

# Happy birthday, Frank Lloyd Wright

On the 150th anniversary of his birth, a look at a few Wright works in the Midwest

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One of America's best-known — and flamboyant — architects still has a loyal following of fans 150 years after his birth in rural Wisconsin on June 8, 1867. Frank Lloyd Wright designed more than 400 structures, a good many of them open to the public in his native Midwest.

Robie House draws visitors to the University of Chicago campus in Hyde Park. Oak Park has the world's largest concentration of Wright structures, including his home and studio. But farther afield, Wright designs make a longer journey in the Midwest worth the trip. A few to consider:

## Dana-Thomas House, Springfield, Illinois

The most intact of Wright's Prairie-style homes hasn't changed much since it was completed in 1904 for wealthy socialite Susan Lawrence Dana. She had inherited an Italianate home from her father and asked Wright to add a wing to accommodate the opulent parties for which she had become so well-known. Instead, he built a 12,600-square-foot home around the original structure, carving out 35 rooms on 16 varying levels.

Dana gave Wright a blank check and he ran with it, designing not only the home but also much of its furnishings and fixtures. More than 450 pieces of art glass and 100 pieces of furniture created by Wright remain. In the spacious dining room, for example, Wright's trademark straight-back wood chairs surround a long table, and art glass chandeliers in a butterfly motif hang in the corners of the room. Stained-glass bay windows, their stacked chevron design mimicking the leaves of a sumac tree, rim the adjacent breakfast nook.

Both the butterfly and sumac patterns can be found throughout the house, the butterflies because Dana loved the colorful insects, and sumac because its autumn colors followed Wright's theme for the house: fall on the prairie. A fountain dominates one of the parlors of the home, perhaps showing off the fact that it became the first house in Springfield with running water as well as electricity.

To accommodate the parties, Wright positioned several music balconies in the house not only as a space for



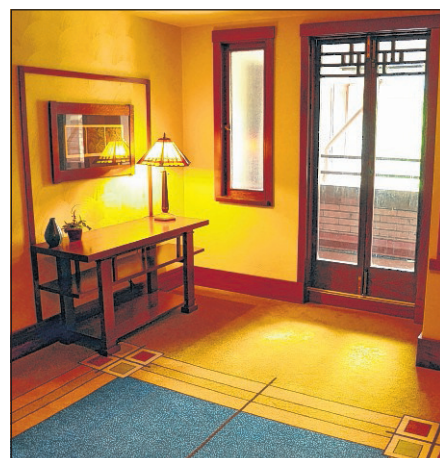
Frank Lloyd Wright's Dana-Thomas house sits on a corner lot a few blocks south of the Illinois capitol in Springfield.



Over the years Frank Lloyd Wright experimented with architectural details as he added onto to Taliesin, his home near Spring Green, Wis.

musicians to perform for guests but also for the lady of the house to make her grand entrance. Other forms of amusement awaited on the lowest level. Most Wright homes do not contain basements, but the original Italianate structure had one. Wright turned it into a duckpin bowling alley and billiard room.

A barrel-vaulted room in an entertainment wing remains one of the highlights of a tour of the home. Carl Sandburg recited poetry on its raised stage



Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie-style motifs can be found throughout the Historic Park Inn in Mason City, Iowa.

and social activist Jane Adams gave lectures. To ensure that noise from the railroad tracks next door didn't interrupt these presentations, Dana arranged to have the trains stopped.

The home's second owner, medical publisher Charles Thomas, maintained the house and its furnishings as a unit

the result of lightning or an electrical malfunction.

Each time Wright rebuilt the home on its original footprint, adding on over the years and experimenting with new ideas in architecture. Taliesin became a working laboratory not only for him but also for students of the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture who continue to spend summers at the Wisconsin



Limestone Wright used to construct Taliesin near Spring Green, Wis., came from a local quarry in keeping with his belief that buildings should fit in with their natural surroundings.

estate and winters at Wright's Taliesin West, also open for tours, near Scottsdale, Ariz.

Descended from Welsh immigrants, Wright named his estate Taliesin meaning "radiant brow" or "shining brow" in Welsh. It sits on the brow of a hill overlooking the Wisconsin River and, in keeping with Wright's use of colors as found in nature, is built with pale yellow limestone from a local quarry. Wood used in the home resembles the color of tree bark and plaster the color of sand along the river.

Wright fought off financial ruin and managed to acquire more land to grow his estate to nearly 600 acres. Taliesin III measures about 37,000 square feet. As in many Wright homes, low ceilings give way to expansive spaces creating the feeling of openness. Wright himself stood 5 foot 8 inches, though by some accounts he measured just 5 foot 6. One odd feature: doorknobs. He placed them higher than usual because they kept getting caught in his pants pockets.

An open great room houses a dining table, an alcove with a grand piano and access to a terrace and bird walk. The loggia's tall windows overlook

the valley. Wright was an avid collector of Asian art, some of which remains on display in the home and on the grounds.

The years have not been kind to Taliesin. Though a National Historic Landmark, it had fallen into such disrepair it was placed on a list of America's Most Endangered Places by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The nonprofit Taliesin Preservation Inc. was established to restore it. The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, formed by Wright and his third wife, owns the property.

Tours of Taliesin begin at the Wright-designed visitor center that contains a bookstore and Riverview Restaurant with windows spanning the length of the building.

## Historic Park Inn and Stockman House, Mason City, Iowa

Wright designed six hotels. Five were built, including his famous Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, but the only Wright hotel remaining overlooks Central Park in downtown Mason City, Iowa.

Opened in 1910 as a combination bank, law office and hotel, the Historic Park Inn takes paying guests and allows guided tours. That it survived at all is due to preservationists. A financial crisis in the 1920s bankrupted the bank and turned the space over to a hodgepodge of retail businesses. In 1972, the hotel building was reconfigured as rental apartments. It deteriorated to such a poor state it made the state's list of endangered historic buildings. Wright on the Park Inc., a nonprofit, took charge bringing the hotel as well as the former bank and law office back into use after renovations costing \$18.5 million. The inn began taking guests again in 2011.

The exterior has Wright's Prairie-style fingerprints all over it, especially in its horizontal lines and cantilevered roofs. Significant changes made inside turned the original 43-room hotel with shared baths into a 27-room property with en suite bathrooms. Six of the guest rooms take over the top floor in the adjoining former bank building. Downstairs, the bank's main building now serves as the hotel's ballroom. Metal grills, some recovered from a farm where they had been used as a fence, cover its clerestory windows.

The hotel's breakfast room had been a room for traveling salesmen to



An optical illusion makes the ends of the roof on the Dana-Thomas house in Springfield, Ill., appear to turn up resembling a Japanese pagoda.

display their wares. A lounge and meeting rooms were carved from the former law office. Lighting behind 25 art-glass panels, recovered from the home of one of the original hotel's owners, brightens the ceiling of the Skylight room. Wright's signature ribbon windows allow natural light to pour into the hotel mezzanine and the French doors open to a balcony for views of the park. Wright sent the men of his day down to the lowest level where they could smoke and drink in the Gentlemen's Lounge. Guests of both genders now imbibe in craft beers and specialty cocktails in a lounge with adjoining wine room and billiards room.

Wright's plans for the hotel sparked interest in Prairie-style homes among Mason City's elite, but only one house was built by Wright before he became persona non grata after taking up with Mamah Cheney. The Stockman House, designed for a local physician, takes a cue from the middle-class houses Wright described in an article in Ladies' Home Journal. Completed in 1908, it has four bedrooms, ribbon windows and Wright's characteristic open floor plan with a fireplace as its centerpiece on the ground floor. Outside, architecture buffs see Wright's distinctive hip roof and overhanging eaves.

This Wright work almost vanished, too. Slated to be demolished to make way for a church parking lot, it was moved to its current site and sold by the city to a preservation group. Tours can be booked through the Architectural Interpretive Center next door.

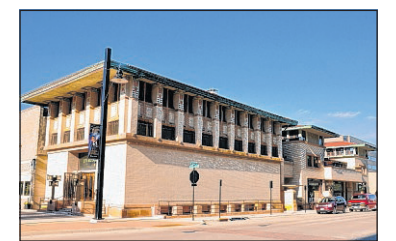
## Frank Lloyd Wright's Midwest works

**Dana-Thomas House:** 301 E. Lawrence Ave., Springfield, Illinois. Open Wednesday through Sunday year round, seasonally Monday and Tuesday. Suggested donation: \$10. (217) 782-6776 or dana-thomas.org/. Upcoming events include a Restoration Tour at 1:15 p.m. Saturday, June 10, and the concert "Frank Lloyd Wright in Words and Music" at 6 p.m. Saturday. Free; reservations requested at (217) 782-6776.

**Taliesin:** 5607 County Road C, Spring Green, Wisconsin. Open daily May through October, Friday through Sunday in April and November. Several tours are offered; the two-hour house tour costs \$58. (877) 588-7900 or taliesinpreservation.org/. On Tuesday through Thursday, June 6-8, tours at Taliesin are 50 percent off.

**Historic Park Inn:** 7 W. State St., Mason City, Iowa. Rates from about \$120. (800) 659-2220 or stoneycreekhotels.com/hotel/travel/masoncity-parkinn/home.do. Guided tours given by Wright on the Park Thursday through Sunday. \$10. (641) 423-0689 or wrightonthepark.org/. Frank Lloyd Wright 150th Birthday Party is Sunday, June 11, at the Historic Park Inn. Schedule: 3:30 p.m. Tim Totten gives a presentation on Wright; 5 p.m. pizza party; 6 p.m. Kim Bixler presentation "Growing Up in a Frank Lloyd Wright House." \$8 for members; \$10 for nonmembers.

**Stockman House:** 530 First St. NE, Mason City, Iowa. Tours daily May through October for \$10. Off-season tours by appointment. (641) 423-1923 or stockmanhouse.org/.



The building now housing the Historic Park Inn in downtown Mason City, Iowa, was designed by Wright to contain a hotel, bank building and law offices.