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## Frank Lloyd Wright in Iowa

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# Frank Lloyd Wright in Iowa

## **Abstract**

Why "Wright in Iowa?" Are there ways that Wright's Iowa works are distinguished from his built works elsewhere? Iowa is a typical Midwest state, exceptional in neither general geography nor landscape. The state's urban areas are minor, and Iowa has never been known for its subscription to avant-garde architecture. Its most renowned artist, Grant Wood, painted Iowa's rolling hills and pie-faced people in cartoon-like images that simultaneously champion and question the coalescence of people and place. Indeed, the state's most convincing buildings are found on its farms with their unpretentious, vernacular, agricultural buildings.

## **Disciplines**

Architectural History and Criticism

## **Comments**

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WINTER 2008  
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# QUARTERLY

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT  
IN IOWA







(Photos above and opposite page, top right) The Lowell and Agnes Walter House, "Cedar Rock," Quasqueton, Iowa. Both the Walter House (see story pages 22-29) and the Stockman House in Mason City, Iowa, (see cover image and story pages 16-19) are now operated as house museums, open to the public. These two now-public houses and the seven privately owned Wright-designed homes in Iowa provide insight into Wright's lifelong efforts to find affordable architectural solutions for an appropriate house form for American society. (Below right) Ladies Home Journal, June 1945. Wright often used the popular press to take both his designs and his design philosophy directly to the public, and the success of this effort is evident in the inspiration for a number of the Iowa houses. After seeing Wright's design "Opus 497" (the approximate number of buildings Wright had designed by this time) in the 1945 Ladies Home Journal, Lowell and Agnes Walter asked Wright to adapt it for their site along the banks of the Wapsipinicon River. Photo above © Daniel Naegele; photo opposite page © Chad Thurman.

**W**

hy "Wright in Iowa?" Are there ways that Wright's Iowa works are distinguished from his built works elsewhere? Iowa is a typical Midwest state, exceptional in neither general geography nor landscape. The state's urban areas are minor, and Iowa has never been known for its subscription to avant-garde architecture. Its most renowned artist, Grant Wood, painted Iowa's rolling hills and pie-faced people in cartoon-like images that simultaneously champion and question the coalescence of people and place. Indeed, the state's most convincing buildings are found on its farms with their unpretentious, vernacular, agricultural buildings.

Certainly, in addition to physical proximity to Wright's home state of Wisconsin, Iowa's Midwestern qualities were compatible with Wright's own convictions. Wright railed against European and neo-classical influences, insisting on the development of a uniquely American way of building. He believed in Jeffersonian government and the associated architec-

# FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT IN IOWA

*Introduction*

*by Daniel Naegele, Ph.D.*



ture of the agrarian gentleman, and he regularly dismissed the big city in favor of decentralized towns. With the exception of the Walter House, built on a large farm site, all of Wright's Iowa buildings are either small-town urban or small-town suburban buildings.

Wright's reputation for organic design, for buildings that grace the landscape, for a site-specific architecture that seeks harmony with nature is firmly established. Yet the expense of such building often rendered it elitist. How to combine the organic and the affordable? Early in his career Wright began addressing the challenge of designing beautiful affordable homes for families of modest means. And it is in this area that Iowa becomes a viable category of investigation because of the state's array of built strategies for affordable homes by America's premier architect. Of

the ten Wright-designed buildings in Iowa, nine are houses; the only non-residential structure is the Park Inn Hotel and City National Bank, built in Mason City, Iowa, in 1909. The 1908 Stockman House, the 1917 Meier House, and the 1945 Walter House were built after each of their owners read popular home magazines featuring Wright designs for affordable housing. And six Usonian houses completed mid-century in Iowa demonstrate masterful Wright approaches for realizing unconventional, natural houses on less-than-elaborate budgets.

The 1908 Stockman House, Wright's first Iowa building, was a non-fireproof manifestation of Wright's famed all-concrete "Fireproof House for \$5000," published as a site-less project in the *Ladies Home Journal* of April 1907. Though a preconceived house seems contradictory to Wright as we understand him today, such was



a reasonable way to bring Wrightian custom-designed domestic architecture to the masses, to sow the seeds of a new American house otherwise beyond the means of most. The Fireproof House was the third in a series of model homes that Wright published in *Ladies Home Journal* beginning in 1901. Designed to take

**OPUS 497** *The world's most distinguished architect designs a crystal house, for town or country, which can have far-reaching effects on future living for all of us.*

The golden room is divided into living and dining sections by an indoor garden lobby on the right, focused on the fireplace dining on the left, opening onto the terrace.

For more than half a century Frank Lloyd Wright has been performing feats of architecture noted for their freedom and originality, and his influence on building all over the world has hardly been equaled by any architect of our times. All this would have been sufficient reason for us to be pleased to publish his most recent house design, Opus 497, done especially for the *Journal*, and in our opinion one of his finest. But there is a somewhat previous one far, after a lapse of many years, Opus 497, is really a continuation of a series of houses he did for this magazine in the early 1900's, one of which we have reproduced below. This was a good house then (it is a good house now)—which is the way you measure greatness.

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**BY RICHARD PRITT**  
*Architectural Editor of the Journal*

**W**RIGHT'S house foretells the future with considerably more than the clarity of crystal. For its preparatory, which you can take as literally as you like, speaks in terms of materials that are the best used in reality. The plan, metal, concrete and brick which its famous architect has indicated for its construction are not only available anywhere at any normal time, and are basically inexpensive, but, as Wright remarks, "they make the house fireproof, verminproof, and pest-free and long-lived." However, it is Wright's juxtaposition of these four simple accessible materials which gives his house the special kind of freedom that carries it very beyond ordinary comfort and convenience. In his hands these four familiar materials are no longer plain, metal, concrete and brick as we have been accustomed to consider them in our houses. Here they suddenly blossom out in forms so uncharacterized that it may take a moment or two for you to realize how right they are at all. Each material works completely at its best for the placement of the occupants and the appearance of the house—but to mention for its best performance, with an absolute minimum of maintenance. Glass no longer means a mere transparent hole in the wall; glass here means a whole light-giving wall. Metal in its secret hidden strength of the beam, metal as the form of stainless steel in the beautiful stainless strength of slender "T" sections that support the roof and hold glass panels in place. Even the metal strips that strengthen the thin brick corners walls in the bedrooms wrap up out in the sweeping ligatures. And the graceful slight floor of the roof are what can happen when an artist explores the possibilities of lightweight precast concrete.

I dwell on the materials because this house is a lesson in materials, given by a master. Brick, for instance, which probably the oldest form of precast concrete building material, can be just as beautiful indoors as out. And when it does this double duty you have a simple, one-material wall as against the ordinary frame-brace wall, made up of an inventory of fifteen layers of materials, each requiring a separate operation. While sunlight and fresh air are fine, few houses have ever taken full advantage of the health, comfort and beauty they can provide. The glass does. The glass walls are fixed in place, for the sake of lightness and simplicity, but from the few outside doors there can be a full view of air, and in addition there can be completely controlled ventilation through the movable wash of the chimney that runs above the main roof. These upper openings also provide a beautiful source of light from above, through ceiling windows that show shades of midnight as well, floors, furniture and plants. These plants, growing in each panel at floor level, not only help to decorate the room, simplicity and fragrance, but form a flower-and-foliage partition between the sitting side of the room around the fireplace and the dining side, which opens upon a terrace for outdoor eating and entertaining.

An important outside feature is the circular planting of flowering shrubs and trees and ferns which protects the privacy of the glass garden rooms and forms a surrounding view. This planting frames a house that is more than a picture house. Put yourself in the floor plan, and try to imagine how a house like this would really feel.

**Journal Houses on Exhibition**

Since January, 1944, we have published a dozen new house designs by the country's outstanding architect—houses that point the way to better, less expensive living after the war. The greatest recognition these houses have had has been given by our readers, from whom we have received a record-breaking volume of letters. Only two of these letters failed to praise our houses, both as in plan and appearance, while in our opinion showed extraordinary appreciation for these new and unfamiliar forms.

Last winter our houses were exhibited in picture panels back at the Museum of Institute of Technology and at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. And this summer the Museum of Modern Art in New York City is putting on a special exhibition, from May to October of the actual scale models that you have even photographed in the magazine. We are glad the authorities agree with our readers.

**A Wright house from the Journal back in February, 1907.**



advantage of a relatively new building medium—reinforced concrete—Wright believed it would be an “improvement over the usual cut-up, overtrimmed boxes” typical of the day, “more enduring than if carved intact from solid stone.” It would have “no attic, no ‘butler’s pantry,’ no back stairway,”—all of which, according to Wright, “would be unnecessarily cumbersome in this scheme, which is trimmed to the last ounce of the superfluous.” The published design was categorically theoretical, Wright’s answer to “how to live securely and better on a budget.” It was intended to be employed again and again on different parcels in different cities for different clients yet addressing essentially the same situation: an affordable, anonymous yet Prairie-Style house for a middle-income family, designed to fit a standard city lot.

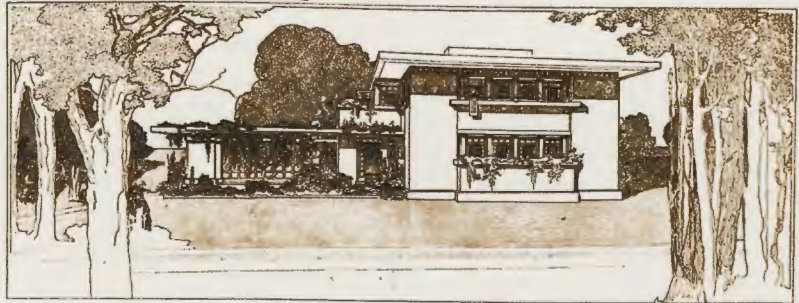
A wood frame, stucco, and hip-roof version of the Fireproof House was built for Stephen Hunt in La Grange, Illinois, in 1907. The following year, the Stockman House, nearly identical to the Hunt House, was built on a small site in Mason City, Iowa. The Stockman House (see pages 16-19) anticipates strategies of Wright’s future affordable design by offering a ‘generic’ parti—in this case, the cubic, two-story body—only to modify it with add-on accoutrements (entrance, staircase, porch, and trellises) that address the specifics of both client and site.

In 1917, a Wright-designed American

(Right) In April 1907, “A Fireproof House for \$5,000” was published in Ladies Home Journal, underscoring Wright’s interest in developing a design that responded to the escalating cost of homebuilding. Among its many features, the Fireproof House called for reducing the number of special rooms and restricting the building’s floor plan. While the “fireproof” version of the house was not built, a number of designs inspired by it were constructed, including the Stockman House in Mason City, Iowa, completed in 1908 (see pages 16-19).

## A Fireproof House for \$5000

Estimated to Cost That Amount in Chicago, and Designed Especially for The Journal  
By Frank Lloyd Wright



One Side of the House, Showing the Trellised Extension

THE cost of building has increased nearly forty per cent. in the past six years. The thirty-five-hundred-dollar wooden house of six years ago would cost nearly five thousand dollars now; so at the present time it would seem that five thousand dollars ought to represent a low enough cost standard, if the result be permanent and the cost of maintenance lessened.

Changing industrial conditions have brought reinforced concrete construction within the reach of the average home-maker. The maximum strength peculiar to the nature of both concrete and steel is in this system utilized with great economy. A structure of this type is more enduring than if carved intact from solid stone, for it is not only a masonry monolith but interlaced with steel fibres as well. Insulated with an impervious non-conducting inner coating it is damp-proof; it is, too, warmer than a wooden house in winter and cooler in summer.

The plan for a small house of this type, submitted here, is the result of a process of elimination due to much experience in planning the inexpensive house. What remains seems sufficiently complete and the ensemble an improvement over the usual cut-up, overtrimmed boxes doing duty in this class, wherein architecture is a matter of “millwork” and the “features” are apt to peel.

As an added grace in summer foliage and flowers are arranged for as a decorative feature of the design, the only ornamentation. In winter the building is well proportioned and complete without them.

NO ATTIC, no “butler’s pantry,” no back stairway have been planned; they would be unnecessarily cumbersome in this scheme, which is trimmed to the last ounce of the superfluous. A closet on the level of the stair landing takes care of trunks and suit-cases, and a dry, well-lighted basement storeroom cares for winter wear; doesn’t classify in the various closets. The open kitchen, with pantry conveniences built into it, is more pleasant and as useful as the complement of kitchen, kitchen pantry and “butler’s pantry.” Access to the stairs from the kitchen is sufficiently private at all times, and the front door may be easily reached from the kitchen without passing through the living-room.

The walls, floors and roof of this house are a monolithic casting, formed in the usual manner by means of wooden false work, the chimney at the centre carrying, like a huge post, the central load of floor and roof construction. Floors and roof are reinforced concrete slabs approximately five inches thick if gravel concrete is used. The roof slab overhangs to protect the walls from sun and the top is waterproofed with a tar and gravel roofing pitched to drain to a downspout located in the chimney-flue, where it is not likely to freeze. To afford further protection to the second-story rooms from the heat of the sun a false ceiling is provided of plastered metal lath hanging eight inches below the bottom of the roof slab, leaving a circulating air space above, exhausted to the large open space in the centre of the chimney. In summer this air space is fed by the openings noted beneath the eaves outside. These openings may be closed in winter by a simple device reached from the second-story windows.

All the interior partitions are of metal lath plastered both sides, or of three-inch tile set upon the floor slabs after the reinforced concrete construction is complete. After coating the inside surfaces of the outside concrete walls with a non-conducting paint, or lining them with a plaster-board, the whole is plastered two coats with a rough sand finish.

The floor striations are finished smooth with wooden strip inlaid for finishing floor coverings, or at additional cost noted they may be finished over a rough structural concrete with a half-inch thick dressing of magnesite mixed with sawdust, which renders them less hard

and cold to the touch, and when waxed presents a very agreeable surface in any color.

The interior is trimmed with light wood strips nailed to small, porous terra-cotta blocks, which are set into the forms at the proper points before the forms are filled with the concrete.

IN THE composition of the concrete for the outside walls only finely-screened bird’s-eye gravel is used with cement enough added to fill the voids. This mixture is put into the boxes quite dry and tamped. When the forms are removed the outside is washed with a solution of hydrochloric acid, which cuts the cement from the outer face of the pebbles, and the whole surface glistens like a piece of gray granite. This treatment insures uniformity of color, and if the wooden forms have been properly made of narrow flooring smoothed on the side toward the concrete and oiled, the surface throughout should be smooth and even without unsightly seams.

The house has been designed four sides alike in order to simplify the making of these forms, and so that, if necessary, forms made for one side may serve for all four.

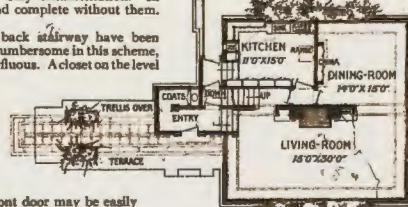
The windows are casement type, swinging outward. The screens or storm sash are fitted within as a part of the window trim, swinging in when the windows need cleaning. All windows may be operated independently of screens by a mechanical device accessible from within at all times and closing beneath the window-sills. The outer sash might at no very great additional expense be made of metal. The trellis over the entrance might give place to a concrete roof slab similar to the roof of the house, should a covered porch be a necessity.

The house may be placed with either the living-room front or the terrace front to the street, as indicated in the exterior perspectives.

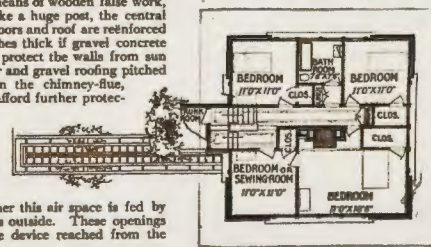
### Estimate of Cost

Concrete construction, masonry and plastering	\$3100
Carpentry, millwork, sash-doors and screens, labor and trimming	1100
Plumbing and furnace	450
Wiring	70
Painting and glazing	160
Hardware	90
	\$4970
If magnesite floors are used add	320
	\$5300

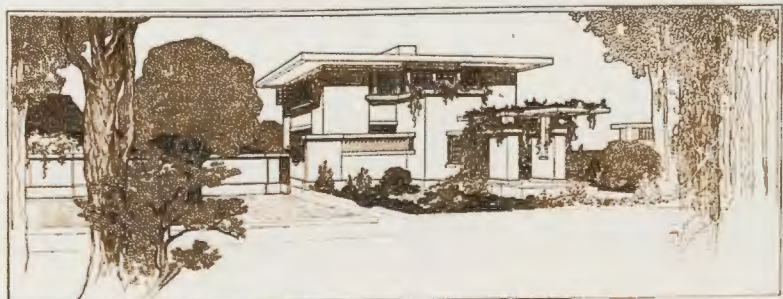
NOTE.—The architect, Mr. Frank Lloyd Wright, Forest and Chicago Avenues, Oak Park, Illinois, has agreed to furnish plans, specifications, details and complete service for ten per cent. of the cost of the house. Where plans, specifications and details only are wanted his charge will be seven and a half per cent. of the cost, provided the purchaser agrees to employ a competent superintendent and to execute the drawings without changes, unless agreed upon in advance with the architect. As the estimate is based on Chicago prices it is well to remember that in different parts of the country the figures will vary, according to local conditions.



The First-Story Plan



The Second Story





System-Built House was erected for attorney Delbert W. Meier (see pages 20-21) in Monona, Iowa, in the north-east corner of the state. The compact, two-story, cubic house with Prairie School accoutrements was one of multiple variations of affordable, non-custom, non-site-specific designs that Wright developed for entrepreneur Arthur L. Richards for the American System-Built House effort. Like the many catalogue houses of the day, the parts of the Meier House were pre-made off site, shipped by rail, and assembled by a local carpenter and crew. This systematic process of building advanced the economy of the pre-conceived house as explored in the Stockman design by substantially reducing labor and materials. The American System-Built House project was presented to the public in 1916 and 1917 when Americans were focused on the First World War. In the next few years, Wright was often in Japan overseeing construction of the Imperial Hotel. Perhaps because of one or the other or both of these factors, the American System-Built House effort failed to capture widespread acceptance. It was not revived when Wright returned to America in the early 1920s.

(Top) In July 1917, the Chicago Sunday Tribune carried an advertisement for a two-story, Wright-designed American System-Built House. The advertisement was one of many that appeared in major newspapers promoting the benefits of low-cost, factory-cut, site-assembled houses, brokered by the Arthur L. Richards Company of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. (Right) Wright designed more than two dozen houses for modest to more affluent budgets. The Richards Company sometimes sent prospective buyers prints illustrating specific designs such as the two-story model shown here. In 1917, an American System-Built House was erected in Monona, Iowa, for Delbert W. Meier (see pages 20-21). Drawing from the Donald Walker Collection at the Library of Congress, © Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.

**YOU CAN OWN AN AMERICAN HOME**

**Homes With Personality and Beauty**  
 American Homes have character. They represent the best of our architecture and the best of our art. They are the homes of the future. They are the homes of the present. They are the homes of the past. They are the homes of the world.

**The Home You Would Plan**  
 American Homes are the best you could ever own. They are the homes of the future. They are the homes of the present. They are the homes of the past. They are the homes of the world.

**Come to Our Office—Learn How YOU Can Own An American Home**

**This Is Distinctly American Architecture**  
 American Homes reflect American art. They are the homes of the future. They are the homes of the present. They are the homes of the past. They are the homes of the world.

**Build by Established Contractors**  
 The American System-Built House is built by established contractors. They are the homes of the future. They are the homes of the present. They are the homes of the past. They are the homes of the world.

**Or Write for Suggestions Meeting Your Requirements**

**Pettit & Rockwell, Chicago Savings Bank Building, 7 West Madison Street—Telephone Central 677**  
 CHICAGO BRANCH OF THE RICHARDS CO. MILWAUKEE, WIS.





During the following decades Wright clarified his vision for an affordable American house. As early as 1925 Wright began using the term "Usonia" to refer to the United States of North America, and in the 1930s he started referring to some of his house designs as "Usonian." Simplification in both construction and design and elimination of unnecessary features and materials were integral to Wright's Usonian designs. Grouped utilities, flat roofs, carports, sandwich walls, and hot water gravity heating integrated with slab-on-grade concrete mats were some of the hallmarks of the original Usonian houses. Later Wright used the term Usonian more broadly, representing moderate-cost housing for the typical family.

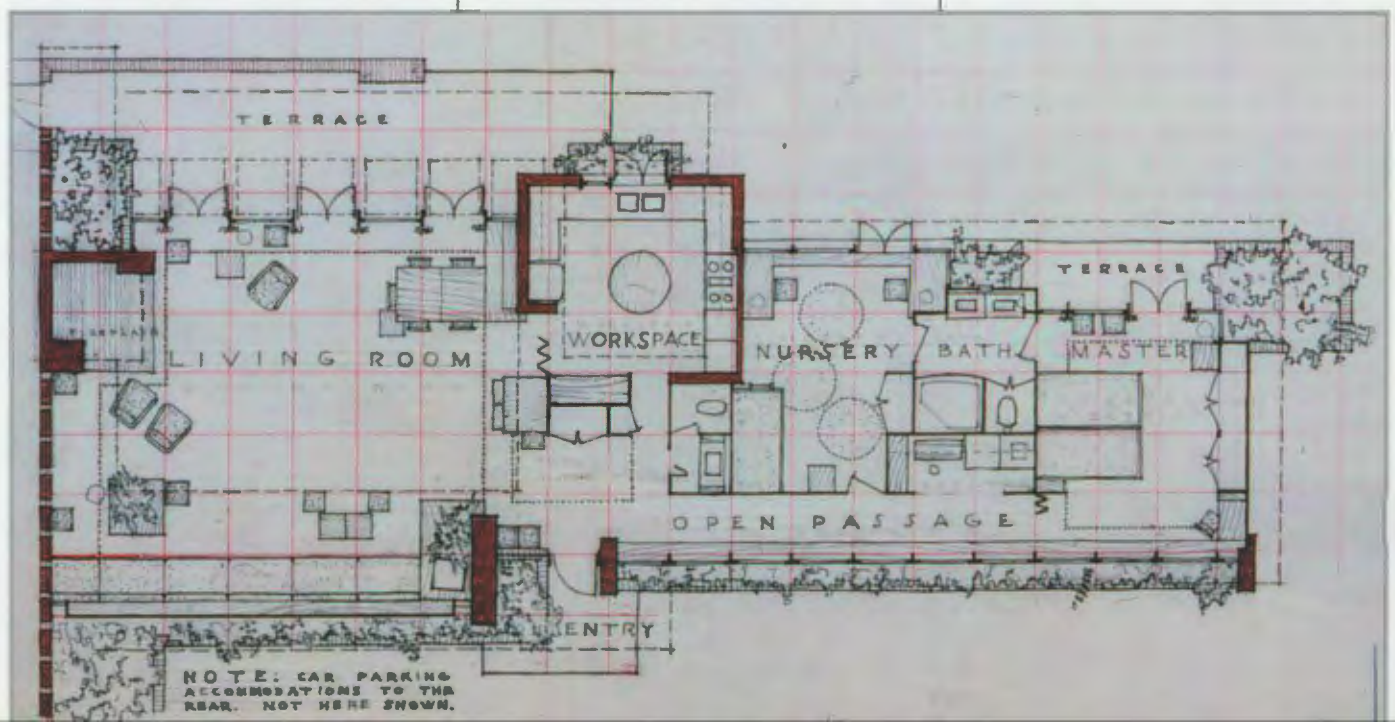
In 1945, Wright published his design for a post-war Usonian House "for town and country" in the June issue of *Ladies Home Journal* (see page 5). Titled "Opus 497," the design is known informally as the "glass house" due to its considerable number of floor-to-ceiling windows and glass doors. Earlier that year, Lowell Walter, a newly retired Des Moines road contractor, had asked Wright to design a summerhouse on a 3800-acre farm in his hometown of Quasqueton in northeast Iowa. On

seeing the *Journal* design, Walter asked Wright if it might be built for him in Quasqueton. Wright's organic answer to the glass-house phenomenon in vogue at mid-century, the Walter House (see pages 22-29), completed in 1950, is again a pre-conceived solution, sensitively sited, and wonderfully elaborated.

In the 1950s, six suburban Wright-designed Usonian houses were completed in Iowa: the Miller House on the Cedar River in Charles City; the highly lyrical Grant House near Cedar Rapids; the Alsop and Lamberson Houses in Oskaloosa; the Trier House near Des Moines; and the Sunday House in Marshalltown. All are on generous lots in or near Iowa cities. Fully half of these Usonians either resulted from or served to exemplify Wright's post-war theory of domestic architecture: the Miller House was detailed in Wright's 1953 book, *The Natural House*; the unique and intelligent construction of the Alsop House was extensively discussed in the February 1959 issue of *House and Home*; and the principal living space of the Sunday House was initially featured in Wright's model Usonian home for the 1953 New York Exhibition, "Sixty Years of Living Architecture." Though it offers no

masterpieces, the Iowa architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright exemplifies a complete and convincing array of Wright's approaches to the challenge of building domestic excellence in the twentieth century.

(Opposite page, top) In 1953, a temporary, full-scale Usonian House was constructed in New York City as part of the exhibition "Sixty Years of Living Architecture: The Work of Frank Lloyd Wright." The house was featured in the November 1955 issue of *House Beautiful*. Shown here is a portion of the living room; all the furniture was designed by Wright. "Recycled" for the living room of the Sunday House in Marshalltown, Iowa, the design featured built-in seating and shelving, ceilings of Philippine mahogany on a four-foot module and at two heights, recessed lights, a large clerestory, and masonry walls. Photo © Pedro E. Guerrero. (Below) The floor plan of the 1953 Usonian Exhibition House. FLLW FND #5314.021. (Opposite page, bottom) In an article promoting modern domestic design, the March 1958 issue of *House and Home* featured images of Wright's 1951 Lamberson (top) and Alsop (bottom) residences in Oskaloosa, Iowa. Billing itself as "America's Biggest Industry Monthly for America's Biggest Industry" *House and Home* was published by TIME, INC, which also published *Time*, *Life*, and *Architectural Forum*, three journals that followed Wright's post-1937 work closely.





Though nine of the Wright-designed buildings in Iowa are houses, perhaps the most surprising of Wright's Iowa buildings is the Park Inn Hotel and City National Bank, begun in Mason City in 1909 and completed while Wright was in Europe. Like Sullivan's remarkable bank in Owatonna, Minnesota, its site is small-town urban, directly opposite and largely fronting the city's green central square. But unlike Sullivan's bank, and unlike nearly all of Wright's other "urban" institutional works, the Hotel and Bank is extroverted, not introverted. Here, Prairie School design has necessarily to open out onto a rigidly gridded, tight, urban landscape. At the same time, economics dictated that Wright be robbed of the reliable base he had used to great effect in his Prairie School houses. The mixed use program combined antithetical building types: the hotel was to be open and welcoming; the bank was to be dense and secure. Wright's resolution, relying on well-established Prairie School aesthetics, is nevertheless intriguing as he posits dual centers—one for the bank flowing in, one for the inn flowing out—and massages the building's massing simultaneously to fit the fabric of the town and front on the lot line. Though the building was redressed many times in the past nine decades, it was never demolished. It is currently being restored in a most promising manner.



*Daniel Naegele, Ph.D., is an architect and associate professor of architecture at Iowa State University. He is a graduate of the University of Cincinnati, the Architectural Association, Yale University, and the University of Pennsylvania. His writings on representation in Modern Movement architecture and art have been translated into six languages and published world wide. He is a member of the Walter Burley Griffin Society and the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy and is currently writing a book on Wright's Lowell Walter House.*



**In Onkaloosa...**

**FIRST FLAX HOUSE** looks like "a ship riding the waves." Onkaloosa say in describing why house site on hillside among hills had

**People trade up because they see houses like the**

Over 9,000 people trekked out to look at these two Frank Lloyd Wright custom houses when they were built in 1951. Even though they were private homes—and not builders' models—more than a third of the visitors went back for a second look and what they saw started a homebuilding revolution in Onkaloosa.

"I'm not afraid to build a 'different-looking' house now," everybody said. And they meant it. More than 40% of the new houses built since 1951 "break with conventional design." As one new owner put it: "We didn't worry about what the neighbors would say—they ended up by liking our house."

"What really impressed us was how you could live on the rolling hills around here," says one neighbor who finished his new house by designed to fit the hillside site just as the Wright houses do. "I don't think of us realized that we were finally sharing the same air as our town by grading down the sites."

What else did Onkaloosans find in the houses? "Intricate detail—something so important as a door," says their builder Jim DeLora. "People of curiosity went home with a longing: they wanted a house with all that the word stands for."



**SECOND FLAX HOUSE** has "enough ideas in it to inspire 30 other houses." Old house (left) was bought by another family