's architectural identity. But before any of those renowned residences could be built, there was the Hollyhock House, the first home Frank Lloyd Wright ever designed and built in Los Angeles.

The 1921 residence for heiress Aline Barnsdall was gifted to the city of Los Angeles in 1927 and formally opened as a public house-museum in 1976. In the years before and since, the home underwent various renovations and began to suffer structural damage — all of which led the city, which still owns and operates the building, to close it for restoration work in 2012. Next month will mark the end of a \$4.35 million effort to bring it back to its original 1920s condition. The house's chief curator, Jeffrey Herr, spoke to ARTINFO about the grueling restoration process and the continued relevance of Wright's Los Angeles body of work.

What were the problems that led you to decide that closure and restoration of the Hollyhock House were necessary?

In the simplest of terms, the roof was leaking and the drains were stopped up. So you have flat roofs and clogged drains, you can imagine the kind of damage that occurs with continual impact of water penetration. That was the main impetus, but there were other issues in terms of foundations. Some of that was even the residue of the Northridge earthquake [of 1994]. Work had, of course, been done before. As with any old house, you start to see things come up that weren't visible or noticeable before. It's an architecturally complicated house with different roof levels, and

different levels in the interior, and it sort of escalates into a very complex program of trying to maintain the home.

Were there significant issues beyond the foundation and roof? Has the interior been altered as part of the current restoration effort?

I wouldn't say that there were significant issues other than that, but in the process of correcting those, we were able to uncover a lot of evidence as to how the house actually looked in 1921. And we were able to actually get a really good idea of the direction we should be going in. It also gave us an opportunity to do a lot of conservation and scientific analysis. That, in turn, led to restoring all the surfaces inside that were impacted because of our work on the roof. For instance, we had to remove an entire porch roof in order to actually fix the issues and the problems surrounding it. This wasn't the roof from 1921; this was actually a replacement from the 1970s. But the impact of that on the interior was significant, and the good news is that we were able to resolve a lot of questions about how that looked. We have a picture, but they often don't give you a lot of detail — especially if they're in black and white — about how a space actually looked. What we've been able to do is take a structure that, on the inside was in many ways over the years “beige-d” out — it lost its lush, exotic feel, it lost a lot of architectural detail, and some of that was due to the problems with water penetration and maintenance, when they'd come in and fix things by making them more modern. What we've done in a sense [laughs] is making it harder to keep up, just by bringing back all that detail which now requires more maintenance.

For instance, that porch in 1921 had 14 accordion glass panels that opened up and folded up. In the 1970s, Lloyd Wright [Frank Lloyd Wright's son, also an architect] said, “That's kind of difficult to maintain, we'll just put in sliding glass doors.” Very '70s, very contemporary for the period, but changed the entire architectural feeling of that particular space. We now have 14 glass panel doors that accordion fold, so that we really can dissolve the wall between the exterior and the interior — which was Wright's intent.

How did you go about recovering evidence of the Hollyhock House's original condition?

Well, the house has had two major interventions in its life — one in 1946 and one in 1974. Lloyd Wright was the architect for both of those, so he did renovate — and I mean renovate — the house in the '40s, but then he came back in the '70s and he did a restoration of that. Which meant that he reversed some of the changes he had made in the '40s. He didn't reverse all of them and in one instance we reversed his alteration from the '30s to again take it back to the '20s.

Did you work with a preservation expert for the current restoration?

Yes, we had a conservation person here under contract. I also acted as the historic restoration professional for this, and of course, given that our funding came from the

California Cultural and Historical Endowment, and also from the National Parks Service, anything that we proposed to do also had to be approved by their historic preservation experts.

How long was the entire process, from the moment you decided to undertake a restoration?

Well, we got the grant in 2009, from the Historical and Cultural Endowment. The City of Los Angeles matched that. Work began in 2010, but a lot of that work was planning, drawing — the actual work didn't start until 2011.

And what are the curatorial plans for the re-opened Hollyhock House?

The Department of Cultural Affairs will continue to work on the interpretation of the interiors to bring them more in line with the way Barnsdall actually furnished the house — including reproducing missing pieces of the Wright furniture that he designed especially for Hollyhock House. We do not have an exhibition schedule planned.

Do you think that the re-opening of the Hollyhock House might shed a new light on the Wright legacy in Southern California?

Yes, it does. You can say that with the restoration of these details, this house, which is important within Wright's own work — it was his first house in Southern California, it was the first house of his second period — is going to allow people to understand better why this house is important, why this house can actually be viewed as an early prototype for the ranch-style house in America, and just how influential it was in the development of California modernism.

And you know, when Richard Meier was asked to name his favorite places in Los Angeles, Hollyhock House was right at the top of the list. So in addition to having Frank Lloyd Wright as having some outstandingly innovative design ideas and having made an incredible impact on the world of architecture, you still have very influential and important architects looking at this house.