

## Architectural Profile Milwaukee Zen Center

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The current home of the Milwaukee Zen Center, 2825 N Stowell Avenue, was built in 1899 for Evan James, who occupied the home with his family members until 1922-23. Architect K.S. Evans—who also designed several other buildings in and around Milwaukee which are included in the [Wisconsin Historical Society's National & State Register of Historical Places](#)—submitted an Application for a Permit to Build the two-story, brick-walled frame home on October 31, 1898 for \$3,000 (Figure 1).

### Application for Permit to Build.

WOOD FRAME.

MILWAUKEE, Oct 31 1898

TO THE INSPECTOR OF BUILDINGS:

The undersigned hereby applies for a permit to build according to the following statement:

Name of Owner Evan James

Street 2825 N. Stowell Blvd.

Location—Lot \_\_\_\_\_ Block \_\_\_\_\_ Ward 18

Cost of Building \$3000.

Name of Architect K. S. Evans

Name of Mason Aldenburgh & Tracy

Name of Carpenter Ambling

Purpose of Building \_\_\_\_\_

General Dimensions 23 X 50'6"

Height from grade to highest ceiling \_\_\_\_\_

Number of stories Two

Height of each story—1st 10 2d 9'6" 3d \_\_\_\_\_

Material in foundation walls Brick

Thickness of foundation walls 12"

Size of studs in outside walls 2 X 4 - 16 inches from centers.

Dimensions of Joists and distance from center:

<u>2 X 10</u>	1st story	<u>16</u>	inches from centers.	
<u>2 X 10</u>	2d story		inches from centers.	#
<u>2 X 8</u>	3d story		inches from centers.	685

IT IS HEREBY AGREED between the undersigned Aldenburgh & Tracy and the City of Milwaukee, that for and in consideration of the premises and of the permit to construct and erect said building, to be issued and granted by said Inspector of Buildings, that \_\_\_\_\_ will construct the work thereon in accordance with the descriptions herein set forth in this statement, and as more fully described in the specifications and plans for said building; and \_\_\_\_\_ further agree to construct said building in strict compliance with an ordinance entitled "An ordinance relating to the construction, maintenance and inspection of buildings in the city of Milwaukee."

Figure 1: Application for Permit to Build, from the City Development Office of Milwaukee

After Mr. James's ownership ended, 2825 Stowell became a rental property, originally as a single-family home. In 1954, then-owner Mrs. C D. Parmenter converted the building to a duplex with two rental units, having been denied permission to add a third family unit (presumably on the third floor) due to the lot size. Future owners also desired adding a third tenant to the property: in 1975, Settlement Real Estate Inc. received a letter from Milwaukee Building Inspector Alderman Ed

Griffin informing them that their advertised gross income of \$8,580 from rentals was based on “illegal rents” exceeding the number of tenants allowed in a building zoned as a duplex.<sup>1</sup>

After years of being rented out (sometimes by commercial rental organizations, other times by landlords who lived on the first floor) 2825 Stowell was purchased for the Milwaukee Zen Center in September 1986, with a member’s brother making the down payment and members gradually paying off the property. The Zen Center, which had been gathering periodically in members’ homes and attics since the mid-70s, could finally create a hermitage to house a permanent priest and regular gatherings for Zen meditation, classes, and fellowship. Minimal renovations have been conducted in the years since the Zen center purchased the building in order to keep up the property, convert it back into a single-family home, and keep the building comfortable for member gatherings.



Figure 2: The front of Milwaukee Zen Center

Asymmetry is an identifying feature of Queen Anne's style, particularly in the roof. The Zen Center’s roof closely aligns with a style subset: a hipped roof with lower cross gables. The cross gables are less pronounced but present. The Zen Center’s roof pitch location and size was common particularly around 1895 until 1905.

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<sup>1</sup> Ed Griffin to Settlement Real Estate Inc., March 10, 1975, “2825 North Stowell Avenue”, (Milwaukee Permit & Development Center, Milwaukee, WI), 1.



Figure 3: The asymmetry in the gables can be seen from above. Image sourced from Google Maps.

Of the four typical decorative details of Queen Anne style (spindework, free classic, half-timbered, and patterned masonry) the Zen Center's exterior aligns with free classic. The structure has less intricate details than other Queen Anne style subsets on the columns, walls, and gables. The Zen Center's windows are bay windows, which is common in Queen Anne and thought to avoid plain walls. Similar to the Stick style, wall surfaces are used as decorative elements in the Queen Anne style. The wall overhang on the North side of the Zen Center is evidence of this. The wall material is less applicable for the Zen Center and non-masonry walls.

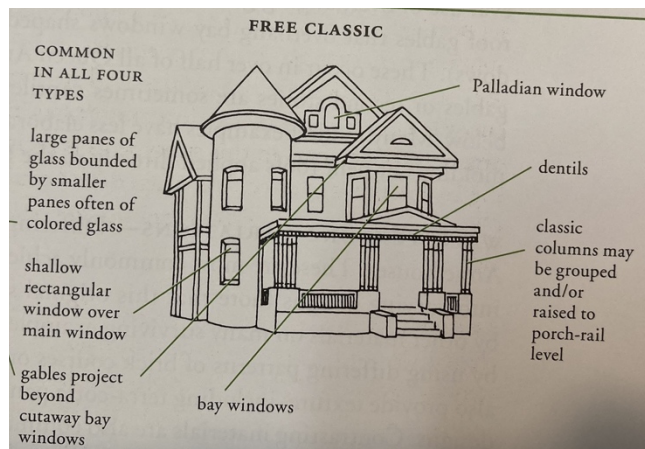


Figure 4: Typical decorative details of Queen Anne Style

The porch's position on the structure aligns with Queen Anne's style, but little else does. The porch's columns, although free classic, do not appear in groups of two or three like many in the Queen Anne style. Additionally, the enclosure of the porch is indicative of renovation, which has yet to be found in the documentation.

The first floor of the building is dedicated to the Zen Center's gatherings, with a sizable Zendo where meditations take place; a kitchen for making meals for the congregation to share; and a sitting room to welcome visitors and serve tea. The second floor includes an apartment for the resident priest, Rev. Reirin Gumbel; a library that can also serve as a classroom; and a space for visitors who

have travelled to join the congregation for events to stay. The attic houses a spot where founders of the Zen Center and members who have passed away are memorialized, as well as an office.

As the place where most of the Zen Center's meditation ceremonies take place, the zendo is the space in 2825 N Stowell which has been most notably transformed by its members from a standard living and dining room into a sacred space. The Zendo—which is just to the left after one enters the Zen Center and removes one's shoes—is full of soft neutral colors and sunlight filtered in through drawn blinds by daylight and soft track lighting by night. All along the cream-colored walls are zafu cushions for members to meditate on. Along the south wall is an unassuming, lectern where the priest guides members through their zazen meditation sessions, complete with a laptop so others can join remotely via Zoom. The centerpiece of the zendo is the altar, which was crafted by an artist in the Zen Center's membership. Made of warm wood, the altar is topped with a Buddha statue, with a lower tier holding flowers, candles, and other ritual objects.



Figure 5: The East-facing window of the Zendo, the Zen Center's main gathering space



Figure 6: The altar in the Zendo, constructed by an artist who is a member of the congregation and featuring a Buddha, flowers, candles, and incense

The Zen Center community's willingness to fund and execute renovations to their Zendo indicates their desire to reconcile their physical space with their gathering activities. In almost every sense, the vernacular and domestic space has informed their practice. At the same time, Rev. Reirin has expressed that the Zen Center's members carry out "regular lives" without a lifelong commitment to become ordained priests or full-time clergy.<sup>2</sup> As a Buddhist hermitage, the Zen center is not seeking acolytes and does not aspire to recruit large membership, unlike Buddhist temples where future priests are trained. They have dedicated their space at 2825 Stowell to meeting the needs of existing members and welcoming those who are curious, rather than advertising their presence in the neighborhood or recruiting visitors who walk by. The Zen Center's website states that they are "a place for meditation, study and reflection, leading to inner awakening and mindful, compassionate action through traditional Soto Zen Practice."<sup>3</sup> The relatively small rooms and typical Upper East Side exterior of the Zen Center are all that is needed to fulfill their mission and provide members with a temporary retreat from the city, focusing far more on the quality of the experience inside their space than on recruiting new members to fill it.

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Reirin Gumbel (resident priest), interview with the authors in the Milwaukee Zen Center on Friday, February 25, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> "Home", *Milwaukee Zen Center*, <http://mkzen.org/>.



Figure 7: One of the few indicators on the outside of the Zen Center that it is more than just another Upper East Side home: a minimalist Buddha painted on the bottom panel of the porch door

### Sources

1900 U.S. census, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, population schedule, enumeration district (ED) 163, sheet (penned) 13, house number 679, family Jones.

“2825 North Stowell Avenue.” Milwaukee Permit & Development Center, Milwaukee, WI.

“Home.” *Milwaukee Zen Center*. Accessed 3 March, 2022. <http://mkzen.org/>

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