

A Minnesota Prairie Style: John Howe and the Menomonie Public Library

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Abstract

This paper highlights and analyzes architect John H. Howe's 1986 design for the Menomonie Public Library, and the preliminary designs leading up to its completion. A prolific Midwest architect in his later career; Howe was Frank Lloyd Wright's chief draftsman for 27 years. He was known for his speed and proficiency at architectural drawings, which illustrated the profound integration of Wright's buildings into the landscape. He closely followed Wright's philosophies and later adapted Prairie School architecture for Minnesota's unique climate. The Menomonie Public Library illustrates the primary elements found in Howe's designs. It is based upon a geometric structure and is tailored to suit the characteristic of the site and the needs of the client. Carefully selected natural and modern building materials as well as the surrounding landscape serve as the inspiration for the design. The Menomonie Public library is a unique and functionally beautiful example of organic architecture in the Midwest.

Keywords: John H. Howe, organic architecture, architecture, Frank Lloyd Wright, Menomonie Public Library, Minnesota Prairie School

Architect John H. Howe was retained in 1981 to design a new public library in Menomonie, Wisconsin. This commission was gained near the end of a long and distinguished career. Howe's primary influence was that of his mentor, the founder of organic architecture, Frank Lloyd Wright. Though he was draftsman for Wright's most famous projects, Howe's work is relatively unknown. The Menomonie Public Library is functional and elegant, carefully integrated into the lakeshore landscape; it is the result of an extensive process of design iteration. While it shares similarities with Wright's work, the building is an example

of Howe's unique design method, which he called the Minnesota Prairie Style.

John Howe realized over 80 buildings in the Twin Cities area of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota, including the First Church of Christ, Scientist, in New Brighton, Minnesota and the public library in Menomonie, Wisconsin. Homes located in western Twin Cities suburbs comprise the majority of his built designs. The houses are not readily visible because they are so carefully worked into the landscape.¹ This defining aspect of organic architecture becomes increasingly vital as development takes over wild places in the urban environment. Organic buildings take into consideration both the physical and spiritual needs of their occupants. The designs are simple, honest and functional, with formal elements based upon abstraction of natural forms. Howe's buildings include some of the best examples of organic architecture in the Midwest.²

The Menomonie Public Library rests on the shore of lake Menomin, in the university town of Menomonie, Wisconsin, which is located about an hour from Minneapolis, Minnesota (Image 1). The building is subtly earth sheltered. It has a hipped roof, brick exterior walls,

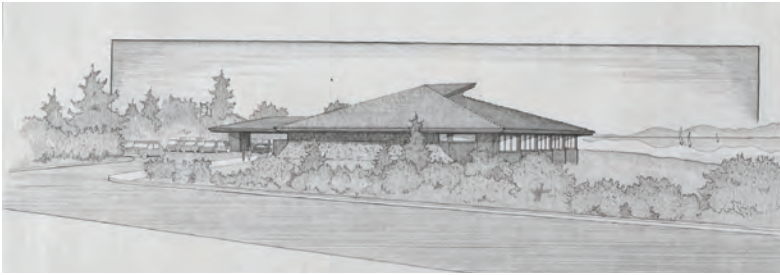


Image 1. Howe, J. H.. Menomonie Public Library II View from the Southwest. [Colored pencil on blueline]. John Howe Collection (N14). University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, MN.

and is oriented to face away from the road toward the lake. The final design of the library was completed after an extensive process of re-design, aligning Howe's architectural ideals with the practical requirements and budget provided by the community.

¹ Linda Mack, 2000. *Living in a Howe house: Wright's draftsman also built a lot.* Star Tribune. Retrieved 3/24/12:1. <http://www.startribune.com/lifestyle/11478911.html?refer=y>

² *Ibid.*

John Howe and Frank Lloyd Wright

John Henry Howe was born on May 17, 1913 and was raised in Evanston, Illinois, an affluent Chicago suburb. He lived in a neighborhood with a number of houses designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and his draftsman, Walter Burley Griffin. When Howe was a child he aspired to become an architect and hoped to work with Frank Lloyd Wright. He said that he had happy childhood memories of bicycling in Oak Park and Chicago's North Shore to visit Wright's buildings.³

In 1932, one week after graduating from high school in Evanston, he joined the first class of students in the Taliesin Fellowship, an apprenticeship program under Frank Lloyd Wright, later to become the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture. Wright and his wife Olgivanna Lloyd Wright founded the Fellowship that same year in Spring Green, Wisconsin. Living and working at Taliesin was a formative experience for Howe. He said that Frank Lloyd Wright taught him how to live. The apprentices worked alongside Wright in all things, sharing the tasks of everyday living. During the Great Depression everyone at Taliesin, including Wright, worked at subsistence farming. Howe learned the joy of hard work and the appreciation of music. Frank Lloyd Wright taught a fundamental work ethic, believing the words of a hymn they would sing at Taliesin, "Joy in work is man's desiring."⁴

A man of remarkable integrity and social conscience, John Howe was arrested at Taliesin in 1942 for refusing conscription into the army during WWII. In 1943 he was put on trial and sentenced to prison. He spent nearly three years in the Federal Correctional Institution at Sandstone, Minnesota.⁵ The facility was minimum security and Howe continued to work, creating a number of designs for buildings and futuristic objects, like a motor home for Frank Lloyd Wright. He also taught drafting to fellow inmates, many of whom were imprisoned for the same reason.⁶

From the beginning of his apprenticeship, Howe distinguished himself through his excellent skill in drawing and drafting. In 1935 he became chief draftsman and senior

³ Richard L. Kronick, *The Pencil in Frank Lloyd Wright's Hand, Journal of the Taliesin Fellows - Issue 23. Summer (1998): 4-17. Los Angeles: Taliesin Fellows, 7.*

⁴ Richard Kronick, 1998, *The Pencil in Frank Lloyd Wright's Hand, 15.*

⁵ MIA, *John Howe in Minnesota: The Prairie School Legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright, September 2, 2000-January 7, 2001. Contributors: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy. Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2000, 1.*

⁶ Jane K. Hession, & Tim Quigley, 26 no. 4 (Sept./Oct. 2000). *The future imagined : John Howe in Sandstone. Architecture Minnesota, 42.*

apprentice in charge of the Taliesin drafting studios. He rendered the ideas that Wright created, supervised the work of the apprentices and traveled to oversee various building sites. Howe worked so closely with his mentor that his desk was adjacent to Wright's and they often shared drafting tables, taking turns working on the same drawing. He learned to work very quickly in order to keep up with Wright. It is said he could create finished drawings more quickly than drawings can be created with computer assistance today.⁷ John Howe produced many of the beautiful drawings associated with Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture. He worked with Wright on hundreds of projects, including the senior architect's most famous and influential works. Howe was the draftsman for Wright's masterpiece, Fallingwater (1934) in Mill Run, Pennsylvania, the Johnson Wax Building (1936) in Racine, Wisconsin, and the Guggenheim Museum in New York City (1943).

Frank Lloyd Wright was an excellent draftsman and taught Howe the style and drawing technique that Wright had perfected under his teacher Louis Sullivan, an influential architect known as the "father of modernism". With Wright's guidance, Howe refined his skill at producing pencil and ink plans and perspectives. Howe created two sets of hand colored drawings for each project, often drawn directly onto the blue-line drawings. His hallmark technique involved many perfectly rendered parallel lines, illustrating planes in color. Howe was known for his unique, stylized way of rendering vegetation, showing the integration of the design into the site, a cornerstone of organic architecture.⁸ These drawings distinguished Howe throughout his career. The excellence and speed at which he could render was truly remarkable. This skill undoubtedly aided him in the second chapter of his career, his architecture practice in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

John Howe's Life After Taliesin

In April of 1959, at the age of 91, Frank Lloyd Wright passed away while undergoing surgery in Phoenix, Arizona. Howe continued to work at Taliesin, helping to complete projects that were in progress and starting new commissions, running the Taliesin studio along with Wes Peters, Wright's engineer and son-in-law. They completed projects that were started under Frank

⁷ Myron A. Marty & Shirley L. Marty, 1999, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin Fellowship*. Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press.

⁸ Jane King Hession & Tim Quigley, *The future imagined: John Howe in Sandstone*, 42.

Lloyd Wright such as the Marin County Civic Center and the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. At this time, most of the senior apprentices remained at Taliesin. Howe and Peters, along with about ten senior apprentices eventually formed the group the Taliesin Associated Architects.

In 1964 John Howe left Taliesin to join the San Francisco office of Aaron Green, the West Coast representative of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. Howe wanted to start an architecture office in Santa Cruz, California, but was getting requests for work in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He had designed three houses in Minneapolis while he was at Taliesin. In August of 1967, he opened an office on Wayzata Boulevard in Minneapolis.

John Howe's Philosophy

After years of developing his architecture practice, Howe found in his mid-career that he was a regional architect with a philosophy adapted specifically to the Midwest. He observed that the Minnesota area called for a unique form of architecture. Flat roofs could not withstand severe winters. Windows must be oriented to the south. Integration of passive solar building design, the use of a building's site, and materials to minimize energy use, was necessary for buildings to be comfortable through severe winters. About this Howe said, "I have developed a Minnesota Prairie School architecture... I also confess to following somewhat in the footsteps of Purcell and Elmslie who were here first and did wonderful work."⁹

William Gray Purcell and George Grant Elmslie, like Frank Lloyd Wright were practitioners of Prairie School architecture, a style beginning in the late 19th century. They described their work as 'organic', referring to a philosophy of integration and intentional reference to natural forms. The style aspired to qualities of honesty and democracy, called for the design of the building and its contents to be integrated and for functional form to be the basis of the design.¹⁰ Organic architecture grew out of ideas of both the Prairie Style and the late 19th century Arts and Crafts movement, promoted by John Ruskin and William Morris. This philosophy embraced ideals of honesty in materials, hand crafted production and exceptional design of every day objects.

⁹ Richard Kronick, 1998, *The Pencil in Frank Lloyd Wright's Hand*, 6.

¹⁰ David Gebhard, 2006, *Purcell & Elmslie: Prairie Progressive Architects*, Gibbs Smith, Salt Lake City, 191-21-22.

John Howe's Design Method

John Howe's designs originated with the inherent characteristics of the site and drew inspiration from carefully chosen building materials. He embraced the principles of organic architecture, the most important being "the land is the beginning of architecture."¹¹ Once he had visited a site and become familiar with it, Howe became inspired to create a design based upon the landscape and the needs of the people who would live there. He would start with a topographical map, then orient the house to the compass points and surrounding views. He carefully considered the role of light and shadow, the orientation of the morning sun and details such as where the rain falls from the roof.¹² He kept intact certain aspects of the site, beautiful rocks and trees.

Elements of organic architecture include interiors that are divided into zones that were based upon the intended function of the space. The plans were very open; the shared areas of the house such as living and dining rooms were often delineated by a change in the height and construction of the ceiling. Walls were used to separate private portions of the house such as bathrooms, bedrooms and the kitchen. Terraces, balconies and banks of windows intentionally brought nature inside, blurring the boundary between the building and the outdoor environment.¹³ Howe's buildings have a unique spatial composition based upon an underlying geometric structure. Each architectural element within the library's plan fits within this matrix.

The structure is more involved and considered than a simple grid pattern or rule of proportion. Naturally inspired geometric forms determine the building's structure. Each architectural component 'grows' from that structure. The design for the Menomonie Public Library began as a deliberate matrix of lines that is similar to tree branches, or perhaps molecular system of units. This method helps to create a sense of order and aesthetic unity in the space.

In keeping with the Prairie School, John Howe created objects that were integrated into the architecture of a building, including stained glass, furniture, built-in cabinets and light fixtures. He used very limited ornament in his buildings; often

¹¹ John H. Howe & M. Tanigawa, 1975, *John H. Howe, Architect/visiting professor, Nihon University, Dept. of Architecture, College of Engineering, Nihon University, 1.*

¹² Linda Mack, 2000, *Living in a Howe house: Wright's draftsman also built a lot, 1.*

¹³ Koning, H. & Eizenberg, J. (1981). *The language of the prairie: Frank Lloyd Wright's prairie houses. Environment and Planning B. 313.*

limiting architectural ornamentation to perforated or hinged boards around the soffit, a feature seen in the Menomonie Public Library. Ornamentation was minimal, and an integrated part of the whole, “as flowers on the tree”, something more profound than surface decoration.¹⁴ These characteristics of simplicity and integration are illustrated in the series of design drawings leading to its completion.

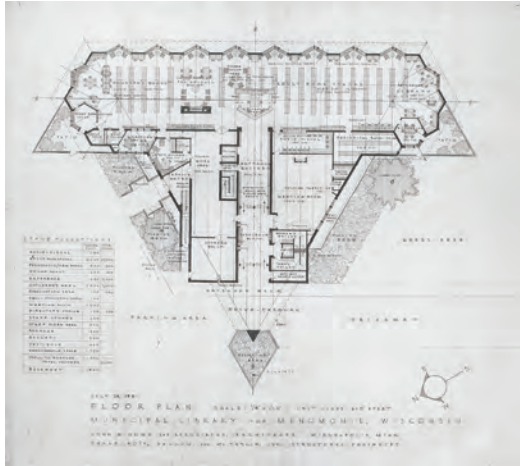


Image 2. Howe, J. H. (Date, Month). *Menomonie Public Library II Floor Plan*. [Colored pencil on blueline]. John Howe Collection (N14). University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, MN.

The Creation of the Menomonie Public Library

Plans for the new library in Menomonie, Wisconsin were considered for nearly ten years before the building was finally realized. Plans were stalled by political, financial and practical challenges. In 1977 a Menomonie City council vote to created a Municipal Library Board, consisting of nine members. In 1979 the City Council approved funds to purchase or develop a library building or site along with construction costs. There was a great deal of community interest in locating the library downtown. A few architects were selected to compete for the project. Library Board member Bob Willow and his wife Jan approached John Howe for the project. Howe, in the tradition of Wright generally did not participate in competitions. The Willows commissioned Howe to do a series of preliminary drawings for the downtown

14. John H. Howe, *The land is the beginning of Architecture – Lecture by John H. Howe given in Japan*, John Howe Collection (N14). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Libraries, 1975.

site that were later presented to the library board.¹⁵

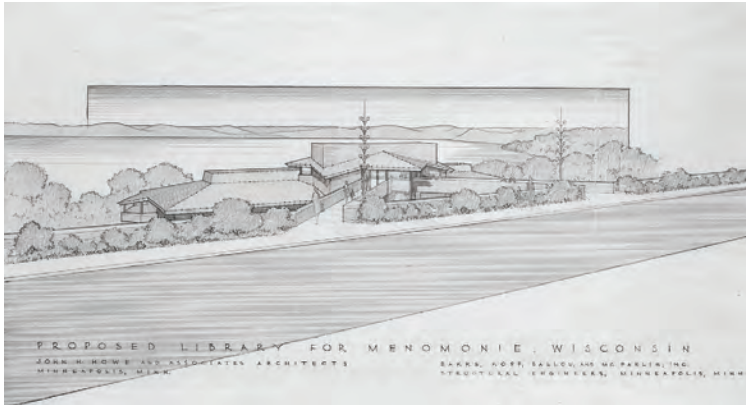


Image 3. Howe, J. H.. *Menomonie Public Library I Exterior Perspective*. [Colored pencil on blueline]. John Howe Collection (N14). University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, MN.

These drawings describe a building located on Third Street and Crescent Avenue, which was never built (Image 3). The preliminary drawings illustrate a design that combines elements of organic influence and futuristic idealism. A horizontal, hipped roofline, in which the four sides slope gently downward, mirrors the shape of distant hills. Three central flat rooftops integrate with those of the downtown buildings. The structure was to be dramatically cantilevered over the hillside, supported by precast concrete pilings, the overall form reminiscent of the trees that would surround the building. Dual diagonal walkways would have approached a wide building that was dynamically stacked upon the steep lakeshore. The building's vertical orientation allowed for more light to enter the interior and efficient use of space within the small lot. The plan featured a sheltered drive that met a lower level entrance and underground parking. Despite, or perhaps because of its dramatic and visionary nature, this plan was later rejected in favor of a larger site.

In 1980 the Municipal Library Board purchased, a two-acre plot of land acquired from the Myrtle Werth Medical Corporation for the amount of \$70,000. The location, just north of the downtown area, would provide space for a large building with a wide view of Lake Menomin. John Howe felt the new lakeside site was excellent and imagined that it would take

about seven months to construct the building. He wanted to create a structure of timeless character and distinction, naturally integrated into the landscape. The Library Board was somewhat concerned about his age (68), but chose him for his design ideas and excellent references.¹⁶ Howe was formally chosen as architect for the Menomonie Public Library on March 24 of 1981.

Designing the Library

In August of that year Mr. Howe presented a preliminary design for the building. The drawings called for another forward-looking plan (Image 4). The building was to be earth sheltered and roughly triangular in shape, the south and east sides dominated by windows. A series of triangular skylights would bring light into the interior and a 180-foot long entrance hall would house an art gallery. A future addition would create a mezzanine, a half story including clerestory windows.



Image 4. Howe, J. H.. Menomonie Public Library II Interior Perspective. [Colored pencil on blueline]. John Howe Collection (N14). University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, MN.

In October of 1981 the library board reviewed the proposed plans and suggested a number of changes. These included removing a large fireplace from the children's area for safety reasons, shortening the entrance hall and reshaping the front of the building.¹⁷ In December of 1981, Howe presented revised site plans and a summary of construction costs, which totaled \$1,137,020. The board suggested that Howe "pull back the

¹⁶ K. Barnard, K. *Building the Menomonie Public Library: An inside view. Menomonie Public Library, 1986.*

¹⁷ K. Barnard, K. *Building the Menomonie Public Library: An inside view. Menomonie Public Library, 1986.*

perimeter by one foot in order to stay within the budget."¹⁸ The revised plan maintains some of the original structure, but the building folds in upon itself, a triangle becomes a pentagon and the building has an even more open and compact plan. Despite a series of significant changes by the client, in the end Howe created a space that is beautiful, unique and functional.

Protests Over Proposed Library

Local opposition to the new library was to some extent based upon affection for the library that was going to be replaced. Up until this time the library in Menomonie was housed in the historic Mabel Tainter Memorial Building, a Richardsonian Romanesque building located in the downtown area. Established by Senator James H. Stout, it was one of the first public libraries in the state of Wisconsin. In the 1980s the books were still housed in tall bookshelves, accessible only to the staff. A patron would request a specific book and a librarian would ascend a tall ladder to retrieve it.¹⁹ A number of community members fought to preserve the Tainter Library and after this option proved impractical, pushed to maintain a downtown location for the library. In June of 1982 a petition was circulated protesting the construction of the new library. In October of the same year, the Library board was served with an injunction prohibiting them from proceeding with the building. In November 1982, an advisory referendum, which would allow the library board to move forward with plans for the library, was defeated. A local developer proposed a hotel on the property if plans for the library were not realized.²³ After this setback, the library construction was delayed for another three, as the project awaited funding and local government approval.

In 1985 the plan for the new library finally gained the necessary momentum for completion. In April the City Council permitted an application for a 125,000 grant, which was approved in July by the Department of Public Instruction. The Library Board now had nearly all the funding required to proceed. As previously agreed the City Council provided the additional \$350,000 needed to complete the project. All aspects of the plan for the library had finally gained approval and construction of the building soon commenced.

¹⁸ Barnard, K. (1986). *Building the Menomonie Public Library: An inside view. Menomonie Public Library.*

¹⁹ Bob Willow, & Jan Willow, 2013, *Interview conducted by Diana Witcher.*

²³ K. Barnard, 1986, *Building the Menomonie Public Library: An inside view, 1986.*

The groundbreaking ceremony for the Menomonie Public Library was held on Saturday October 5, 1985. John Howe attended the ceremony. Community opposition persisted; individuals who opposed the building picketed that day reportedly with signs that read "This is Russia" and "Don't Ask the County."²⁴ On August 6, 1986 the Mabel Tainter Library was officially closed. On September 2, after nine years of planning, the Menomonie Public Library opened to the public.

The library dedication was held on September 21, 1986. John Howe and Public Library Board president Dwight Agnew attended. First Lady Barbara Bush presided over the ceremony; at the time Mrs. Bush was working on a campaign to eradicate illiteracy. A group of fifteen to twenty people picketed the dedication, but the event was well attended.²⁵

At the dedication Howe said, "I won't say much... The library says what I have to say... Within these walls the citizens of Menomonie will discover new horizons. For as we know, there is no frigate like a book to take you miles away. The library offers limitless expansion and growth." There is a handwritten note on a newspaper clipping from Howe's business files in the Northwest Architectural Archives correcting a misquote from "there is no thrill" to "there is no frigate."²⁶

The Library as Built

The library features a low sheltering roof and covered entrance on the north (Image 5). The building is pentagonal in shape. Energy efficient walls enfold a series of windows on the east and south, which afford lake views and collect passive solar energy. The circulation desk is centrally located, providing ease of observation and service, near rows of bookshelves for 36,000 books. A large public meeting room, paneled entirely in red oak, is adjacent to the main entrance allowing for use when the library is closed. A centrally located audiovisual section is situated near the children's area on the south, along with space for computer terminals. A story-hour discussion room is positioned between the children's library and the meeting room. An elevator provides access to a 4,800 square foot basement, which holds workshop and storage space. The completed building is 12,000 square feet and cost 1.2 million dollars.

²⁴ K. Barnard, 1986, *Building the Menomonie Public Library: An inside view*, 1986.

²⁵ Chuck Backus, 2011, 1986: *Menomonie dedicates new public library*. *Dunn County News*. Retrieved 3/24/12: http://chippewa.com/dunnconnect/news/local/history/menomonie-dedicates-new-public-library/article_87ecac7a-e3a8-11e0-a8e2-001cc4c03286. 197

²⁶ *a small warship or archaic sailboat*

John Howe chose materials for the library that are beautiful, modest and readily available in the Upper Midwest. The walls and roof supports are made of brick or burnished concrete masonry on all exposed faces, both inside and outside. The colors are warm and inviting. The exterior brick is reminiscent of the local sandy-colored limestone bedrock. The partitions on the interior are steel framed and finished with paneling made of red oak. Red oak and cedar are used throughout the building. Both trees are often found growing wild in the Menomonie area. The bookshelves, carrels, tables and chairs are also red oak.



Image 5. Howe, J. H. (Date, Month). Menomonie Public Library II View from the Southwest. [Colored pencil on blueline]. John Howe Collection (N14). University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, MN.

In the tradition of organic architecture, transitions in the ceiling delineate areas of function within the building. The central information area is a primary focus, housed by a stained glass ceiling. The areas that hold the library materials have ten-foot high ceilings, with long vertical lines of florescent light and acoustical tile; these aspects encourage movement. The reading areas on the perimeter of the building are situated near the windows. A lower eight-foot ceiling made of cedar designates them as areas of quiet and repose. The combination of lowered ceilings and natural light from the windows creates a feeling of stillness and intimacy. In this perimeter there is a series of tables

and chairs, centered on windows that create cozy semi-private areas to read and research. The building has a sense of dignity and tranquility. It is remarkable how quiet it is in the back of the library. There is no noticeable noise from the street and one can concentrate on work or enjoy the beautiful view of the lake.

John Howe's design for the Menomonie Public Library was his own, but he drew inspiration from the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. The central ceiling of the library is pentagonal in shape and backlit, functioning as stained glass (Image 6). The structure is reminiscent of the ceiling in the living room of the Coonley House (1908) by Frank Lloyd Wright, located in Riverside, Illinois. The radial form is similar, as are the secondary crosspieces. Howe's design has more symmetry and a more conventional treatment of negative space. Howe's version is also functional, providing light to the room below.



Image 6. Witcher, D. (2013, May). *Menomonie Public Library Ceiling* [Photograph]. Menomonie, Wisconsin.

The ceiling originally provided natural light through a light well that originated in the winged portion of the library roof. Because the light was too dim, fluorescent lights were later installed. The geometric shape houses five inner triangles, divided into five sections by red oak styles, which hold vertical

pieces of colored glazing. This element brings an openness and elegance to the center of the library. As a focal point it is a visual cue to the use of the space, sheltering the information and circulation desks, areas of primary interactions between library staff and patrons.

Conclusion

John H. Howe was a prolific architect who made an important contribution to American architecture. His work evolved into what he called a Minnesota Prairie Style, which originated in organic architecture and the philosophies developed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Howe's work had an elegant pragmatism that was uniquely his own. His designs centered on the characteristics of the site and the needs of the client. Inspiration for each design began with the landscape and the nature of the materials at hand. His designs are complex and elegant, grounded in the concepts of organic architecture. Howe's buildings offer myriad opportunities for research and historical restoration. Though will first be remembered Wright's draftsman and senior apprentice of the Taliesin architecture studio, his architectural designs are a significant contribution to organic architecture. His built structures should be preserved and cherished both for their historical value and their inherent quality of intelligent, understated beauty.

The Menomonie public library is an unknown historical gem, a unique community space designed by a quietly influential Prairie School architect. John Howe intended the Menomonie Public Library to be a building that was profoundly integrated into its natural surroundings. It combines beauty with function, serving as a place of discovery and learning, a space for community members to gather. John Howe's design for the library serves as a model for architecture that is quiet and stable transcending passing trends by combining elegance and integrated function.

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