Historic Oak Park: Beyond the districts

Andrew Fackler

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Historic Oak Park: Beyond the Districts

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Master of Community & Regional Planning
Iowa State University
Creative Component - Spring 2020
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................................................................ 2
Personal Note ........................................................................................................................................................................................................ 3
Introduction .......................................................................................................................................................................................................... 4
A Brief History of Oak Park ........................................................................................................................................................................ 5 - 6
Internship Experience & Project Origins ........................................................................................................................................... 7
Project Goals & Scope .............................................................................................................................................................................. 8
Data Organization .................................................................................................................................................................................... 9 - 10
Problems with the Data & Process ...................................................................................................................................................... 11 - 13
Connections to Planning .......................................................................................................................................................................... 14 - 15
Lessons Learned & Skills Achieved .................................................................................................................................................. 16
Future of Preservation in Oak Park ...................................................................................................................................................... 17
Conclusions ........................................................................................................................................................................................................ 18
References ........................................................................................................................................................................................................ 19
Appendix ..............................................................................................................................................................................................................

“Beyond the Historic Districts” Infographics ........................................................................................................................................ A - E
Creative Component Kick-Off Presentation ........................................................................................................................................ F
Final Oral Defense Presentation ................................................................................................................................................................ G
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This professional planning report was completed as part of the requirement for a Creative Component (course number C R P 599) to achieve the Master of Community and Regional Planning degree at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa, Spring 2020.

This final report document and accompanying infographics were produced in Adobe InDesign 2020. Photos were edited in Adobe Photoshop 2020. Line drawings were traced and adapted or drawn in Adobe Illustrator 2020. Accompanying committee presentations were produced in Canva.
I chose to treat this report as both a conglomeration of thoughts and ideas and a memoir of sorts summarizing my experience, detailing the path that led me to planning, preservation, an extended internship with the Village of Oak Park, Illinois, and eventually to this project. I came to Iowa State University in 2014 as a freshman in Political Science, with the intention of focusing on international relations. This cemented my love for government and public policy, but I was never quite sure where I wanted to go with my major. I immediately found a student job at Parks Library in the Department of Special Collections and University Archives, where I worked every semester through all of my undergraduate program as well as my graduate study when I returned to Iowa State in 2018. From this experience, I quickly developed a strong interest in local history, and by proxy, historic preservation.

In the summer of 2015, I was diagnosed with testicular cancer, and this turned my world and future upside down. I took the fall 2015 academic semester off to be treated and recover, and in this time also thought hard about what I wanted to pursue and do with my life post-illness. In the spring of 2016, I took another semester of all Political Science courses, and realized that although I found the material fascinating, I did not necessarily want to pursue any of the careers the major was likely to lead me to. As I was now nearly halfway through my undergraduate education, this sparked something of a mental crisis, as I was still dealing with the challenges that cancer had brought to my life and now did not know what career I might end up in. Therefore, that summer, I began looking through Iowa State’s course catalog very closely, and I discovered a program I had not heard of: Community and Regional Planning. I sort of understood what that meant, but did not know all it entailed, and decided to sign up for “Environmental Planning” as an elective and see where it took me. It was exactly what I was looking for, and I absolutely fell in love with the material and read every page of the nearly 800-page textbook. I felt that planning was essentially applied governance, and I spent the rest of my undergrad taking as many Planning electives as I could despite staying on the Political Science course (changing my focus to local government in the process). Having enjoyed the program and professors so much from that time, I chose Iowa State when deciding to pursue my Master’s degree as well. All of this led me to this final project, and I look forward to my future career in the urban planning field.

- Andrew Fackler, May 2020
The concept of “historic preservation” in the United States dates to the years immediately preceding the American Civil War, when historic and cultural resources stemming from the founding fathers and other elites of the Revolutionary days were under threat due to neglect or demolition, as the urban centers of industrializing America expanded. As Mount Vernon – the plantation home of wealthy first president George Washington – began to show decay from decades of high maintenance costs, major non-profit efforts set out to preserve it and other historic buildings and properties associated with the founders of modern America (Hosmer, 1981). Despite these early efforts, it was not until over a century later in 1963 that the destruction of Pennsylvania Station in New York City shocked the nation and sparked the modern historic preservation movement. Just three years later in 1966, modern historic preservation in the United States finally began to be codified into law with the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), creating a process of designating and recognizing historic properties across the country at the national level. In the 54 years since, preservation laws now exist at all levels of government, with regulations garnering the greatest power at the local level (Tyler et al., 2018).

Half a century after historic preservation truly found its place in American law and society, the discipline has reached a crossroads. For one, preservation in the United States finds its roots in preserving structures predominantly related to the accomplishments of white, cisgender, straight, wealthy men. This has dominated thinking about what is and is not “historic” up until quite recently, as more and more women, people of color, and sexual and religious minorities are being recognized for their contributions to the nation’s built environment. Another major shift comes due to the passage of time, as the modernist and mass-produced buildings and subdivisions of the post-WWII mid-20th century are all well beyond the 50-year threshold used as a guideline for determining historic status. Finally, in many ways preservation is being utilized and valued more than ever, as tax credits, sustainability concerns, increased tourism and business, and revitalization more generally are all providing incentives for cities of every shape and size to start considering what resources they have, how they can be used to market their community, and how to make better places. All of this presents an interesting conundrum for “early adopters” of historic preservation policies, however. In communities that already know what cultural resources they have, where they have largely preserved, maintained, and marketed their historic nature and internalized preservation as part of their core identity — where do they go next? This emergent but under-researched problem is what this project aimed to tackle, using the historic Chicago suburb of Oak Park to explore the documentation of the built landscape and the future of preservation there. This was done by sorting and utilizing data with the intention of making it useable to the public, using this experience to describe how problems with data can lead to poor planning, and by creating educational infographics that describe aspects of Oak Park’s built history that are either under-appreciated, beginning to emerge as important assets, or simply overshadowed by the more “famous” buildings and people that the suburb is known for. The following report documents my year-long journey studying and working on and with these materials, as well as why doing this kind of work is important to me personally, to the Village of Oak Park, and to urban planning as a field. I conclude with recommendations and potential next steps for the future.
A Brief History of Oak Park

The Village of Oak Park is a suburb unlike any other. Immediately west of, and bordering on two of its rectangular sides the City of Chicago, Oak Park has the unique distinction of being very old and very urban compared to the traditional mid-century suburban boom towns that most think of upon hearing the term. First settled in the mid-1830s, Oak Park saw a population explosion in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, becoming a “streetcar suburb” connecting directly to Chicago’s downtown Loop to the east. This population boom was largely the result of this easy access to the city combined with an ever-denser urban environment, that resulted in the Village becoming an early “bedroom community” for individuals who worked in the city, but who could afford to live away from the density and pollution out in the “country,” all while maintaining easy access to employment and resources (Sokol, 2011).

Oak Park has been home to, or is affiliated with, countless notable individuals, including author Ernest Hemingway who was born in the Village in 1899 and grew up there (Deuchler, 2013). However, among the most distinguished and prevalent upon the historic landscape is architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who called Oak Park home from 1889 to 1909, during some of his most productive years, and whose “Home and Studio” attracts tens of thousands of tourists to the community every year. Today, the Village boasts the world’s largest concentration of the Prairie School style of architecture popularized by Wright. In addition, Oak Park lays claim to 25 historic buildings designed by Wright himself built between 1889 and 1913, most notably Unity Temple on Lake Street near downtown. During Wright’s tenure, the Village formally incorporated in 1902, ultimately deciding against and avoiding being annexed by Chicago as an extension of the city’s Austin neighborhood (Village of Oak Park, 2020).
By the mid-20th century, Oak Park was largely built-out, and the population peaked at 66,000 in 1940. Following this peak, the population slowly declined due to decreasing family sizes, and today sits around 52,000. Another major chapter in the Village's story came in the 1960s, when white flight out of cities and policies of racial segregation across America swept through Chicagoland. Chicago’s Austin neighborhood – literally across the street from Oak Park’s eastern municipal boundary – found itself quickly falling into poverty, and fears that Oak Park would be “next” were rampant. As a result, Village officials made the decision to embrace integration rather than allow Oak Park to segregate and fall into the same cycle of white flight and decreasing property values that so many other urban places nationwide had (Goodwin, 1979). One action was banning “For Sale” signs in front yards (making it visually difficult to distinguish who was moving), and this policy has remained to this day. An even more prominent action was the decision to build a new Village Hall and Police Station in the southern, less affluent portion of the Village, in order to show unity and a commitment by Oak Park to all of its citizens. This was especially important after the I-290 Eisenhower Expressway was built straight through a large swath of the southern portion of the Village in the 1950s, effectively cutting off a neighborhood as well as destroying much of the built environment in the process. Designed by architect Harry Weese, the new Village Hall on Madison Street was completed in 1975, and due to its history of helping “save” the Village and what it represents as a deliberate counter to the racism of mid-century America, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2014 – a mere 39 years after construction (Village of Oak Park, 2020).

Today, Oak Park is a diverse community that thrives on its heritage, livability, and continued access to Chicago (as although the old streetcar lines have since faded, ‘L’ rail tracks still lead directly to the Loop). The Village contains three nationally and locally-designated historic districts – Frank Lloyd Wright-Prairie School of Architecture (NRHP 1973), Ridgeland-Oak Park (NRHP 1983), and Gunderson (NRHP 2002) – which comprise roughly one-third of Oak Park’s total area and offer a plethora of architectural styles and forms; 11 buildings and one park also listed on the National Register; and more than 70 locally designated historic landmarks, all as of 2020. Oak Park also makes a strong effort to not only list historic buildings and districts nationally, but also locally, as nationally recognized historic resources are largely honorific while locally designated ones hold true protection where the Village requires permission to alter or destroy any contributing structures. Oak Park is truly a unique place, and in many ways serves as a prime - albeit extreme - example of what historic preservation efforts in the United States can look like, be, and accomplish in the communities where they are utilized.
This project began in late-May 2019 when I was first hired to be a summer Historic Preservation and Planning Intern with the Village of Oak Park, IL in their Planning and Zoning Department, under supervision of Historic Preservation Planner Susie Trexler. The Village sought two interns to work 37.5 hours per week during the summer months to “perform planning duties and conduct research at Village Hall, determine and describe historic building styles and features, and record information in the Villages’ database.” Through this experience I learned architectural styles; data entry, analysis, and organization; and gained exposure to and knowledge about historic preservation at the local level that I would have never been able to in an academic setting, and these are exactly the skills that the Village was hoping for us to learn in the process. Throughout this experience, however, I noticed issues with the process, gaps in the data, and a more general feeling that a broader narrative of what was historic in Oak Park could be explored, and asked to stay on as an intern and continue the work I was already doing for the Village to craft my Master’s Creative Component. That decision led me to this report nearly a year later and provided me with the opportunity to continue to work with a community I was beginning to, by then, intimately understand and find remarkable. I continued to work closely with the Village under Susie throughout the entirety of this project, and she guided me along the way as I developed materials and asked questions about the planning process and history of Oak Park. My internship combined with this guidance made this creative component a “real-world” exercise from start to finish.
The initial goal of this project was to help the residents of Oak Park - who do not necessarily live in FLW or otherwise ‘famous’ houses - get excited about their properties and community by creating easy-to-understand materials on many of the overlooked or under-researched aspects of the Village’s historic landscape, while making more in-depth information readily available, and I feel that great strides have been made in this direction. As important as Frank Lloyd Wright is, discussion and research surrounding his life and works in many ways pushes aside much of the rest of what the Village has to offer, including its broader architectural legacy, and has the potential to drown out other aspects of Oak Park’s built environment that are not as heavily discussed. By developing resources and documenting buildings of all styles and eras across the Village with the intention of making that information publicly accessible – while still relating them back to Wrightian architecture and ideas – we can begin to see the bigger picture of what Oak Park is and can be.

The scope of this creative component was, therefore, threefold. The first and largest part was the organization and entry of historic survey data, as thousands of properties needed to be understood and entered in an online database that Oak Park uses to both showcase its historic resources to the public and use internally for historic preservation planning measures. The second portion was the creation of five infographics that showcase aspects of Oak Park and preservation in general that may not receive as much attention as those districts, buildings, and architects that Oak Park is most famous for. These 11x17 inch infographic posters (see Appendix A-E) cover:

- The American Foursquare, an 1890s-1930s, largely Frank Lloyd Wright-influenced form of house especially popular in the Midwest and abundant across Oak Park.
- The preservation of Mid-Century Modern architecture, as their relevance and fight for preservation increases the older the buildings of that era become.
- Historic apartment buildings, which are often overshadowed by the stronger interest in historic single-family housing across the Village.
- Historic commercial buildings, which are also often overshadowed by other architecture.
- And an overview of notable but less discussed builders and developers across the Village, as their influence on Oak Park’s landscape is quite significant.

The final portion of this project was the writing and compilation of this report, which details the process I went through working on these materials, an in-depth look at how data is used in preservation and planning and the problems with how it is currently maintained in most places, and my thoughts about the direction historical preservation is headed in Oak Park and elsewhere.
The largest and most pressing component of this project was understanding, organizing, analyzing, and inputting data regarding every building in Oak Park that is situated inside one of the Village’s three historic districts (or other historic surveys conducted so far), as well as other locally and nationally designated historic landmarks outside those districts. For well over a decade, it has been a major goal of Oak Park’s Historic Preservation Commission and planners to document all of the Village’s historic properties into one searchable and publicly accessible database. This resource is utilized by the public and researchers, but is also vital to the Village itself, such as when making preservation decisions that comply with Village ordinances that mandate historical context, design, and architectural reviews of changes to historic buildings, and even when conducting reviews for National Register nominations. The Village has collected photographs and historical information about properties, architects, builders, developers, owners, and architectural history more broadly, as well as worked with the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest (its sister suburb to the west) and used historical permits and other information that the Village has on file. This information has been meticulously entered into an online database system called RuskinARC (accessed at www.ruskinarc.com/oakpark/oakpark), which is described by the software company that developed it as “a professional web-based tool for historic architecture surveys.” RuskinARC offers a wide array of fields that can be entered, automatically synthesized for public use, and can be downloaded to use with GIS programs, Microsoft Excel, and other analysis platforms. Mapping and graphing features also exist right on the platform for easy public and private research. Oak Park is by far the largest user of this tool, as nearly 5,000 properties and over 10,000 photos have been entered and uploaded to RuskinARC’s system under the Village’s survey, “Historic Resources of Oak Park.” Generally, the Village aims to enter roughly 60-70 data points for each property, as well as one to three photos (or more if historical photos are readily available). At nearly 5,000 properties, this amounts to, at minimum, 300,000 data points that can be used and analyzed to study nearly any aspect of Oak Park’s historic built environment. Some of the data categories entered for each property include:

- Resource category and type
- Address and location information
- Parcel, area, and map information
- Historical and current building names
- Construction date range and specific year
- Important associated people
- Architectural form and style (with primary and secondary style available to enter)
- Physical description (roof type and material, chimneys, siding, windows, porches, etc.)
- Historic and present function/use
- Historic designation(s) and protections
- Sources of information

The splash page for Oak Park’s “Historic Resources of Oak Park” hosted by RuskinARC features a selection of random photos from the survey, updated numbers of how many resources are included in the survey, a description of the Village, a map breaking down various sub-surveys, and building stock numbers. (Photo source: Author screenshot via RuskinARC, May 2020)

The public view of a specific resource breaks down details of the selected building (in this case, Village Hall), a map, architectural description, and files featuring further information if the building is an individually listed landmark or site. (Photo source: Author screenshot via RuskinARC, May 2020)
In addition, fields for information about ancillary structures, significance, condition and alterations, ownership, and others could be entered, but are presently optional when recording Village properties. As a result, if every possible field were utilized, each building could contain over 170 data points that could be analyzed individually or used to compare features and data to other properties across Oak Park, offering limitless ways of surveying the Village’s built environment.

Obviously, the scope of this data is massive – even for a Village that thrives off its heritage – and this cannot be overstated. As noted earlier, another intern and I were hired by Oak Park in the summer of 2019 with the express purpose of “completing” this database, and we certainly came close. We started with a folder full of photos of buildings and a spreadsheet that provided much of the basic information for the remaining properties, but as much of this data was incorrect or missing, a majority of the survey information being entered had to be researched, clarified, updated, or created as we went along. When we began, roughly 3,000 properties were in the database, and between our work that summer, my work the past year completing this project, and that of Oak Park’s Historic Preservation Planner, nearly every property across the Village’s three historic districts can now be found in the database, even if at varying levels of completion that will continue to be worked on.

When taking into consideration the heritage and continued legacy Oak Park has as an epicenter of American architectural history, this data and its maintenance is absolutely critical.
Problems with the Data & Process

As robust in quantity and usefulness the data being created and organized for Oak Park’s historic resources is, part of what led me to want to continue this project after my time interning were the problems I saw with it. Many of these issues were quite interesting and I felt warranted further discussion and explanation, as they relate to future historic preservation efforts and planning more generally if allowed to run rampant – error propagation will certainly be a problem unless addressed head-on. I preface this by stating that some issues are unavoidable, such as an intern like myself first learning architectural styles and forms and thus struggling or occasionally misattributing buildings that will need to be fixed later (I am sure there are some houses labelled “Craftsman” that are actually not as it took me a week or two to grasp what that style truly entailed); or information that simply cannot be known for a fact and must be either guessed or not entered at all (such as whether the stucco siding of a house is original or not). At the end of the day, however, bad or incomplete data are either useless or can lead to bad planning decisions, and the problems I identified in my work with the data deserve to be noted.

One of the overarching issues I noticed while going through the process was a lack of consistency between those creating the initial data over time. Some aspects of surveying historic architecture are somewhat subjective – what one surveyor might define as a purely Queen Anne house, another may label Craftsman, on account of the strength of certain architectural elements. However, other issues – such as variation in defining building type, style, and form – create much larger issues, as it became obvious to us that when the database began, there had been some confusion over these distinctions. As a result, finding and synthesizing building information becomes a challenge. For example, say you have two American Foursquare houses that look nearly identical. For one of the entries, the house is correctly defined as “Foursquare” under the “Building Form” field. But in the other, the house is defined as “Foursquare” in the “Building Style” field, while its “Form” is blank. When a person does a search for American Foursquare houses in the Village by form – as that is what it is – the second house would not show up, and would be lost to the researcher unless they somehow knew that some properties were defined as “Foursquare” in the style category. We noted several instances of this and with almost 5,000 properties there are surely more. I attempted to clean up these issues as I saw them, but it is clearly a problem that could easily be present in any communities’ historic survey and might take years to fully sort out in a municipality like Oak Park especially.

Some buildings - such as this 1914 single-family house at 245 S Cuyler Ave - defy easy architectural attribution, as this house largely looks like a Prairie School style American Foursquare from the side, yet from the front it actually a Mission or Spanish Revival style house with the relative symmetry and form of a Colonial Revival. As complicated as this description may be, it is important to be as detailed and accurate as possible when describing buildings for a historical survey, so that everything is categorized as best as can be for accurate analysis. (Photos source: Village of Oak Park)

On the record entry side of RuskinARC, it is possible to label buildings as having a “Foursquare” form and/or an “American Foursquare” style. If a building were only labelled such under style while form was left blank, it might not be displayed to researchers running reports - correctly - for Foursquares under form. This is just one example of how historical records could easily be “lost” because of simple misidentification. (Photo source: Author screenshot via RuskinARC, May 2020)
In a very similar vein are properties that are correctly identified, or a feature is correctly described, but synonyms or variations in what they might be labelled exist. If the people entering data are inconsistent in their language and terminology, the data can become just as difficult to search, find, map, and work with as with the previous point. One instance of this was with multi-family housing across the Village, as an abundance of terms can be used to describe this same basic type of building. An extreme example was when I noticed four buildings that looked very similar, yet had been entered by various people at various points in time. As a result, the type of resource was labelled differently for each one despite them being nearly identical structures. One was defined as a “Two-Flat” (which is what we were told to use for this type of building); one had been called a “Duplex” (similar but not the same); one an “Apartment Building” (technically correct but not useful when compared to the 100+ unit apartment buildings across the Village); and one given no form but categorized as simply “Multi-Family” (again, technically correct but not useful). I changed each of these to “Two-Flat,” but the point is that had I not caught this, and someone were looking to analyze those types of buildings across Oak Park, three out of four might have been completely missed or lost due to not using the same terms. In addition, the same can happen with building features, such as “Wide” versus “Deep” roof eaves – both can be used to describe essentially the same thing, but using both simultaneously can overcomplicate analysis if you were trying to see “Two-Flats” with “Wide” eaves and miss the majority of properties because of lack of consistent labelling. Finally, even if similar terms are consistently used across time internally, historical databases and surveys elsewhere may use entirely different terms, making comparisons or finding information from multiple sources complicated. Clearly, a common set of defining terms may be needed to truly make historical survey data make sense across both time and place. Another issue I identified stems from “incomplete” data, and the weight given to or importance of including various elements over time. Older entries in Oak Park’s database failed to include parcel data, for instance, that we now try to enter for every property. When I noticed this missing in older entries, I would stop and enter it, but once again, with so many properties it might take a significant amount of time to finally have this entered for every building. Incomplete data can also affect migration of systems. If RuskinARC is discontinued or the Village simply wishes to move to a different platform, and data for some properties is missing, incomplete, or otherwise scrambled, it loses much of its usability. Oak Park's data is far from corrupted or in a bad state of affairs, but the ramifications of lack of normalization still stand for any survey or project like this that deals with hundreds of thousands of data points – you put garbage in, you get garbage out. Few might want to accept that reality or take the time to clean it up (or hire someone to do just that), but for it to have any usefulness or point at all, what goes into a new system needs to already be in something of a usable state. Clearly Oak Park cares about this – as evidenced by their decision to hire paid interns with the express purpose of having us enter and clean up their data – but this mentality of not ignoring the fine details should be better understood and taught to those wishing to create similar resources elsewhere in the future.
A final major data problem is the upkeep and futureproofing of a survey collection like Oak Park’s. A dataset like this will likely never be “complete”: buildings are torn down and new ones are built; siding and windows are changed; new prominent residents come and go; new historical information is discovered; designation status changes; the list goes on. A database anywhere, but especially in a municipality like Oak Park that lives and dies on its historic built landscape, needs to be a living one, where information is consistently reviewed, edited, added to, updated, and generally made to be as accurate at any given time as possible to achieve maximum usefulness. Photos are an especially big concern. Many of the photos currently being used were taken in the mid-2000s when digital cameras were new, and thus are very small, pixelated, and outdated. Therefore, those photos fail to reflect the building in question as it exists today. In addition, some properties only have one photo, and if we are basing assessments of a property off of a single 15-year-old pixelated photo, it can result in incorrect data simply from it coming from an outdated source that may be difficult to determine details from. Ironically, there is little existing precedent as to how to remedy the issue of aging documentation like photos and changes in the built landscape, as even the National Park Service (which administers the National Register) does not have a system in place to require these kinds of data updates. My suggestion is that new photos could be scheduled to be taken and survey entries updated on some kind of annual rotation, so that no data remains untouched or inaccurate for more than a decade or so. Those old photos would slowly become historic in-and-of themselves, showing the progression of houses and properties, and would help drive accurate and maintained data as well as create a new historic timeline. Taking multiple new, high-quality photos of every property in the Village from the ground (not drive-bys which can result in obstructions, blurriness, or lack of good angles) is a massive undertaking for any community, but should be the ultimate goal. The same could be applied for approved building permits – as work is approved, part of the process on the Village’s side could be updating the survey record for that property if need be before the permit is filed away. The point of all this is to say that a database with changing elements is never done, and systems to maintain and update it should be accounted for and utilized.

The planning problems that all of these issues can cause go deeper than one might imagine at first glance. For instance, say the Village wanted to notify all property owners of Prairie School style houses in Oak Park about a funding opportunity they might qualify for that would aid them in the maintenance and preservation of their homes. The Village might then run a report in RuskinARC that gives them a list of “all” of the Prairie School houses across the Village, and contact those owners with details of the grant application. However, if several Prairie houses are misidentified or labelled incorrectly, those owners would never receive that information – despite being eligible – and thus properties that could have benefitted will not simply due to their house not being correctly cataloged. The exact same scenario might happen if someone were to want to make a guidebook of Queen Anne style houses in Oak Park and ran a report to find all the Queen Annes across the Village’s historic districts. With some mislabeled as Second Empire or some other Victorian style, once again many houses could be excluded because someone did not give them the proper identifier. Finally – and most egregious – are the bad planning decisions that can result from incomplete or incorrect data. Say the Village were considering making some kind of walking tour of Stick style houses in the Ridgeland-Oak Park Historic District. They go to look at the map of Stick houses there and see that there are only three. As a result, they determine it is not a worthwhile endeavor, and abandon the project. In reality, Ridgeland contains at least 19 Stick-style houses – more than enough to put together a walking tour – but because 16 of them were unidentified or mislabelled, the plan was scrapped, and thus potential tourism dollars were lost from people who may have been very interested in visiting Oak Park to see the Village’s Stick residences (note: this example is purely a hypothetical, but a situation like it might be possible with poor data management). This example is minor compared to some that might occur if information is not accurate or available and planners make blind decisions based on what they think they know, but the point is that data is a delicate and important resource. Properly utilizing and maintaining it should be prioritized when dealing with historic preservation activities and many planning actions in general, and much of this project came down to exactly that.
Connections to Planning

Historic resource surveys, data collection and analysis, and preservation generally are all tied closely to planning initiatives in Oak Park and elsewhere, so projects such as mine are directly related to understanding how decisions are made in such communities. As noted earlier, Oak Park is a suburb unlike any other – it is made up of primarily single-family houses, yet still manages to be a dense urban area with direct transit access to a major city. The Village is physically surrounded by other suburbs and Chicago, as it has been for over a century, and thus has nowhere to physically grow. Instead, planning decisions are made on the basis of how to best utilize existing building stock and resources to the greatest extent possible to continue providing a high standard of living, as the only new development comes from in-fill or the destruction of existing structures. This is part of how preservation became so important. In a place that cannot simply expand through annexation, like a far-flung suburb on the rural fringe might, the existing built environment must be well maintained in order to keep up the same quality of living that the Village strives to provide and project. Oak Park's historic districts are, of course, a major draw for new residents, businesses, and investment. They allow the Village more control over what residents within them can and cannot do, allowing Oak Park to have much more direct control over the maintenance of, and changes to, roughly one-third of the Village's geographic area. In addition, this gives them greater power to notify residents when the exteriors of buildings fall into disrepair, and plan in ways that are unique to cities with such districts due to this greater and more direct control. This also ties in with the growing importance of sustainability to planning broadly, as well as to historic preservation, as the most sustainable buildings are often the ones we already have. The more Oak Park and cities like it make environmentally-conscious and sustainability goals part of their land use plans, values, and visions, the more important - and at times challenging - preservation of the existing built environment becomes. Historic resources are increasingly valued not simply for their intrinsic historic worth, but because of the embodied energy that they represent. Moreover, at a broader geographic scale, Oak Park's shared border with Chicago, and its direct access to the Loop via public transportation or the expressway, make the suburb one of the most sustainable in the metropolitan area. The goals of preservation and sustainability come together in Oak Park and create a tension that cities lacking one condition or the other would not face. In addition, redevelopment, growth, and change in historic neighborhoods and districts provides another interesting relationship to planning and the availability of high-quality data. This data can be utilized in making planning decisions regarding surgical changes and in-fill, and therefore how to move development towards some areas or away from others. When trying to protect a building or maintain the historic sense of place of a neighborhood, development could be more sensitively done by targeting non-contributing resources, which might help shift pressure away from contributing ones (whether they be at risk physically or simply within the aesthetic context of the place).

Oak Park describes itself as a "[regional] leader in environmental initiatives," and details a plethora of actions the Village has taken and activities that residents can partake in that further this goal. Largely missing from the Sustainability Plan and listed initiatives, however, is the role of historic preservation, which in a community as rich in cultural heritage as Oak Park should be further explored. (Photo source: Oak Park River Forest Sustainability Plan)
A final consideration is that of heritage tourism. Oak Park thrives off of its history not only for its residents, but also by bringing in outsiders to experience the culture and history of the Village. For example, an estimated 90,000 people visit Frank Lloyd Wright’s Home and Studio each year, and that is just one of hundreds of historic locations that draws visitors to the area. With hundreds of thousands flocking to Oak Park annually, much of the Village’s economy is based around its historic assets, and thus planning for how to best utilize and make them known is vital to their success and future. Both community and economic development are intertwined with historic preservation so closely in Oak Park that it is impossible to ignore. Unfortunately, this can be a double-edged sword – while tourism is certainly an economic boon for the Village, it can also tire and annoy the actual residents who live there year-round. Outsiders unfamiliar with the streets, culture, and environment can take a toll on both residents and the landscape. Continuing to be an active, living, and innovative community while still prioritizing and utilizing its historic resources to their economic benefit is a balancing act that must be constantly reexamined to maintain a healthy and happy community.

There are few other places in the United States which such a high concentration of history and historic architecture in an area as small as 4.5 square miles, but that does not mean that the ways in which Oak Park combines its existing built landscape with community planning for the future cannot be applied to other places. More and more cities are realizing the potential in restoring and reusing their existing buildings to drive their economy, sense of place, and livability. Oak Park should continue to be used as case study in how to successfully intertwine planning and the strong utilization of historic resources, as there are plenty of lessons that can be extrapolated and molded to aid other communities. Although one of the primary goals of this project was to highlight and advocate for historic resources in Oak Park that are under-appreciated or overshadowed, the immense influence of Frank Lloyd Wright simply cannot be ignored. Heritage tourism to the Village is largely driven by Wright’s influence on the landscape, such as his Home and Studio (top) which draws over 90,000 visitors a year, as well as Unity Temple (bottom), declared part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2019. (Photo sources: ioensis via Flickr (top); Andrew Pielage via Traditional Building (bottom))
Lessons Learned & Skills Achieved

My internship and this creative component have taught me an immense amount that I could have never meaningfully learned in an academic setting. I have already discussed all of the work I completed and what I learned regarding data synthesization and organization, but that is not the only skill I grew from completing this project. For one, although I went in having taken several historic preservation courses and holding a strong interest in the discipline, working for Oak Park forced me to learn skills required for professional practice: the identification of architectural forms, styles, and features; how historic surveys are conducted; and perhaps most importantly, how preservation rules and regulations are actually used and applied by planners in field and how much of this decision-making is predicated on the use of data—accurate data in many cases, but out-of-date or erroneous data in others. The first day I began interning with the Village, I was given a computer, a short explanation of the RuskinARC platform, a spreadsheet, a copy of Virginia McAlester’s *A Field Guide to American Houses* and a few other architecture and local history books, and within a couple hours told to have at it and begin sorting and entering data. Obviously, I could ask all the questions I needed, but it ultimately fell on to me to start sifting through the survey data, learn the names and variations of architectural details and styles from images and Google Streetview, and learn how to synthesize what was important, identify features, and ultimately create accurate survey entries for each building. In doing this, I learned how to look at architecture – especially single-family houses, as is the majority of Oak Park – in an entirely different light. Before this experience I might have seen a house and thought “those are interesting windows” or “what a unique roof,” but now it is nearly impossible for me to not instinctively classify features in my head and why they matter whenever I see buildings. Learning architectural styles and features completely changes your perception of individual structures across the built landscape, and it has made me realize that that is a valuable skill that not all planners are taught to ever have - a gap in my education I did not previously realize was there. Where one person might just see an old house, I now might be able to tell that it is some uncommon variation of a Queen Anne or has rare original stained-glass windows, for example. Knowing what to look for and what you are looking at like this is a skill that can aid in planners being able to make plans that better consider older building stock, especially as the planning field moves towards increased sustainability, revitalization and reuse, and heritage tourism. This may seem incredibly insignificant, but when multiplied to the neighborhood scale or to the context of the landscape around it, being able to identify any clues that point to historic significance as a planner can mean the difference between advocating saving a unique building or piece of history, and blindly approving plans to demolish it. That is not to say planners hold that kind of power in most circumstances or that everything old should be saved – far from it. In fact, in most communities, final decisions about preservation are made by Historic Preservation Commissions made up of locals with an interest in the topic, while planners act as liaisons and are relied on to provide information to make accurate and informed decisions. But in order to make those kinds of educated rulings, good data needs to be kept and maintained, as a lack thereof can lead to poor decision-making. Clearly, the fields of urban planning, historic preservation, and architecture grow closer every day as higher-education and the world more generally becomes more and more interdisciplinary, and based on my experience, I believe more could be done to cross-train and integrate students of each to better understand the other disciplines, so that we all can make better-informed decisions. The other set of skills I achieved in completing this creative component was a surprising one to me -- graphic design software, specifically the Adobe Creative Suite. This is another arena that I feel can be incredibly useful to planners yet not all planners learn, and I was stunned how much I forced myself to grasp in order to finish this project. When I initially set off with the goal of making a handful of infographics, I admittedly felt in over my head. Although not inept at design, I had simply never utilized the Adobe Creative Suite (primarily Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign) to any major extent, yet producing these materials (with some aid from one of my planning colleagues) had me figuring out how to draw objects, work with colors, move and change shapes, create a layout that made sense, etc. As social media has become so prevalent, there are countless things fighting for our attention. Traditionally, government work – as planning often is – is not outwardly that exciting, and so understanding how to use tools that can better market places, events, plans, and the like can help insure that as a planner I am able to produce materials that are appealing and useful and contribute to the goal of citizen participation. The same can be said for documents such as comprehensive plans – a plan made up of solely solid text is unlikely to be read, but one that has been well-designed and thought-out that makes you want to pick it up and read it is far more likely to be referenced and utilized. I am far from a design master from simply making a handful of posters, but I was able to go from ignorant of graphic design to competent in a matter of months and learn what can be produced with enough time and care. I hope that future work I do allows me to continue building and using those skills to make information about buildings, landscapes, and infrastructure interesting to both citizens and those in power in order to foster understanding of how to make better places.
Future of Preservation in Oak Park

I am hopeful that I have helped move Oak Park in a positive direction towards having a truly comprehensive catalog of its historic resources, as well as some insight as to where to go next. I have already discussed the need to find a system that allows for and prioritizes consistently updating and improving survey data, but I think a further goal should be weaving this information into a narrative that allows the Village to tell new stories. I have started this process with my infographics on some less-discussed preservation topics, but ultimately there is plenty more work for Oak Park’s Historic Preservation Commission and planners to do. For one, existing guidebooks to the Village’s historic districts are quite old; the last true guide to the Frank Lloyd Wright-Prairie School of Architecture Historic District was published in 1999, the last about Ridgeland-Oak Park in 1993, and it does not appear that a comprehensive guide to Gunderson has ever been produced. In addition, existing guides do not do a very good job creating a narrative, and simply showcase a selection of historic houses and other buildings in isolation with some individual context. Ideally, not only should the Village expand beyond such a singular focus on Wright, but more stories about the patterns of how houses and developments came to be over time and across the landscape should be explored. Further educational infographics beyond mine could even be created in the future to push that goal forward. I would suggest one about the Hemingway family beyond famous author Ernest, as the entire Hemingway family greatly influenced Oak Park’s built environment; one about Vernacular buildings, as some historic buildings simply become lost in the fray due to being “what’s between the historic buildings;” and a similar graphic about architecture that is “outside the box,” as some buildings cannot be easily categorized or are so unique that they deserve to be called out on their own. In addition, there are plenty of other topics that could also be explored in the format of an infographic or other educational tools: the Eisenhower Expressway; Oak Park’s historic streetcar, rail, and ‘L’ transit lines; historic churches; the development of infrastructure; patterns over time of how Oak Park’s landscape has evolved; etc. Continuing efforts to make lesser-known aspects of Oak Park’s built environment known such as these would go a long in continuing to move the Village’s historic narrative forward.

Rather than a traditional guidebook, the state of technology and how people consume information calls for a more interactive approach. This could include a website that compiles information about the various architectural styles, forms, builders, developers, architects, and history that made Oak Park what it is, forming a sort of “guide” that makes sense for 2020 and beyond. Having a website with a flowing narrative and detailed background information could work quite well in conjunction with RuskinARC, as information about each individual property would be easily available, but this new platform would provide building highlights, news, stories, and other more accessible and friendly features that make it more useful and understandable to a general audience. A major component of this could be the use of story maps, which utilize GIS mapping, photos, and a narrative to showcase progression of development or simply allow for a more interactive and focused look at some specific element of preservation in Oak Park. In addition, once a website is established, a mobile version of that site or even a smartphone application could be developed, and with this the addition of walking tours with pictures, audio, and detailed information with links to find out more. Doing so would allow anyone to be able to come to Oak Park, download an app, and immediately be able to have a digital map that they could walk around with and be able to experience the Village’s built history. Even more drastically, a city-wide app could offer location tracking (upon the user’s permission) that sends push notifications of nearby interesting historic sites that might otherwise be ignored as they walk, bike, or drive about the Village. This could instill an interest in preservation and the built environment that would be absent in the lives of people who are unlikely to go out of their way to take a dedicated walking tour, but are still interested in quick snippets about the world around them. These are all simply ideas, but clearly the ways in which public engagement with historic heritage in a community like Oak Park is conducted is limitless with new technology. Of course, any new opportunity to promote Oak Park’s history could exacerbate the existing problems caused by such tourism – traffic, trespassing, vandalism, etc. But taking such steps would also help modernize Oak Park’s approach to marketing and showcasing its historic resources, and thus finding ways to balance these two needs is certainly a worthwhile endeavor.

Finally, a more regional approach to preservation may be necessary in the future, and should be encouraged. Oak Park and River Forest work closely together in learning about and preserving their heritage, but what about working with Berwyn, Cicero, or Chicago’s Austin neighborhood? In Austin especially, much of the historic building stock is the same, yet crossing Austin Blvd seems like different world to some Oak Parkers. Bridging these communities through preservation to better understand their shared history and diverse demographics could truly take Oak Park to the next level of historic preservation planning - that is, looking at the wider socioeconomic and geographic picture rather than planning in a bubble.
Oak Park is reaching a crossroads, and uncharted territory lies ahead. While there are countless communities across the country that are only now beginning to see the value in what historic resources they have, their historic significance, and how best to use those resources to their economic and social advantage, Oak Park knows well what it has, and has for so long that the very fabric of the community is entangled with historic preservation. While current efforts should continue, stronger efforts to move beyond fixed notions of what “counts” as historic, what is noteworthy, and what that all means is necessary for the Village to continue progressing and innovating in the field of preservation, rather than become simply a time capsule or outdoor building museum. The two best places to start are finding ways to highlight less-explored aspects of Oak Park's history (a solution I have forwarded with my infographics), and by creating new interactive educational resources and guides that better weave a narrative and encapsulate all of what the Village has to offer.

Oak Park is, and has every opportunity to continue to be, an exemplar for how historic preservation can be used in every facet of urban planning. Every act of preservation holds the key to either atoning for the past, or exacerbating the problems the past created depending on how it is utilized, but Oak Park has the opportunity to tackle both of these issues head-on with every action it takes. With dedication to innovation and an ability to evolve as time moves forward and the definitions of “historic” continually change, the Village can be an even greater model of how to use history to drive planning decisions and create better places for all.
References


& a plethora of building permits, Sanborn maps, historic landmark and register nomination forms, and other Village-compiled information in RuskinARC.
When you first think of a “house,” an image of the American Foursquare architectural form might come to mind. Popular from the 1890s through the 1930s - and currently experiencing a modern revival in the 2010s - the Foursquare features a boxy shape, 2 or 2-1/2 stories, a central front dormer, a wide front porch, an efficient interior layout, and the incorporation of elements of the Craftsman and/or Prairie School styles. The Foursquare style was especially popular in urban neighborhoods of “streetcar suburbs” like Oak Park, as their shape and design allowed for a relatively large home to be built on a small urban lot. Sometimes called the “Prairie Box,” the form draws strongly from the design ideas put forward by architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Despite their abundance across Oak Park and the Midwest, however, plenty of unique variation exists across them. Frames may be wood or brick; siding may be stucco, wood, or masonry; elements like dormers or windows vary in size and shape; and due to their age, additions, enclosed porches, altered or added design elements, and many more may all be present from generations of owners. With nearly 1,500 across Oak Park’s historic districts and surveys alone, the American Foursquare defines the historic built environment of Oak Park more drastically than any other architectural form.

### The American Foursquare’s Prairie Roots

#### Charles S. Berwind House

Another E.E. Roberts design, the 1908 Schwerin House was also heavily influenced by the Prairie style. More unique to this house is its use of decorative details, such as the art glass used for many of the windows and doors throughout. Roberts also enjoyed designing houses with exaggerated dormers, and this house’s large, arched-roof examples are no exception. When it comes to Prairie Foursquares, few examples are as obvious and well-done as this.

#### William H. Copeland House

Built for physician William Copeland in 1894, this house was originally constructed in the Italianate style, but was remodeled by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1909 to give it its present Prairie School and Foursquare appearance. This included adding a hipped roof, wider eaves, and opening up interior space. A common trend in early 20th-century Oak Park was the conversion of existing Foursquares and other homes into the Prairie style, showcasing Wright’s influence on the form.

#### Albert H. Vilas House

The Vilas House - built circa 1890 - was originally constructed in the Italianate style (much like the Copeland House above). However, following the trend of conversions to the Prairie Style, the house saw a radical remodel in 1906 to the Prairie Foursquare seen today. To the right are before and after photos printed in the publication Oak Leaves, which shows contractor Sinn & Geddes’s impressive transformation to Wright’s rapidly-in-demand style, including an entirely new porch.

#### Ernest Hemingway Boyhood Home

Hemingway’s Boyhood Home - where he lived from ages 7 to 21 - is a Foursquare house that has seen several architectural changes, yet has retained a stark Prairie house since it was built in 1906. The house features six dormers, flared roofs, an elongated rectangular shape, and Japanese-influenced dormer windows that were a favorite of Wright’s. For more in-depth information, see the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust’s extensive research report about this house.

#### Russell Wallace House

The Wallace House is another Prairie Style house built in 1906, and has maintained incredibly strong integrity with its exterior remaining virtually unchanged since construction. The house features more intricate Prairie design elements than some, such as its stucco walls with abundant wood banding and accents. Architect E.E. Roberts designed many other Foursquare and Prairie houses across Oak Park, and its influence from Wright’s designs shows through strongly here.

#### Charles W. Ellis House

Built in 1910 and also designed by E.E. Roberts, the Ellis house is a more traditional example of a Four- square with Prairie Style influences. This house has also maintained a strong degree of integrity, as it has only been occupied by a few families since construction and boasts interior and exterior materials that are largely original. This house serves as an intact time capsule of the middle-class American Foursquare neighborhoods in Oak Park.

#### Ray Kroc Boyhood Home

The Ray Kroc Boyhood Home was built in 1905 by the popular Oak Park developer Gunderson & Sons. Ray Kroc was the fast-food tycoon most famous for franchising the first six original McDonald’s locations in California, and then growing it into the massive restaurant chain we know today. His boyhood home is a much more Craftsman-style Foursquare (note its contrasting bands of color and cross-beam railings) with some Prairie influences, such as its deep roof eaves.

#### John Edis House

Built for contractor John Edis in 1910, the Gunderson & Sons-built Edis House features a gablefront rather than hipped roof, and combined with its short eaves and decorations makes the style of this house much more Queen Anne and Craftsman. Like many Gunderson homes, this house features bay windows on the second floor, and a remarkable symmetry with a covered porch. Despite the gabled roof, the house is fundamentally Foursquare in its form.

#### George O. Gunderson House

The Gunderson House was the home of George Gunderson of the prominent Gunderson & Sons construction firm in 1907 until his death in 1945, and it stands as an excellent example of a Prairie School Foursquare with a particularly strong connection to the famous Oak Park developer. The house features a very wide front facade and bay windows on all sides, a flared hip roof, and four large dormers. Much of the house remains original to the time it was built.

#### George and Mary Sheppard House

The Sheppard House was built by popular developer F.A. H. & Company in 1904, and showcases a wide variety of styles depending on how it is interpreted. The house is clearly influenced by the Prairie style with its wide eaves, but the width and symmetry of the front facade shows strong hints of Colonial Revival as well. The first owners of the house give it its namesake, and other than a new roof, it remains almost unchanged from its original condition.

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As historic Preservation matures and time moves forward, so do perceptions of what is "historic." The National Register of Historic Places generally - with notable exceptions - follows a "50-year rule," where properties are eligible to gain historic status after turning 50. Today, that presents an interesting discussion, as the mass-produced housing of the mid-20th century has largely met that requirement. Mid-century buildings are under-threat, but viewing them as historic resources is the current frontier of preservation. Luckily, the styles and designs of this era are coming back into fashion, and this could and should extend to architecture.

Mid-Century as In-Fill

- Rejection of perceived “cook-ie-cutter” or “ugly” exteriors.
- Some cheaply constructed.
- Small houses on large lots when large houses are in-demand.
- Many heavily altered to fit current design trends and needs.

Major Threats

Prairie Influences on Mid-Century

Frank Lloyd Wright’s Prairie School style that Oak Park is so famous for seems far removed from what many perceive about Mid-Century Modern houses, but Prairie influences are abundant in many Mid-Century styles and forms - even in Oak Park itself. International, Modernistic (such as the Fixman House above) and even some Ranch style houses all feature wide, flat or low roofs with wide eaves, drawing obvious influence from Wright’s designs. Mid-Century may be unique, but its deeper architectural roots should not be ignored.

The Frontier of Preservation

A major hurdle to historic protection in cities like Oak Park are houses such as this 1961, Contemporary-styled, split-level Ranch on N Harvey Ave. Built between two Queen Anne houses, a house like this is non-contributing to the historic district in which it’s located, meaning it has none of the protections given to the older buildings around it. Context matters in preservation, and a mid-century house all on its own may be threatened in the future.

For More Information

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Photos source: Village of Oak Park

The I.M. and Fannabell Fixman House, a 1953 Modernistic house designated an Oak Park Local Historic Landmark in 2014. This 1955 Split-Level at N Kenilworth features strong Prairie influences.

Historic Context in a Modernist Building

The new Village Hall faced the challenge of being new, imposing, and unique, while simultaneously respecting Oak Park’s Prairie History and roots. Weese’s solution was to “turn the building inside-out,” respecting a central courtyard and using traditional and natural building materials throughout.

Government Transparency through Architecture

In addition, Weese carefully studied window placement, utilizing Chicago “common brick” as used across Oak Park in the late 19th century such as in Frank Lloyd Wright’s own Home and Studio), and took any measures possible to create a unique, Modernist design while still being sensitive to the architecture of the Village it was set to serve.

In addition to being built at the “human-scale,” the new Modernist Village Hall was designed to represent open and transparent government. The Council Chambers, for instance (see below), were designed so that board members were both close to and situated below the people, rather than elevated above the scenery. In addition, the majority of offices around the interior of the rest of the buildings are also open to public view, with plenty of natural light and open space throughout.

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Mid-Century Architecture

Styles and Forms across Oak Park

Minimal Traditional

Truly the “little house that could.” Minimal Traditional houses defined the new neighborhoods of the Great Depression, provided housing for millions of returning WWII soldiers, and were the start of the suburban housing boom of the 1940s and 50s.

Split-Level

A form of house rather than a style, the Split-Level (especially in the Ranch style) was one of America’s most popular forms and styles, and often served as a kind of affordable step-up from apartment living to ownership.

Mid-Century Apartment Buildings

Mid-century apartment buildings come in an abundance of forms and styles, and often served as a kind of affordable step-up from apartment living to ownership. While architects often embraced contemporary styles and trends, many buildings are in-demand. Some cheaply constructed.

Minneapolis and Multi-Family

Large houses are in-demand. Many heavily altered to fit current design trends and needs.

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Apartment buildings dot the landscape across Oak Park, and are a representation of how urbanized this "suburbs" truly is due to the density and engineering presence they bring to the built environment. Often clustered along major throughfares such as Austin Boulevard and Oak Park Avenue - but also found interspersed in neighborhoods of single-family housing - Oak Park's historic apartment buildings showcase an abundance of architectural styles, associations with notable architects and builders, and help convey a unique and storied history of the Village and its residents.

Linden Apartments - 1916
175-181 Linden Avenue (639-645; 643-645 Ontario Street)
Designed by architect John S. Van Bergen and built by Guy & McClintock, Oak Park's Linden Apartments are a rare example of an apartment building built in the Prairie School style of architecture. The three-story structure was built to house "luxury" apartments aiming to give residents the amenities of a single-family house without the annoyances that came with them, and features eighteen apartment units on an L-shaped footprint. Due to the building's association with Van Bergen (who designed many other buildings across Oak Park) and its status as a rare Prairie style apartment complex, Linden was designated an Oak Park Local Historic Landmark in 2009.

Roberts Building - 1929
300-304 N Grove Avenue (818 Erie Street)
The Roberts Building, influenced by the Art Deco style of architecture, features sixteen units that have since been converted to condominiums. Designed by famed architect E.E. Roberts and his son Elmer, the building set high standards for residents, such as a minimum age requirement of 45 to rent and no children or pets allowed. Elmer lived in and managed the building for most of his adult life, and as a result of the standards he set, the building has remained in extremely good condition. The Roberts Building was designated as an Oak Park Local Historic Landmark in 2002.

Santa Maria Apartments - 1924
208-232 N Oak Park Avenue (719-723 Erie Street)
Oak Park's Santa Maria Apartments are an amazing example of a courtyard form apartment building, boasting three courtyards and a massive 112 dwelling units. Built in a Tudor Revival style, the Santa Maria has remained in excellent condition, especially considering its age, size, and level of detail, with Klein and Hoffman awarded an Oak Park Preservation Award in 2010 for their work restoring the building's terra cotta and other features.

Poley Building - 1928
408-410 S Austin Boulevard
The three-story Poley Building is most significant for its architect Charles Kristen and the building's unique variation of the Tudor Revival architectural style. It was listed as an Oak Park Local Historic Landmark in 2004.

Dorothy Manor Apartments - 1927
424-426 S Austin Boulevard
Built in a Beaux Arts and Neo-Classical style, Dorothy Manor represents a shift in Oak Park to favoring small, lar-sized new apartment buildings with highly decorative elements during the economic boom of the 1920s. This boom and its accompanying wave of development and population increase resulted in a plethora of similar apartment buildings being constructed all along Austin Boulevard and other major streets across the Village. The three-story building was designed by Chicago architect William F. Pagels and has seen few exterior changes. It was converted to condominiums in 1994 and granted Oak Park Local Historic Landmark status in 2005.

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RuskinARC: Historic Resources of Oak Park - www.ruskinarc.com/oakpark - A database with information about every building located within Oak Park's historic districts and other architectural surveys. Maintained by the Village and consistently updated, this resource provides historic and architectural information about all of the Village's historic properties.

References

Author: Andrew Fackler
Iowa State University
Master's Creative Component
Community & Regional Planning
Spring 2020
Commercial buildings encompass a wide variety of structures that are built with the express purpose of generating a profit of some kind. This much is obvious, but this fact can easily result in the endangerment of older and historic commercial buildings if their importance is ignored or forgotten. Unlike a single-family house that receives incremental upgrades to accommodate the lifestyle changes of occupants over time, when commercial buildings have outlived their useful life or cannot be easily or cheaply refurbished, many are quick to be torn down and rebuilt. This is because it is often more cost-effective than reworking existing space to meet modern needs simply to save the existing building. Many commercial buildings, therefore, are at risk, so the following is a selection of historic commercial buildings across Oak Park that are worth taking a closer look at.

**Harlem Office Building - 1958**
1515 N Harlem Avenue

The Harlem Office Building is a unique and well-maintained example of Mid-Century Modern architecture located in the far northwest corner of Oak Park. Designed by Esposito & Company, the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988. The building was designed by the firm as being “one of the finest architecturally designed structures in the metropolitan Chicago area.” It features strong use of glass that in many ways still looks modern today. Harlem is also unique in being a rare example of a Mid-Century building in Oak Park that is historically designated and thus protected.

**Boulevard Arcade Building - 1906, 1922**
1033 South Boulevard

The Boulevard Arcade Building began as a single-story dry goods store in 1906 (see bottom left). But by 1932, the building had been transformed into the two-story indoor shopping mall it is today. When advertising for this remodel, the new building was announced as a “Women’s Building” that would be “devoted to merchandise and service of interest to women,” and included a variety of stores such as a furrier as an anchor. The Medical Arts Building remains a domineering and prominent structure in Oak Park’s Downtown. It was also designed by Thomas W. Lamb, who was considered the “King of Theatres” in the early-20th century, designing hundreds across the country and world. Lake Theatre remains an icon along Lake Street today.

**Lake Theatre - 1936**
1022 Lake Street

Oak Park’s Lake Theatre has been an entertainment hub in Downtown Oak Park for nearly 85 years, opening its doors on April 11, 1936 with showings of the British romantic comedy “The Ghost Goes West.” Although not officially designated, the theatre remains “historic” in many respects, with the exterior signature marquee and Art Deco styling remaining intact. The building was also designed by Thomas W. Lamb, who was considered the “King of Theatres” in the early 20th century, designing hundreds across the country and world. Lake Theatre remains an icon along Lake Street today.

**Strickland’s Grocery Store - 1938**
719-721 Lake Street

Strickland’s Grocery Store is a two-story Art Deco building that served as a grocery store for decades before becoming a retail and office building. The building is immediately west of the Medical Arts Building (see panel right), and the original grocery storefront facade has been added to match the appearance of its larger neighbor (see left).

**Medical Arts Building - 1929**
715 Lake Street

Built in a strong Art Deco style, Lake Street’s 122 foot tall Medical Arts Building was the tallest in Oak Park for decades following its construction. A 1958 painting of the proposed building (see left) shows the building with two four-story wings; however these were never built. Regardless, the Medical Arts Building remains a domineering and prominent structure in Oak Park’s Downtown.

For More Information
RuskinARC - Historic Resources of Oak Park - www.ruskinarc.com/oakpark - A database with information about every building located within Oak Park’s historic districts and other architectural surveys. Maintained by the Village and consistently updated, this resource provides historic and architectural information about all of the Village’s historic properties.

References
Information gathered from: RuskinARC resource entries; Local Landmark Nomination Forms; A Field Guide to American Houses, Virginia Savage McAlester; Chicago Tribune
Photos source: Village of Oak Park, RuskinARC, Google Streetview

Author:
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Spring 2020
Although the impact of architects on Oak Park’s built landscape is certainly impressive, the role of builders and developers is equally great. In 1897, Illinois became the first state to implement a licensing law for architects, while the rest of the country followed suit over the course of the next half-century. Prior to this, the disjunction between architects and builders was much more blurred, as many architects required no formal training and generally learned from mentors and years of practice, just like most builders. The relationship between builders and architects was strong, and it was builders who were responsible for making architectural designs work. The following is a selection of builders and developers across Oak Park who truly made the Village’s historic built environment what it is today.

Harper & Butendorff Co.

Harper & Butendorff Co. was a masonry contracting firm that operated in Oak Park from 1890 through the early 1920s. The company’s president James Harper was a mason-craftsman from Scotland, who first came to the United States in 1885. The firm he lead worked with many prominent architects of the day, including Frank Lloyd Wright (for example, Wright’s 1909 Laura Gale Wright – see the 1902 Isaac T. Guy & McClintock houses, as well as 22 two-flats, something S.E. Gunderson House at 701 S Elmwood Ave, built 1907, left below). Hulbert’s impact on Oak Park’s built environment even resulted in a proposed new historic district in 2013 that ultimately failed due to lack of public support. Regardless, Hubert’s streets of repeated yet varied houses remain a prominent and historically interesting asset for the Village.

Thomas Henry Hulbert

Thomas Henry Hulbert was a realtor and developer responsible for over 150 houses in Oak Park, building a large subdivision in the Village (see left) between 1905 and 1913. The neighborhood was intended to cater to the growing middle class of the early 20th-century, building affordable and attractive houses with easy access to Chicago (aided further by Hulbert’s construction of a new nearby elevated train station). Hulbert’s houses came in an abundance of styles, such as Queen Anne (see 526 Clinton Ave, built 1906, bottom right), Craftsman, and Prairie, as well as other styled Foursquares (see 533 S Kenilworth Ave, built 1907, left below).

Frederick A. Hill & Co.

F.A. Hill & Co. was a real estate company founded by Frederick A. Hill, Sr. at the turn of the century. The company built a plethora of houses in Oak Park and throughout western Chicago and its suburbs, building over 150 houses in Oak Park alone at the very beginning of the 20th-century. Houses developed by the company varied in style, but the majority were Four Square houses in Prairie School or Queen Anne styles. One of F.A. Hill’s most prominent houses is the George and Mary Wescott House built in 1904 (see 1906 and 2011 photos below), a large foursquare house listed as an Oak Park Local Historic Landmark in 2011. Today, the company’s legacy in Oak Park continues, as some of the Village’s oldest housing stock can be attributed to Hill.

Guy & McClintock

Guy & McClintock was a construction firm made up of a partnership between Joseph S. Guy and John McClintock, Jr., both English immigrants and childhood friends who learned the construction trade together while working under the same contractor. The firm built over 80 buildings in Oak Park during the 1910s and 1920s, working with an abundance of notable architects and speculating in masonry work. Although the majority of their work was residential, they were also responsible for constructing some churches and commercial properties (see left).

Building Stock across Oak Park

This graph displays how just a dozen builders are responsible for building one-third of Oak Park’s building stock across the Village’s three historic districts and other architectural surveys - over 1,500 buildings.
Internship and Project Origins

- **Interned** with the Village full-time **summer 2019**
  - Worked under their Historic Preservation Planner in the Planning & Zoning Department
  - Project centered on organizing, analyzing, and entering historic property information into an online database
  - Also involved historic research and field-work
- Quickly realized **issues with documentation** and what was being overlooked
- As project was not complete, Village asked me to continue
  - Presently still an intern through graduation
The Village of Oak Park, Illinois

- A *suburb* unlike any other
- Settled in the 1830s with a population explosion in the late 19th / early 20th century
- Connected to downtown Chicago via streetcar and rail
  - A very early bedroom community!
- Architect [Frank Lloyd Wright](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Lloyd_Wright) settled in 1889
- Author [Ernest Hemingway](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Hemingway) born in 1899
- Incorporated 1902 and avoided being absorbed by Chicago
- Tackled *racial integration* head-on in the 1960s
- Today an affluent community that thrives on its *heritage*, livability, and access to downtown Chicago
Data Organization and Analysis (~50%)
Existing data collected continues to be entered and organized

Creation of Educational Posters / Infographics (~40%)
Informational, graphic-based materials for a general audience

Preparation for the Future (~10%)
Brainstorming and documenting ideas for future website and further work to be done with information gathered
Goal:

Help the residents of Oak Park - who don’t live in FLW or otherwise "famous" houses - get excited about their properties and community by creating easy-to-understand materials on many of the overlooked or under-researched aspects of the village's historic landscape, while making more in-depth information readily available.
• The village is physically surrounded and cannot physically "grow" - so must focus on utilizing existing land and assets

• **Heritage tourism** a major part of Oak Park's economy

• Growing importance of **sustainability** and how preservation can aid it

• Residents care deeply about history, so **community development is intertwined with historic preservation** there
  - Community is well aware of it's historic nature - so where do they go from here?
  - Somewhat untapped area of study in preservation - we know what's historic and protect it, so now what? What else do we have? How can the village capitalize on that?

• Fabric of the community at stake
  - Not everything can or should be preserved, but village **risks losing unprotected historic assets** if their importance is not better understood
Poster / Infographic Sub-Topics

American Foursquare
Mid-Century Houses and Buildings
Vernacular Houses
Apartments and Multi-family
Poster / Infographic Sub-Topics

- Historic Commercial
- Prominent Builders and Developers
- Hemingway Family Influence
- Outside the Box
I was first hired (with a second intern) to "conduct research [...], determine and describe historic building styles and features, and record information in the Villages' database."

- Amount of data to deal with is **massive** and has been going on for decades
  - ~5,000 properties across 3 districts
  - 60-70 data points (ideally) entered for each property (plus 1-3 photos)
  - At absolute bare minimum, **300,000+ data points** across whole database

- In a place that lives and dies on its heritage, understanding what they have is critical
- If data is bad, it can lead to **bad planning** decisions
  - Used in conducting reviews for the NHPA
What's Been Completed

- Dataset
- RuskinARC online database
- https://www.ruskinarc.com/oakpark/oakpark
- Progress on report
- Poster / infographic mock-up (in-progress)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>February</th>
<th>March</th>
<th>April</th>
<th>May</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finish organizing spreadsheet data</td>
<td>Begin final infographic production and in-depth research</td>
<td>Finalize report, presentation</td>
<td>Submit materials to Oak Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue entering buildings into RuskinARC</td>
<td>Spring Break - March 16 - 20</td>
<td>Oral examination (request submitted 3 weeks prior) - April 10 (last day possible April 17)</td>
<td>Graduate Commencement - May 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue to build design skills and draft infographics</td>
<td>Begin writing and organizing final report and ideas for future implementation</td>
<td>Make final edits and design needed to infographics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial committee presentation - February 28</td>
<td>Intend to have draft materials to committee by March 27</td>
<td>Approval form due by April 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Make final edits and design needed to infographics</td>
<td>Upload to library by April 23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Expected Final Products

- 8 Well-designed educational infographics for a general audience
- 1 Final report discussing project from conception to completion
- 1 Organized spreadsheet showcasing status of remaining properties
- 1 Happy village and citizenry!
Comments, questions, concerns?
Historic Oak Park: Beyond the Districts

Creative Component - Spring 2020 - Final Oral Defense
Master of Community and Regional Planning - Iowa State University
"Oak Park is a neighborhood of wide lawns and narrow minds."

Ernest Hemingway
(but probably not)
It all started 1 year ago...

“Perform **planning duties** and conduct **research** at Village Hall, determine and describe **historic building styles** and **features**, and **record information** in the Villages’ database”

• Learned...
  ○ Architectural styles
  ○ Data entry, analysis, and organization
  ○ And gained exposure to and knowledge about historic preservation at the local level
• Major **issues** with the **data**
• Historic assets being **overlooked**
• They know what they have, so **now what?**
  ○ Oak Park a unique case
  ○ Suburb with huge **heritage**
  ○ They live their history, but there's **more work to be done**
• Other communities likely to face similar issues
• All of this made me feel there was more to identify and learn

**Problems Identified**
Decided to complete three tasks:
  ◦ Further "complete" and better understand the data set and how it can be used and kept useful
  ◦ Create infographics that highlight aspects of Oak Park that may be under-appreciated by the average visitor or citizen (see next slides)
  ◦ Compile into a report of my experience

Taught lessons in big data and graphic design!

Village largely beginning to go "off the beaten path," but there's more to do
American Foursquare

- Especially popular in the Midwest
- "Prairie Box" - influenced by FLW
- So abundant in Oak Park that can fade into the background

Mid-Century Modern

- Increasing in relevance every day
- Often in-fill
- Threats increasing
- Village Hall is a modernist building!
Apartment Buildings

- Highly detailed
- Often modernized too heavily
- Lost in the background to single-family housing

Builders & Developers

- Architects get all the love!
- A dozen builders responsible for 1/3 of building stock
- Defined Oak Park’s character
Future Work

- More less-explored topics to cover
  - Completing **Commercial Buildings** Infographic
  - Other potential topics to cover:
    - Vernacular buildings
    - Architecture "Outside the Box"
    - The Hemingways beyond Ernest
- Continue clean-up of database
- Methods of managing and updating data to be explored

Future of Oak Park

- Population and size roughly the same, but **economic growth** potential and likely
- Increased focus on sustainability
- Re-branding efforts attempted
  - Have not gone over well but are interesting
- How to avoid becoming a museum
- New histories will be formed and discovered