

Ornament and Promiscuity

Edgar Tafel's First Presbyterian Church House

As Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum was finally approaching completion in 1959, construction began on one of the Wrightian camp's few other incursions into Manhattan. This project – dark, orthogonal, recessive, and historically referential – was a foil to the Guggenheim in every way, and has remained as obscure as Wright's museum is famous.

At the southwest corner of 5th Avenue and 12th Street, set back from the side yard of the First Presbyterian Church (1842-46, Joseph C. Wells) a passerby might, or just as well might not, note an odd and reticent block that serves as the Church House. The initial impression is of a pastiche of historical motifs decorating a functionalist cube, the result of some 1930's architect's naïve, charming stab at modernity. Actually, the Church House has more baffling origins in the postwar work of one of Wright's most successful protégés, Edgar Tafel. Tafel is best known for memorializing his experiences working on the Johnson Wax Building and Fallingwater in several general-audience books. However, beyond a clear reverence for Wright, his recollections suggest a resistance and realism that led him to leave Taliesin in 1941 and become one of its few alumni to develop a significant independent career.

Relocating to New York, Tafel began doing work, often for religious institutions, that upended Wright's standoffishness toward historical precedent. Sidestepping Taliesin's influence, he opened up his designs to an almost excessive range of stylistic and contextual allusions. The joy of Tafel's work is in the promiscuity of his references and, especially, the pictorial skill with which he arranges and manipulates them.



First Presbyterian Church House, 12th Street entry
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The Presbyterian Church House reveals itself in three stages. At first, it is hardly noticeable, set back behind a lawn along the north flank of the old church and masked by trees. Its monotone sepia brickwork, exactly matching the color of the church's stone, makes it recede even further. The passages of schematic ornament across its façade signal that it's basically in the style of the church, and deflect closer attention. However, a second look reveals that the Church House doesn't belong to the same period as its parent building at all and actually has a very ambiguous presence. Now, it manifests as a slightly facetious mash-up of gothic, deco, and early Modern elements of indeterminate age and origin.

Finally, moving past reticence and strangeness, the Church House emerges as a rigorous and considered example of Tafel's work. The body of the building is a simple block of brown roman brick with large steel sash windows. Apart from incremental modulation of the window dimensions and the brick planes to emphasize corners and piers, a deadpan regularity governs everything. Onto this plain body, Tafel applies a grid of fancy articulation according to strict rules. On the horizontal, strips of repeated quatrefoils in precast concrete literally replicate the stone parapets of original church. On the vertical, green-glazed terracotta ridges recall the color and profile of the church windows' tracery.

The overall dark color of the Church House camouflages the sparseness and schematic quality of the ornament, which is pretty startling upon study. Both the horizontal and vertical elements sit out from the surface of the masonry volume. The terracotta seems (possibly) engaged with mass of the building, but the quatrefoils strips are clipped on as shallow balconies with open returns at the sides. The top of the Church House is also ornamented on each side with a nearly free-floating cornice of the

quatrefoil strips; these do not meet at the building's corners, leaving the edge of the plain masonry box exposed from top to bottom

Tafel vividly manipulates this limited ornament-grid system to create directional motion across the surface of the simple building mass. At the bottom stories, the horizontal quatrefoil strips are most prominent, and project out far enough to become true balconies at the second floor, rippling from the plane of the lawn up into the building to provide a visual base for the façade. Above, the green terracotta ridges rise unbroken to the quatrefoil cornice, giving the upper floors a pronounced vertical lift. This activated gridding is the clearest Wrightian mode here, although it's tipped from a plan operation (as Wright characteristically used it) up to a generative façade strategy recalling the Chicago School. Tafel also employs it to the very un-Wrightian end of ghosting in articulation while maintaining appropriate deference to the adjacent church.

Tafel's Church House is a provocatively early example of omnivorous contextualism that uses ornament as found object, but its reserve and peculiarity have ensured that it has received only the most modest recognition. The highly considered operations that Tafel performed here stayed stuck in obscurity, and the responsive eclecticism he pursued would only receive wider consideration when it was filtered through – and given the imprimatur of – more legitimate sources over the next twenty years. While all eyes were on Wright's Guggenheim, the Church House anticipated a far more widespread upheaval in architecture's future.