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Frank Lloyd Wright in Iowa

Daniel J. Naegele
Iowa State University, naegele@iastate.edu

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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.

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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.

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-
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
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).
System-Built House was erected for attorney Delbert W. Meier (see pages 20-21) in Monona, Iowa, in the northeast 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.
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 wondrously 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.
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 worldwide. 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.