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Frank Lloyd Wright apprentice cast his influence over Chicago suburbs

Barry Byrne's designs diverged from master but still embraced organic way of building

By Blair Kamin

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Architect Barry Byrne gave the interior of St. Thomas an open, column-free space. (Jose M. Osorio, Chicago Tribune)

Chicago loves to call itself the cradle of modern architecture, but what exactly is modern architecture? The steel and glass skyscrapers of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe? The Prairie School houses of Frank Lloyd Wright?

Maybe those are the wrong questions. To some, modernism isn't — or, rather, shouldn't be — a style. A building's inner workings, especially its floor plan and the activities it organizes, should generate its outer shell. Form ought to follow function, not fashion.

The late Chicago architect Barry Byrne, an apprentice of Frank Lloyd Wright, believed passionately in this organic way of building. "We know too much about surface things, too little about what lies beyond the surface," he once wrote.

Byrne, who died in 1967 at 83, was a devout Catholic who pushed his church in new architectural directions. His thrust-altar churches in Chicago, Tulsa, Okla., and Cork, Ireland, anticipated by decades the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, which sought to break down traditional barriers between priests and parishioners. Byrne's buildings, including private homes, schools and dormitories, also grace the Chicago suburbs of Wilmette, Lisle and Park Ridge.

But like many of Wright's apprentices, he's long been obscured by the master's shadow.

He gets his due, though, in a fine new biography, "The Architecture of Barry Byrne: Taking the Prairie School to Europe." The book, by Vincent Michael, executive director of the Global Heritage Fund in Palo Alto, Calif., and a faculty member at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, skillfully reveals how

Byrne carved a path separate from Wright's and sheds fresh light on his interactions with Europe's architectural avant-garde.

Even though the book is something of a family affair — Michael is married to Byrne's granddaughter, Felicity Rich, who took most of the book's photographs — it is a solid scholarly work, untainted by favoritism.

Born in 1883, Byrne came from a lower-middle-class Irish family on Chicago's West Side. His father was a railroad blacksmith. His mother had witnessed the Great Chicago Fire. Byrne dropped out of grade school. But his life took shape in 1902 when he was dazzled by a Wright exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. Later that year, Wright hired him as an office boy.

Wright's Oak Park studio, Michael writes, "was Byrne's high school and university, and the irregular and meager pay did little" to curb his enthusiasm.

Byrne supervised the construction of Wright's Unity Temple in Oak Park. Eventually he opened his own shop and charted his own architectural course.

As Michael writes, Byrne's 1920s churches shared Wright's earth-toned palette, but unlike Wright's ground-hugging forms, they were resolutely vertical, with tall, narrow windows culminating in triangular arches.

Byrne's buildings also featured captivating ornament that broke ranks with the later modernist penchant for smooth-surfaced abstraction.

Sculpted cherubs adorn the entrance to the St. Francis Xavier School in Wilmette. Finials and stylized trees of life enliven the massive brick walls of St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood. Ornament, Byrne believed, was legitimate so long as it grew from a building's structure and function rather than being applied arbitrarily. Alfonso Iannelli, who designed the famous Sprite sculptures at Wright's Midway Gardens, was his frequent collaborator.

Located at 55th Street and Kimbark Avenue, the Hyde Park church remains a striking presence, more than 80 years after it was dedicated. The exterior's serrated corners, triangle-topped windows and terra cotta ornament are at once massive and human-scaled, evocative of Gothic architecture but free of imitation.

The stepped ceiling of the column-free interior, made possible by steel roof trusses, echoes the serrations outside. A thrust stage juts toward the long rows of wooden pews, rimmed by a long railing encouraged by a papal initiative that sought to increase the ranks of parishioners receiving Communion.

While the interior has been compromised by a traditional canopy and other features that are out of sync with Byrne's aesthetic, the building as a whole was revolutionary, anticipating changes in church architecture inspired by the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s.

"Just as Wright had created the residential open plan" in his Prairie School houses, Michael writes, "Byrne gave the Catholic church a column-free interior."

When Byrne traveled to Europe in the summer of 1924, buildings like St. Thomas the Apostle were his calling card as he visited such avant-garde architects as Mies. At this stage, Michael writes, a series of new architectural movements — expressionism, constructivism and others — competed with one

another. Modernism had not been codified into a style that Byrne came to revile for its arid, anti-humanist forms of steel, glass and concrete.

The Depression humbled Byrne, as it did other architects, but he returned to active practice in the postwar era, producing such memorable works as the fish-shaped St. Francis Xavier Church in Kansas City. Near his 84th birthday, a car struck and killed him as he crossed a street in Evanston on his way to church.

A plaque at St. Thomas the Apostle aptly remembers Byrne as "A Man Ahead of His Time."

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