

HISTORY

A Pre-Conceived Design and Many “Designers”

The details of the dialogue between the Aldermans and Stanford White reveal a brief relationship in which the Aldermans may have been too specific in what they wanted in the design of their house for White’s taste, or perhaps ego. The Aldermans came to the process with a specific model and style in mind, including many minute details for a house of this size. This placed White in position of arguing against some of the design features that the Aldermans clearly wanted, and of presenting two design schemes that the Aldermans soundly denounced in correspondence a few days before the architect’s death.

One is tempted in such a scenario to see the Aldermans as the true authors of the house, and to presume that Stanford White’s role in the design was “cut off at the pass” and that the design was fully revised upon his death. In fact, some of Stanford White’s contributions to the design clearly survived the criticism of Dr. and Mrs. Alderman and became part of the house as constructed, in spite of the timing of White’s death. An example is the use of the Doric order in the portico rather than the Ionic order. Conversely, the west entrance porte cochere that the Aldermans wanted and White disliked also made it into the final design. White, or at least the firm of McKim, Mead & White, probably insisted on placing the study doorway on the west wall of the center hall rather than foreshortening the stairs to place it on the north wall of the side hall as the Aldermans had suggested. Dr. Alderman may have had in mind the idea of going from his carriage to his study and from the study to the bedrooms without entering the center hall, a division of spaces reinforced by the two columns shown where the center hall meets the side hall in the “red-ink” drawings. However, placing the study entrance at the foot of the stairs, as shown on the “red-ink” floor plan, would have resulted in a steep stairway. Instead, the design as built has a gracious and unusually gradual staircase, remarkably easy to climb, with delicate details that are characteristic of high design in the “Edwardian” era and typical of Stanford White’s most noted contributions to the decorative arts of the time.¹⁷

Beyond the basic forms, however, most of the house’s other details were really worked out by McKim, Mead & White after Stanford White’s death. Although White had mentioned that he was bringing his “younger partner, Mr. Fenner,” along on his initial visit to the site, nothing else is known of Fenner’s involvement in the process.¹⁸ Some of the correspondence from McKim, Mead & White after Stanford White’s death is signed by architect William M. Kendall, an important designer who became a leader in the firm after White’s death. Kendall became especially important in the firm after the death of Charles F. McKim in 1909.¹⁹ Most of the drawings prepared for the project throughout the design process were signed by a draftsman named “Wylie,” although other draftsmen signed some of the other documents as well.²⁰