

Visiting Frank Lloyd Wright works in Milwaukee, Madison

By Katherine Rodeghier
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travel

"We think it may have been a drug house because it was so abused." Those words, whispered by a docent giving tours of homes designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, strike horror in the hearts of those who cherish the work of the famous architect.

Wright's structures, like those of any architect, fall victim to the passing years and changing times. Preservationists quietly work to save what they can of his distinctive designs for generations to come.

Two examples, one in Milwaukee and one in Madison, Wisconsin:

Burnham Block, Milwaukee

"I would rather solve the small house problem than build anything else I can think of," wrote Wright in the January 1938 issue of Architectural Forum. The man famous for his grand mansions, hotels, museums, commercial buildings and places of worship was most interested in designing housing for the common man. In his seven decades as an architect, he made more than 960 drawings of modest homes, more sketches than any other of his projects. Six of those homes stand side-by-side on Burnham Street in Milwaukee. One has been restored and its interior is open for tours. The others have been or are being acquired by preservationists who hope to return them to their original condition.

Known as American System-Built Homes, they might

be considered a forerunner to prefabricated houses. But instead of being built off-site, Wright had lumber and other materials cut in mills and factories delivered to the location and assembled on the property. Twenty of these houses have been discovered in the U.S., though Wright experts believe there are more.

The six on Burnham Block were built between October 1915 and July 1916. The B1 model, the only known example of this design, cost \$3,000, measures 805 square feet and has two bedrooms. Tours of the interior show how familiar Wright techniques make it appear larger. Ribbon windows flood the parlor with light. A low ceiling at the entry transitions to a higher ceiling in the main room creating the illusion of spaciousness.

At the other end of the block,



COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Frank Lloyd Wright's distinctive designs are apparent in the furnishings inside the B1 model house on the Burnham Block in Milwaukee, Wis.

Wright's C3 model two-flat has been restored on the outside but much work remains inside. It had so deteriorated — walls damaged, buckets placed to catch rainwater — that workers speculate it became a hangout for substance abusers. All the houses on the block had been

altered from Wright's design in some way: porches enclosed, concrete tile on roofs, metal siding covering original stucco.

Wright and developer Arthur L. Richards had high hopes for selling these homes to residents with moderate and low-incomes, but World War



COURTESY OF
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A corner house on the Burnham Block in Milwaukee, Wis., has been restored on the outside.

I came along and materials that would have been used for housing went to the war effort. Wright left for Japan to oversee construction of his design for the Imperial Hotel and his relationship with Richards declined, leading to a lawsuit that Wright won.

Today visitors come from more than 33 countries — many from Japan where Wright has a big following — to see the houses on the Burnham Block. Docent-led tours begin at the B1 model at 2714 W. Burnham St., cost \$15 and

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Sudoku answers

6	1	4	8	3	5	9	7	2
5	3	2	1	9	7	6	8	4
9	7	8	6	4	2	1	3	5
7	8	1	2	5	4	3	6	9
4	6	9	3	7	8	5	2	1
2	5	3	9	6	1	8	4	7
3	4	6	7	1	9	2	5	8
1	2	5	4	8	6	7	9	3
8	9	7	5	2	3	4	1	6

are given most weekends in summer and on Saturdays most of the rest of the year. Reservations are not necessary. wrightinmilwaukee.org/.

Unitarian Meeting House, Madison

When members of the First Unitarian Society in Madison decided to hire an architect to design a new worship space, they hesitated to choose one of their own. Wright was a member of the congregation his parents helped found in 1879, but the persnickety architect's projects frequently encountered cost overruns that its 150 members could ill afford. Still, they could not pass up the opportunity to employ the talent in their midst.

The Unitarian Meeting House was completed in 1951 when Wright was 84. Sure enough, it exceeded the congregation's budget. To cut costs, instead of paying for rock for the church to be trucked from the quarry 35 miles away, members carried the rocks themselves, earning accolades in the congregation's history as "the stone haulers."

This year members are tackling a new project: Replacing the expensive copper on the steeply pitched roof jutting from the one-story structure. Resembling the prow of a ship, Wright likened it to praying hands. It's the church's most distinctive exterior feature.

Wright called the meeting house a "little country church." A National Historic Landmark, it's one of 10 churches he designed and one of 17 Wright structures honored by the American Institute of Architects for their contribution to American culture. The meeting house rests on the brow of a hill rather than the summit in keeping with Wright's idea that buildings should blend with nature. At the time it sat on the outskirts of Madison overlooking the experimental farm fields of the University of Wisconsin and Lake Mendota in the distance. Urban development has since obscured the views.

Wright's design incorporates nature in several other ways. Rather than stained glass, he used clear glass in windows and often embedded them in dolomite stone walls arranged to resemble the cliff of a quarry. The ceiling in



COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER

The Landmark Auditorium inside the Unitarian Meeting House in Madison, Wis., was designed by one of its members, Frank Lloyd Wright.

the worship space undulates in a way Wright envisioned as a mother bird lowering her wings over her offspring. Pews are made of plywood that Wright called a good, simple material that does not pretend to be anything grander. As in all Wright churches, seating flanks three sides of the pulpit to foster greater community.

Lovers of Wright architecture spot other signature features, such as clerestory windows, overhanging eaves, a low ceiling at the entry and Cherokee red paint on a concrete floor marked by a diamond pattern formed by the joining of two equilateral triangles. Wright felt triangles conveyed structural strength. The walls of a loggia repeat the triangular shape and are hung with Japanese prints Wright owned, now sadly faded.

The congregation grew to more than 1,100 members, severely crowding Wright's Landmark Auditorium. So in 2008 an addition was completed with an Atrium Auditorium seating 525 worshippers

and rooms for the church school, meetings, library and musical rehearsals. Experts in Wright's architecture worked with architects to ensure the addition, tucked unobtrusively behind the original building, reflected the spirit of Wright's design but did not upstage it. It earned LEED gold status for its green roof and geothermal heating and cooling. Two rain gardens lessen water runoff onto neighboring property.

A Jewish congregation uses the meeting house for services. Unitarian services are held in Wright's Landmark Auditorium on Saturdays and on Sundays in the Atrium Auditorium where a grand piano ordered by Wright remains. It was delivered to the meeting house unannounced and the congregation assumed it was a gift from its famous member. Turns out Wright had only made the down payment and sent the congregation a bill for the balance. Another cost overrun to pay.

As with Milwaukee's Burnham Block, visitors come from around the world, especially Japan, to see the meeting house at 900 University Bay Drive, often combining it with a trip to Wright's home, Taliesin, a few miles away. Tours of the meeting house take place weekdays May through September and after services on Sundays. A \$10 donation helps fund preservation of the building. Reservations are recommended. (608) 233-9774 or fusmadison.org/.

• *Information for this article was gathered during a writer's conference sponsored by the Greater Madison Convention and Visitors Bureau, visit madison.com/, and Visit Milwaukee, visit milwaukee.org/.*

your best shot



Lynne Solway, Buffalo Grove

"In July 2015, on our way to Pisa, Italy, we visited a small winery in the town of Santa Margherita. I was struck by the patchwork of textures captured in this photo of an exterior wall of the winery."

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