

BUILDING WITH BOOKS

In this city with a mad passion for architecture, one bookstore towers above the rest BY ELISA DRAKE



“He’s an architect; I had it for breakfast,” Marilyn Hasbrouck says. She’s referring to her husband, Wilbert Hasbrouck, who chuckles and nods. We’re at the Prairie Avenue Bookshop, the venerable architecture bookstore they own in the Loop, in the shade of the overhead El tracks. I’m sitting between them at the head of a giant bankers table from Scotland, circa early 20th century (designer unknown), whose ivory-colored, high-backed chairs dwarf Marilyn and me, but suit the 6-foot-plus, gray-bearded “Bill” just fine. I don’t tell him, but he reminds me a bit of a tall Colonel Sanders, in suspenders instead of a string tie.

I ask them about the imposing table: “We found it in the second floor of a junky antique shop on the North Side,” Bill recalls. “The guy was going out of business so he sold it to us for a very modest price ... You can’t move it. It’s too heavy.” I sit, feeling small, listening as he and Marilyn weave the

story of their bookshop. It comes out in back-and-forth “remember whens” and “when was that agains” between the two 70-something owners, who share a rare and charming camaraderie that has come from working together for more than 45 years.

The short story is this: Prairie Avenue Bookshop began as a basement business with 100 or so books and grew into the largest and arguably most respected architectural bookstore in the world, with upwards of 18,000 titles. “Nobody could read their way around the bookshop in a lifetime,” Marilyn says. The number includes new, old and out-of-print titles in categories ranging from architect biographies and surveys to technical reference manuals to architectural theory to building materials and styles to interior design. It caters to students, professors and professionals from around the globe, and anyone with a passing interest in anything related to architecture.





FROM DUSTY, OUT-OF-PRINT TOMES FILLED WITH SKETCHES TO DIRECT-FROM-THE-PRESSES BOOKS ON GREEN BUILDING TECHNIQUES, PRAIRIE AVENUE HAS IT ALL. FAR RIGHT: OWNERS BILL AND MARILYN HASBROUCK

Over the years, the bookstore has become a go-to destination for all types. Manager Beth Eifrig and assistant manager Karl Eifrig (her brother-in-law) regale me with stories: “There are times when someone wants a few thousand dollars worth of a particular color book to fill a showroom,” Beth mentions—she says orange and pink have recently made a comeback. Karl recalls his strangest request: “John Malkovich called and wanted us to find images of skyscrapers that had never been built to hang on his walls in Paris.” In 1995, a book-signing by Rem Koolhaas attracted a line of fans that snaked out the door, and Karl was tasked with fetching the acclaimed architect cappuccinos at the nearby DePaul University center. “He had about four.”

“It’s always interesting,” Beth says. “We’re surrounded by beautiful art books and a low percentage of people who are bad to deal with, as opposed to most retail.” And, she adds, “It’s a mom and pop shop that never sold out. [Marilyn and Bill] have been involved the whole time.”

It makes sense, too, because at its core, the bookshop is a personal expression of the Hasbrouck’s passion for and dedication to architecture, particularly the Prairie School, which thrived from 1890 to 1915 and was one of the few truly indigenous American architectural styles. To spread the good Prairie word, in 1961 the Hasbroucks founded the Prairie School Press, publishing works (mostly reprints) by and about some of



the movement’s trailblazing designers, like Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Sullivan and Walter Burley Griffin.

A few years later, the Hasbroucks launched the Prairie School Review, which they describe as an academic “monograph,” rather than a journal, because it focused on that single subject. They published until 1978, and customers can still purchase old issues from a rack in the back of the store. The truth is, selling books was initially a way to support their publishing venture. “I had bought a library of books, remember?” Bill glances at Marilyn, then continues: “Well, I bought several—I’d go to an auction and buy a box full of books and get one [worthwhile] copy, and soon our basement was full of architectural books. And so we said, we ought to start a bookshop, and so we did.”

The business steadily expanded and, in 1974, the Hasbroucks bought an old mansion next door to the historic 1887 Glessner House on Prairie Avenue, where Bill had an office as executive

ALL PHOTOS BY SARAH HADLEY



director of both the Chicago Chapter and the Illinois Council of the American Institute of Architects. “So that’s how we got our name,” Bill explains. Certainly a fitting address, considering the architectural significance of Prairie Avenue between 16th and 30th streets, now a historic district and once the “it” strip for mansions owned by wealthy late 19th-century Chicago elites like Marshall Field and George Pullman.

In 1978, the bookshop was bursting again, and the Hasbroucks moved it to the Printers Row district, burgeoning at the time—“We’re urban pioneers,” Marilyn declares with pride—and then, in ’95, to its current space, which the duo designed to accommodate their needs and aesthetics. “It was the last thing I designed before I retired,” Bill says, although his retirement would put most of us to shame. He still consults, especially on preservation projects, and he recently published a 700-page tome, “The Chicago Architectural Club: Prelude to the Modern,” which Marilyn says took him nine years. Bill clarifies: “It took me about six, but I thought about it for a while before I started.”

For the bookshop design, their goal was to create a visually appealing, “scholarly” space that shines the spotlight on architects and architecture. They spent three weeks meticulously hanging stenciled names of well-known architect-authors above the bookshelves. “They’re hard to read unless you get up close, and we like it that way,” Bill says. They don’t want anything to distract from the focus—books, books and more books. Bill’s name is “at the entrance to the restroom,” he jokes. Marilyn corrects his humble take on the matter: “the entrance to his office.” And then Bill turns it back to his wife.

“A lot of the things in here that nobody notices are Marilyn’s,” he says graciously. “For instance, the panes above the shelves jut out a little bit so they’re like little rooms you’re standing in; the shelves are all sloped back so we can put

books face-up and they don’t fall off; and the lighting is done so people aren’t standing in their own shadow.”

“That was Bill,” Marilyn interjects.

Whoever did what, it comes together as one of the most inviting bookstores you’re likely to find anywhere. In this web-savvy world where books are bought with a click and new gadgets make reading a high-tech experience, Prairie Avenue is an old-school gem. Which is not to say that the shop doesn’t have its own prominent Internet presence. Until 2000, Marilyn put together an annual printed catalog of all the books they carried. The last time she did it, it filled 220 pages, but printing costs got too high, so now it’s all on the web. But, as Marilyn says, “Architects are very visually oriented people,” and many miss the printed version. Plus, Bill points out: “There’s a substantial body of people who don’t use the Internet and these are often the people who have—” Marilyn finishes his sentence: “—great libraries.”

In fact, people sometimes mistake Prairie Avenue for a public library. Bill tells of a group of “blue-haired ladies” who visited once and were quite miffed that they had to pay for the books. The thing is, the hushed ambiance, forest green carpeting, dim lighting and amalgamation of used and new volumes can be confusing. It’s partly what prompted the Hasbroucks to place a placard on the bankers table that instructs, “No note-taking.” It’s just a simple reminder that if you’re a student with a paper due or a weekend warrior with a decorating project in mind, this is not the place to hunker down and do your research. The knowledgeable Prairie Avenue staff can assist your quest for the perfect resource, but they’ll politely ask you to put the notepad away if they must.

But it doesn’t happen too often. Mostly, people come in to browse and buy—there’s plenty of room to wander without bumping elbows, as the main floor puts books on perimeter shelves, with that bankers table in the center—and get lost in a book about Santiago Calatrava, Renzo Piano or ancient Roman architecture, a dusty 1930 copy of “The New World Architecture,” topics like “Old Houses on Nantucket” and “World Shop Interiors,” and so on. In addition to that central table, there are chairs and tables in Art Deco and Arts and Crafts styles that are either designed by or reproductions of the likes of Frank Lloyd Wright, Rennie Mackintosh, Mies van der Rohe and Joseph Hoffman. Books are stacked high along the walls and on small tables draped with frayed Oriental rugs. “The ambiance is a major factor,” Marilyn says of the shop’s appeal. That, and the books.

“We have a lot of titles,” Bill says, and Marilyn adds, “There’s nothing like this.” She’s right—and in a town as giddy about architecture as Chicago, that’s saying a lot.

Prairie Avenue Bookshop is located at 418 S. Wabash Ave., 312.922.8311, www.pabook.com.



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