

## Farmers and Merchants Bank newly refurbished facade finally finished

The 1919 Prairie School style Farmers and Merchants bank at 159 West Prairie Street in Columbus had its newly restored facade revealed on Wednesday at 3 p.m. Quite a crowd gathered around to witness the historic event.

Each piece of the facade is a unique piece designed by Sullivan. There are two steel beams that carried all that terra cotta. Sullivan's drawings called for those beams to be anchored securely. The right beam was, but the beam to the left was not anchored at all, and had moved very early on in the history of the building. If you look at early photographs of the building, you can see tiny cracks in the terra cotta on the left side of the facade. Each piece has been restored or remade by a specialty company out of New York. Fortunately, once it was opened up, it was fairly easy for the restoration crews to correct.

"We had a good contractor, and really appreciated working with Robert Forrer and his crew from Spray-O-Bond," said Jack Waite, architect for the restoration.

This bank is the last of eight small, midwestern banks designed by Chicago Architect Louis Sullivan. It was made a National Historic Landmark in 1976. Built during the bank presidency of John Russell Wheeler, it was Wheeler's wife who convinced him to hire Sullivan instead of building a bank in the more Classical Revival style. Sullivan lived in Wheeler's home on his frequent visits to supervise the construction.

Local master carpenter, Carl Ibsch worked on the building. Sullivan referred to him as, "One of the finest craftsmen I have ever worked with."

The original building has a compact, rectilinear plan. The walls are tapestry brick, carefully selected to give a shaded effect. The exterior is elaborately decorated with the terra cotta ornamentation for which Sullivan is famous.

The granite and glass facade adjacent to the front entrance replaced an



The unveiling of the Farmers and Merchants Union Bank facade on Wednesday at 3 p.m. The bank front has been under construction for over a year

original storefront in 1980 when the bank expanded.

William Palmer, project manager, said of the restoration crew, "Spray-O-Bond meticulously took this facade apart, agonized over the details, and put their souls into the job, and it shows on the projects."

Jack Waite and William Palmer both work out of John G. Waite and Associates architectural firm. They "worked from Louis Sullivan's drawings and the original shop drawings for the terra cotta in order to repair some of the terra cotta stones," said Waite. The total project took one and a half years to complete, according to Waite.

"Most of the original stones are still there, and

only a few had to be replaced. The terra cotta that was damaged was damaged because of structural flaws" Waite added.

Robert Forrer, foreman of Spray-O-Bond, specialists in restoring historic masonry buildings, commented at the ceremony in the Senior Center afterward, "We've been looking at this thing from three feet away for the better part of a year now. Some of the terra cotta stones took six months to make. It took us about a year."

Gianfranco Tassara, of Inspired Artisans out of Milwaukee, was the one who did the gold leafing and the marble polishing on the facade. He is from Portugal,

but of Italian descent. The project took him six weeks. "I like to see the finished work and the people happy. When I'm working, I'm thinking of the work that the people in the past have passed on, and I'm trying to preserve what our forefathers left for us," he said.

Representative David Ward was on hand at the affair, obviously inspired by the revitalized 'Jewel Box'. He said of the affair, "This is a great day for the city of Columbus, when you see the way Columbus has been able to preserve its downtown, and also for the bank. In an age of the bank mega-merger, with banks moving to the outskirts of towns and building these

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## F&M Bank Renovation

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sterile looking financial institutions, F&M in Columbus has been able to maintain their historical part of downtown Columbus."

Dennis Teichow, Historic Preservation Commission Chair, also spoke of the bank,

"Columbus has a bigger and better collection of historic architecture than most any other city our size. More than a decade ago, the city council made a commitment to preserve the community's architectural heritage by establishing a Historical Landmarks and Preservation Commission. Organizations like the Farmers and Merchant's bank in Columbus bring a smile to the collective face of the Historic Preservation

Commission. I know I speak for the entire Historic Preservation Commission when I say, 'hats off to you Farmers and Merchants Bank, for all your efforts.'"

Mary Poser, wife of the late Dr. Rolf 'Chub' Poser, who was on the bank's board of directors for 40 years until his death in 1997, said, "In this day and age when the dictum 'form follows function' is often interpreted as 'just make it functional', it is very

gratifying to see this building so beautifully designed by Louis Sullivan, who is also an artist, and then so lovingly maintained and restored by the present bank staff. I would like to thank the board for what they've done. I'd also like to thank the State Historical Society."

Bank directors took it upon themselves to restore the jewel box, an effort much appreciated by the city of Columbus.