

SULLIVAN, Francis Conroy (1882 – 1929)

A colleague and follower of Frank Lloyd Wright, Francis Conroy Sullivan challenged the reigning Victorian style of his time. By espousing the principles of the Prairie School and adapting them to the Canadian environment, he pioneered a new, modern architecture in Canada.

Francis Sullivan was born of Irish-American parents in Kingston, Ontario on July 2, 1882. When he was eighteen, his family moved to Ottawa, and he began his career as apprentice carpenter with his uncle. The next few years saw Sullivan progress to carpenter, draftsman and, in 1907, architect in Oakland, California. He returned to Ottawa the following year and joined the staff of the Chief Architect's office at the Department of Public Works, soon moonlighting in partnership with architect Moses Edey. He married in the summer of 1910.

Unhappy about being passed over for the position of Chief Architect, Sullivan submitted his resignation from Public Works and worked earnestly towards winning the role of architect for the new Pembroke Library. He succeeded in April, 1911, in association with Frank Lloyd Wright. Although early schemes presented to the Library board appear to be Wright's work, the final built design is generally credited to Sullivan.

Buoyed by public recognition with the Pembroke Library, Sullivan opened his own office in Ottawa in 1912, marking the formal beginning of a vibrant, if short-lived, private practice. Some of his best work was built in Ottawa including the Horticulture Building in Landsdowne Park; his own house; the Gormon Residence along the Ottawa River, (unfortunately demolished in the 1950's) and the Connor's Residence on Huron Street. He designed a number of other residences, post offices, fire halls, schools and churches throughout Canada during this period.

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the supply of new work was abruptly curtailed and, by 1916, had all but disappeared. Sullivan closed his office, sold his house and moved his family to an

apartment. Frank Lloyd Wright visited him in Ottawa en route to Tokyo, and shortly thereafter, Sullivan left for the United States with his family to work with Wright as an associate at Taliesin, particularly on the Tokyo Imperial Hotel. An exhibition of Wright's work at the Art Institute of Chicago, in 1916, included three works attributed to both Wright and Sullivan as associated architects.

In 1917, Sullivan was appointed as Director of Construction for the military hospital at Ste-Anne de Bellevue, Quebec and moved his family there, returning to Ottawa in 1918 or 19. The Sullivan family permanently returned to the United States in 1921. Sullivan drifted from firm to firm in Chicago for the next six years, his short temper and strongly held views often coming to odds with his employers' wishes. In 1922, he met a young colleague, A.C. Kriewall, who shared his passion for architecture and who became his devoted apprentice. Kriewall, a more diplomatic and well-liked employee, often finished work begun by Sullivan who, after a characteristic row with their employer, would leave in a fit, pounding the streets for another job. When the work was completed, Kriewall would dutifully join his mentor.

As a condition for securing the position of Chief Architect for the Chicago Board of Education, Sullivan became an American citizen in 1924 and a member of both the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada and the Ontario Association of Architects. His health and personal life, already strained, began to suffer irreparably. In 1927, Sullivan was divorced by his wife and underwent an operation for throat cancer. Kriewall, patient to the limit, finally felt he could not put up with Sullivan's tirades any longer and left him for good.

Happily, Sullivan's last days were spent in the family atmosphere of his mentor's studio when he accepted Wright's invitation to become a member of his select staff in Phoenix, Arizona in 1928. He died there on April 4, the following year, a few months before the Wall Street Crash.