

Emanuel L. Philipp Elementary: the closing of a school designed for children

by David Zach

Milwaukee is known for having beautiful, old architecture and when strangers come to town, we like to show off our favorite buildings. Those visitors however, often see things we don't and remind us to pay more attention to what most of us have learned to forget. Sometimes when we forget history it repeats itself, but this time there's little chance that it will.

Emanuel Philipp Elementary School is beautiful, mostly forgotten and has a great history. The Milwaukee Public School District has decided to close it. Before they shut the doors, let's take one more look and try to remember why they built it in the first place.

Located at 4310 N. 16th Street, it was designed by Eschweiler & Eschweiler (think of the Milwaukee Gas Light tower and Hotel Metro), it's a unique blend of Arts & Crafts and Art Deco design.

This is a school designed for children. One should believe that all schools are built that way, but at Philipp School there are Mother Goose-themed terra cotta panels wrapping the building. Want to know how the elephant got its trunk? Look on the carved-relief sides of the steps leading to the front doors, and you'll also see an alligator and a storytelling brave and lions and tigers and well, bears too. Look up from there to meet the stone-cast stares from five penguins guarding the doors.

All who enter here should know this was not designed to just be a place for education, but it was to be a garden for



the seeds of imagination, adventure and a lifelong love affair with learning.

Step within and you'll find two kindergarten rooms just around the corner. In one, look at the floor to find hidden panels that lift out to reveal a sandbox. Just inside the other is a fireplace with small animals carved into the surround. Look farther into the room and find a fountain. What did these things teach children that they needed to know?

What did they reveal about their teachers, parents and community?

This is a school built in the early 1930s for a neighborhood of poor immigrants from Germany, the country where kindergartens were invented. During those relatively unsophisticated and cash starved years, even they knew what must always be inside the lives of children. Back then, they knew that even whimsy could be part of the bottom line.





the most progressive thing is not to change, and to take a stand firmly upon hard won traditions which will always be true.

One such tradition is that our schools are supposed to secure skills, knowledge and citizenship leading to a better future for all. But we keep failing too many students, and so in the confusion of continual reform, we now find ourselves with an easier and newer tradition of making sure that schools are secure employment programs for adults.

Today, seventy-four years later, the panels over the sandbox are sealed, the fountain is dry and the fires have been put out. Why don't these things have a place in twenty-first century education? Have the experts of education evolved beyond the notion of little children sitting around a fireplace while stories are told and lessons learned? Are the rest of us just too busy, distracted, discouraged and too modern to recognize that timeless things are being left in the past? Will the future of education ever again be made safe for sandboxes?



Why are we really closing Emanuel Philipp Elementary? Is the building too old and inefficient? Do we have too few students and too little funding? Is competition forcing their hand? Or is a school with such timeless traditions as this too embarrassing because we don't want to be reminded that the district, city and citizens who built it in 1931 knew that schools are not always about the bottom line, but they are always about the horizon.

In our constant rush to create perfect schools, we oddly find ourselves with educational policies which are almost always younger than the children themselves. Why does so much in education constantly change? We know change is good, but so is tradition. It is not unreasonable to believe that sometimes



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