

Monona Terrace

After 60 years of almosts,
the shore of Lake Monona
is transformed

By ANITA CLARK

Surely it's always been here, this big wedding cake on the shore of Lake Monona.

Surely its exuberant vanilla scoops, its arched windows, have always echoed the design of the state Capitol.

No. Monona Terrace arrived only after nearly 60 years of controversy and false starts.

It was a nasty business, fueled by animosity toward the genius but eccentric architect Frank Lloyd Wright and fed by fears about money and image, elitism and access.

Approved by voters twice but never built, then rejected in two more votes, the project was the poster child for the complaint that Madison was the city that can't put two bricks together.

Detractors branded it "the mistake on the lake" and peddled white elephant



Rich Rygh



Wisconsin Historical Society / WHI-1922

A fascinating view of a North Central Airlines DC-3 airplane flying over the Madison Isthmus in 1952. Clearly visible are the Capitol, the 1 West Wilson Street State Office Building, and lakes Monona and Mendota, along with the shoreline — here accommodating parked cars — that would later become home to Monona Terrace.

cookies to publicize their opposition. They named their campaign “It Ain’t Wright.”

But, in fact, the building is widely hailed as a Wright design, based on the great man’s drawings as executed by Taliesin architect Tony Puttnam and his team.

Madison historian Jack Holzhueter calls the building “stunningly important” and “a great glorious building that looks magical.”

In the 1990s, the project was revived by the oddest of political bedfellows, including liberal Mayor Paul Soglin and conservative Republican Gov. Tommy Thompson. Bolstered by both

of Madison’s daily newspapers, the campaign finally succeeded and the center opened in 1997 at the end of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, the renamed Monona Avenue.

It reigns there today, a gleaming icon that attracts brown-bag lunchers in nice weather and conventioners year-round. The curious wander through and peer out at the lake. Summer boaters peer back.

The center hosts retirement parties, charity balls, law school banquets and the Wisconsin Film Festival. Last year, it opened its doors to 73 conventions and conferences, plus 127 weddings. About 1,000 people visited every day.

By the 1992 referendum, voters had forgotten about Wright’s philandering and his arrogance and his unpaid bills. “They simply saw Wright as a genius

and were astonished that this (building) hadn’t happened before,” Holzhueter said.

As the city celebrates its birthday, Monona Terrace celebrates a sparkling Downtown energized by its arrival. Restaurants multiplied, condo towers climbed skyward and the Hilton Madison opened next door.

Soglin calls the successful vote “a realization that we were more than just the state capital or the university, that we couldn’t be dependent on them forever for our economy. As a city we wanted to make a statement about who we were and what we were.”

One can easily imagine Wright himself, striding the halls of heaven, his cape and white hair flowing, growling, “I told them so.” ■