



The Historic Park Inn in Mason City, Iowa, is the only remaining Frank Lloyd Wright-designed hotel in the world and was a prototype for his famous, long-gone Imperial Hotel in Tokyo.

Iowa's Prairie School trove

Before he was banished, Frank Lloyd Wright left his mark on Mason City

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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MASON CITY, Iowa
Frank Lloyd Wright wasn't exactly run out of town; he was asked never to return.

Like the fictional professor Howard Hill in "The Music Man," composed by native son Meredith Willson, Wright displeased the good people of this "River City." He abandoned his wife and six children in Oak Park and ran off to Europe with his neighbor's wife, a scandal and a deal breaker at the turn of the last century.

But before he was ostracized, Wright designed a hotel and a modest Prairie School home, sparking such a wave of enthusiasm for his signature style that colleagues stepped in to take over the work.

The result? This northern Iowa town of nearly 30,000 has the only remaining Wright-designed hotel in the world — itself a tourist attraction — and one of the highest concentrations of Prairie School architecture, visible on walking tours.

Some argue that visitors' interest in architecture has outstripped that of Mason City's other tourist draws: Willson's boyhood home and Music Man Square, a replica of "The Music Man" movie set.

Mason City's architectural claim to fame began when leading citizens sought to build a bank and hotel. Attorney James Markley's daughters attended a boarding school that Wright built for the architect's aunts in Spring Green, Wis., and he was so taken by its design that he recommended Wright for the project. The combination City National Bank, Park Inn Hotel and law offices, done in Wright's classic Prairie School style, opened in 1910.

It's the only remaining hotel of six designed — five built — by Wright and was a prototype for one of his most famous works, the long-gone Imperial Hotel in Tokyo.

But it, too, almost disappeared. The bank fell on hard times during the 1920s farm crisis, was sold in bankruptcy and then converted to retail space. The hotel struggled along until 1972, was divided into apartments and fell into such disrepair it was imploding on itself, making a list of the top 10 most endangered historic properties in Iowa. The nonprofit Wright on the Park Inc. took ownership, and the hotel, along with the former bank and law offices, reopened as the Historic Park Inn in 2011.

Not without a fight, however.

Some community members considered it "a pile of



A ribbon of windows, a signature Prairie School feature, brings light into a guest room at the Historic Park Inn.



The Stockman House, completed in 1908, is the only Prairie-style Wright home in Iowa that is open to the public.

junk," said Claudia Collier, the nonprofit's office manager and tour coordinator. "There was a lot of contention. People thought it was a waste of time" and questioned why anyone would come to Mason City to see a hotel built by a long-dead architect.

But a groundswell of support drowned out the detractors and resulted in an \$18.5 million renovation that triggered a Mason City renaissance. The hotel has had guests from all 50 states and 40 countries. Those not lucky enough to snag a room reservation content themselves with one of Wright on the Park's guided tours.

Catherine Fields, who owns the CoffeeCat down the street, said the reopening of the hotel has created "a different energy in town" drawing lots of visitors. She points to the coffeehouse's bulletin board displaying postcards customers sent from their home cities and countries.

Mason City is "in the midst of a 'River City' renaissance," said Mayor Eric Bookmeyer. "Even from five years ago, it looks completely different now. It's been a cultural shift. There is an intense pride; residents enjoy showing off their town."

There's more to show-off than the hotel.

While Wright was working on the hotel and bank project, a local physician asked him to design a home. The Stockman House, completed in 1908, is Iowa's only Wright-designed Prairie-style home that is open to the public, with tours done through the Architectural Interpretive Center next door. The home is Wright's take on middle-class housing he described in a Ladies' Home Journal article titled "A Fireproof House for \$5,000."

The four-bedroom home has several Prairie School features, including a projecting hip roof with overhanging eaves, ribbon windows and an L-shaped open floor plan around a central fireplace.

"This is Frank Lloyd Wright's room without walls," said Joanne Hardinger, operations and tour coordinator for the River City Society for Historic Preservation. "He wanted to break out of the box," the small, separate rooms typical in Victorian homes.

Now on the National Register of Historic Places, the Stockman House also was almost lost to history. Before it could be torn down to make way for a



The Yelland House, by William Drummond, was the first of many Prairie Style homes built by Wright's associates.

church parking lot, it was acquired by the city, moved to its present location and sold to the preservation society.

After Stockman House was completed, several other families wanted homes in the Prairie School style, but Wright had left town. William Drummond, an architect in Wright's Oak Park studio who came to Mason City to oversee the bank and hotel project, designed one house. Walter Burley Griffin, who also worked for Wright in Oak Park, designed another five but left for Australia after winning an international competition to plan its new capital, Canberra. Francis Barry Byrne, another Wright protege, designed two more houses.

All are part of the Rock Crest-Rock Glen National Historic District, the nation's most compact grouping of Prairie School buildings unified around a common natural setting: the rocky bluffs and verdant glen on opposite banks of Willow Creek. All the homes remain private residences not open to the public, but exteriors can be viewed on self-guided walking tours. Guidebooks are sold at the Architectural Interpretive Center.

Architecture buffs who

come to Mason City usually book rooms at the Historic Park Inn. They find plenty of Wright touches but with some significant changes to cater to modern tastes. The original hotel had 43 rooms, each 10 feet by 10 feet, with shared bathrooms. The restored hotel has 21 rooms in the original hotel building plus six on the top floor of the adjoining former bank building. Each is different, but all have private baths.

Wright designed the bank to look like a strongbox, with the two-story main room — now the hotel ballroom — topped by clerestory windows covered with metal grilles. Fourteen grilles are original, found on a local farm where they had been repurposed as fencing. Other found objects include 25 art-glass panels in the hotel's Skylight Room. One of the hotel's owners removed them when the roof began to leak and took them to his home in the historic district.

Wright's only remaining hotel is essentially a museum of his Prairie School style, with clean horizontal lines and cantilevered roofs. Some who take tours argue that the Arizona Biltmore also is a Wright



Frank Lloyd Wright is depicted in American Architect, a sculpture by Martha Pettigrew, in Central Park.



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If you go

■ Historic Park Inn: 7 W. State St., about \$100 to \$275, 641-422-0015, 800-659-2220, stoneycreekhotels.com/hotel/travel/masoncity-parkinn/home.do

■ Hotel tours: Wright on the Park guided tours of Historic Park Inn, \$10, 641-423-0689, wrightonthe-park.org

■ Stockman House tours: 530 First St. NE, \$10 adults, \$5 age 12-17, \$3 age 6-11 (unsuitable for younger children), 641-423-1923, stockmanhouse.org

■ Architectural Interpretive Center: 520 First St. NE, suggested donation \$3, walking tour guidebook \$5, 641-423-1923, stockmanhouse.org

■ Visitor info: 800-423-5724, visitmasoncityiowa.com

hotel, but guides are quick to point out that Wright was not the architect of record there but a consultant. Wright's fingerprints are all over the Mason City hotel. Natural light floods the mezzanine from his ribbon windows. The Ladies' Parlor has French doors he designed that open onto a balcony overlooking Central Park.

The former Sample Room, where traveling salesmen displayed their wares for customers, is now a breakfast room for hotel guests. The former law offices became a lounge and meeting room. Wright put the Gentlemen's Lounge, where men could smoke and drink away from the ladies, in the basement. It's now a bar, wine room and billiard room with a period pool table.

"Music Man's" Marian the librarian would not approve.