

HARRIS ARMSTRONG'S TRADITIONAL DESIGNS: THE HOUSE AT 423 MIRIAM

by Andrew Raimist, AIA

If I recall correctly, I last visited 423 Miriam Avenue in Kirkwood when the house was previously on market; it must have been around the turn of the century (*our* century). The Realtor told me Harris Armstrong designed the house. Inquiring as to the source of the information, they explained, "The prior owners told us this was the case." When I inquired about documentation demonstrating Armstrong's involvement (such as drawings, contracts, notices, permits, publications, etc.), they knew of none, but commented it was commonly understood in the neighborhood that the design was indeed by Armstrong.



423 Miriam Avenue, Kirkwood, with entry facing north.

My comment at the time (and this remains my opinion) was, "Armstrong *may* have designed the house, but in lieu of substantive evidence, I'm unable to determine whether that is the case. I leave open that possibility and welcome any information regarding this home (as well as others with a similar status)."



423 Miriam Avenue, primary street facade's gable end faces east.

During my first encounter with the house, I had an initial gut feeling that either Armstrong was not at all involved or

if he were, it was something he might have wished to conceal. At the time, I found it hard to believe Armstrong would have designed a house of this sort following his modernist breakthroughs of 1935: the Shanley Building in Clayton and the Cori Residence on Berry Road in Glendale. My initial investigations into Armstrong's career were colored by my preconceived misconception that his career should have followed a logical, linear trajectory away from "traditional" architecture styles toward the International Style and other interpretations of the new modernism as it spread through the United States during the 1930s.

My understanding of his career has developed considerably over the years with an increasing appreciation that traditional modes of architecture and building held for him. I am investigating this line of inquiry further for both practical and philosophical reasons.

In practical terms, understanding the context in which his work developed is critical to placing formal and stylistic concerns in proper perspective. The history of American architecture in the Twentieth Century has been severely distorted by many of the procedures and prohibitions instituted by the modern movement particularly upon its ascendancy as the dominant architectural design paradigm following World War II.

Philosophically I'm working to create a holistic model for understanding the development of American architecture as a cultural, economic, and technologic response to the pressing problems of the era.

On his retirement in the late 1960s, Armstrong edited his office files removing projects he apparently did not wish attributed to him. It's possible 423 Miriam Avenue (1936-37) was one of those redacted projects. Part of my problem in this case is I don't see anything particularly "damning" or unappealing about the house he might wish to conceal. It's not terribly different from other projects completed around the same time included in his office's files.



423 Miriam Avenue, east facade's brick masonry details.

I haven't studied Armstrong's more tradition based brick detailing in great depth and while such analysis could be suggestive, it would be far from definitive, particularly when dealing with variants of traditional masonry detailing. Nevertheless, the brickwork on the house does offer some tantalizing clues particularly in light of the important role masonry construction and detailing played throughout his most productive years and in some of his most inventive projects.

423 Miriam features segmental shallow brick arches on the ground level generally using a single rowlock on all elevations except on the street facade facing east where three rowlock courses are superimposed.

All second story windows have flat lintels the central extra tall opening featuring a half round transom with a single rowlock. On the north and south elevations, a continuous white painted fascia above the second floor openings appear to conceal wood structural lintels. On the east elevation however, the two outer windows have more expressive horizontal jack arches four brick courses high.

All of these brick details are relatively common features in homes of the 1930s, but are also consistent with Armstrong homes of the same era.

However, the areas between the first and second floor windows on the east elevation are rather curious for a house of this type. These recessed bricks panels are set back from the face of the wall itself (as visible in the detail photograph). Two vertical grooves aligned with the edges of the window openings seem to express the structural condition where the weight of the wall above the second floor window is divided between the left and right sides of the opening. The segmental arch at the first floor is limited *only to the width of the opening*. Normally such arches would extend beyond the opening on either side to distribute the weight downward in the wall. The manner in which the spring points are "cut off" appears to express a relative lack of weight being distributed at the first floor window head.

This condition, creating vertical slots determined by the width of the fenestration, suggests the later modernist trope of expressing non-structural infill spandrel panels within vertically stacked openings. Armstrong would have been familiar with this approach to wall construction, having designed several high-rise buildings in the early 1930s following the approach celebrated in Louis Sullivan's Wainwright Building. Armstrong's high-rises include a 20 story Medical Office Building constructed in Minneapolis and an unbuilt 40 Story Tower for downtown St. Louis. Both were the result of Armstrong's partnership with engineer Alexander B. Boyer.

423 Miriam's volumetric form has a typological similarity to an Armstrong designed home for Louise F. Walker at 20



12-Story Medical Building, Minneapolis by Boyer & Armstrong (1930).

Overhills Drive in Ladue of 1935-36. This traditional brick masonry design was completed the year *following* the construction of the Shanley Building and Cori House, two of his most significant early modernist works. If Armstrong had wished to conceal his traditional architectural production, he likely could have done so. However, a photograph of the house was published in a local paper with a caption mentioning owner, architect and contractor.



Perspective rendering of Walker House, 20 Overhills, Ladue (1936).

In addition Armstrong kept this signed rendering of the house as a part of his office records. Documenting the house appears to have held particular importance to him since he had it professionally photographed from *precisely* the same vantage point illustrated in his perspective.

Comparing these homes, the use of heavy brick gable end walls with parapets capping the end of the primary rectangular mass is a common expressive feature. The house on Miriam features a similar façade composition with a central white painted entryway as well as an ell containing a garage. The Walker House includes white stone lintels and full wood shutters; the Miriam Avenue House has shallow segmental arches at the first floor and lacks shutters or stonework. The East wall includes three brick high segmental arches and taller more expressive jack arches at the Second floor. Both houses have a single semi-circular brick arch constructed in a similarly minimal manner.

The window openings on the side elevation of the Walker house extend down to the floor along with full-height shutters. Such access was sometimes provided to facilitate holding funerals allowing for access for a coffin and pallbearers. While the East elevation windows at 423 Miriam do not extend full-height, they are constructed with a lightweight wood panel at floor level rather than brick.

The gable end wall at 423 Miriam features a nearly identical design of its gable end wall with several courses of bricks set along the rake up to the peak as well as cast iron stars set into the upper corners of the wall. An unusual feature of the Miriam House is its lack of a basement; the house was built as a slab on grade structure, which later became common practice in postwar residential construction.

Another common feature is the use of simple brick masses for the chimneys. The Miriam House lacks a projecting chimney on the end wall, but this would be consistent with an effort to mimic the general form of the Walker House with lower budget. Finally, both houses include low brick walls creating a forecourt at the entry.



Early photograph of Walker House, 20 Overhills, Ladue

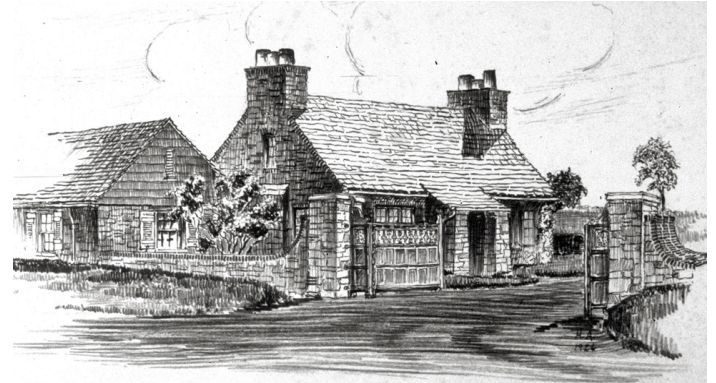
It appears Armstrong undertook quite a number of other projects in the Depression years, but were later edited out, lost, or otherwise removed from his office files. There are numerous drawings for residences from the 1930s varying in style from traditional gable homes to abstract modernist experiments.

The primary evidence of an intentional culling of work from the office files is a comparison of the “original” project numbers and the project numbers indicated in the Armstrong Archives. It may be the missing projects are ones that did not proceed into design or construction or have been intentionally removed.

The following year, 1937, Armstrong built the Schnaare Residence, “Orchard House,” at 6 Lindworth Place in Ladue, about which an extensive article including floor plans and perspective rendering was published. The text made it very clear Armstrong considered this home to be “Missouri-type” construction. Similarly, Armstrong promoted the William De Loss Love Residence of 1939, and the surviving materials include professional

photographs, articles, and publications. These homes will be the discussed in a subsequent article.

The house on Miriam reminds me of three traditional brick structures located at 9024, 9026, and 9076 Manchester Road. I’ve suspected them of being Armstrong designs but have no definitive evidence beyond some superficial similarities in design to other structures designed by Armstrong in the 1930s, the use of reclaimed brick, and the fact he designed a number of commercial buildings in the area.



Harris Armstrong sketch of unidentified house dated 1926.



2601 South Warson Road, Ladue, photographed 2009.

A surviving sketch by Armstrong suggests other influences and additional context. This unidentified design appears to be a rendering of the gatehouse of the large estate at 2601 South Warson Road built around 1925 by New York architect Harrie T. Lindeberg for financier Harry F. Knight. While driving down Warson with Louise Armstrong, some years ago, she was adamant the owner of this house had wanted Armstrong to design it, but that he had refused because they wanted to build in a traditional manner.

The sketch suggests he might have been retained to prepare this perspective rendering, played some role in its design, or simply recorded the built structure for his professional development.

Although the evidence of Armstrong’s involvement in 423 Miriam Avenue is based primarily on comments handed

down by previous the owners, I have no substantive reason to dispute this attribution. On the contrary, the construction offers tantalizing suggestions of his possible participation.