

On The Street Where I Live

**Presented to the Chicago Literary Club
by Howard B. Prossnitz
November 8, 2004**

One trait that I have noticed in some graduates of a certain law school that is located not in Palo Alto but rather Cambridge, Massachusetts is that they rarely question the veracity of their own opinions, nor do they shrink from making declarative statements. Often, I find myself pointing out exceptions to one of their particular theories of the universe. However, when one of my former law partners (who had the redeeming quality of having gone to college in New Haven) was visiting our house and pronounced to me, “Howard, you and Liza live on the most architecturally significant street in the United States, make that the world”, I immediately agreed.

Not so unusual is the fact that one of the members of this Club had a prescient insightful observation. He told me that back in the 1950's he was visiting Williamsburg where he saw numerous tourists visiting the restored historical buildings. Upon coming back to Chicago, he happened to take a walk down our street and thought, “gee, someday these houses will be brought back to snuff, and tourists will be walking down this street just like in Williamsburg.” It turns out that Donald V.W. was a man who was ahead of his time, at least in predicting architecturally significant tourist venues.

There is both quantitative data and anecdotal evidence to support the notoriety of our neighborhood. The hard data is that there are six houses on the street designed by Mr X. and another six houses by the same said celebrity within two blocks making for the highest concentration of Mr.X's work anywhere in the world.

Mr. X liked to use the element of surprise when you entered his structures. I am employing a similar technique here, making some of you, but certainly not all of you, wait a few minutes before you know the identity of Mr. X.

The anecdotal evidence about the street is that when I wake up on a weekend morning and look out through our bedroom window, I usually see clumps of German, Japanese and French tourists standing in front of our house with their cameras focused not on our bedroom, but on one of Mr. X's houses which is directly across the street. An astonishing 100,000 tourists a year are reported to visit the neighborhood.

Tonight, I will take you down a walk of the street where I live, with a few detours down intersecting streets, and a peek inside the interiors of a couple of our neighbors' houses. These interior views are not available to the public but since you are members of the Most Significant Literary Club on the 200 block of South Michigan Avenue in Chicago, Illinois, I am happy to share them with you. Needless to say, copyright laws apply so please do not take pictures of the interior pictures without my express written consent which is hereby withheld.

Since this is an evening for superlatives, it seems fitting that my subject liked to refer to himself in such terms. When he was asked by Edward R. Murrow whether he considered himself to be the world's greatest living architect, he responded by asking why the limitation "living" had been inserted into the question.

Our hero's father, William, was born in 1825. William was the son of a Baptist minister and studied at Amherst College. He then taught music in Utica, New York. In 1851, he married Pamela Holcomb. Together, they moved to Hartford, Connecticut where

he studied law and joined the Bar in 1857. From there, they moved on to Wisconsin. After bearing three children, Pamela died after a miscarriage in 1864.

Our hero's mother, Anna Lloyd Jones, was born in Wales in 1842. Her family were Unitarians and part of a Celtic clan that had broken away from the established Protestant church in England. They prided themselves on being nonconformists and their motto was "Truth Against the World". The Jones family settled in Hillside, Wisconsin, near the small village of Spring Green. Not too long after his first wife's death, William, who was county school superintendent at the time, met Anna seventeen years younger. She was working as a teacher and they got married in the summer of 1866. The family moved from town to town since William was not able to keep a steady job. They spent time in Lone Rock, Wisconsin, McGregor, Iowa, Pawtucket, Rhode Island, Weymouth, Massachusetts, and Madison, Wisconsin.

Our hero was born on June 8, 1867 in Richland Center, Wisconsin. He lived until April 9, 1959, just two months short of his 92nd birthday. His career would span seventy-three years from designing modified Victorian homes in our neighborhood to doing the Marin County Civic Center in San Rafael California in 1957 and the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. In addition to designing scores, if not hundreds, of structures, he wrote at least eighteen books about himself and his work. A lot of what he said about himself is not necessarily true. So if anything in my paper sounds false, it probably is. Given the huge span of his life and work, I am going to limit myself to his early career and the houses he did in our neighborhood.

His mother decided at an early age that he would be an architect. She adorned his room with ten engravings of old English cathedrals. In 1876, when he was nine years old, Anna visited the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. She brought home a new line of educational toys called the Froebel gifts and occupations which were sets of wooden blocks and strips of colored paper. The Froebel method of learning was non-verbal. It encouraged children to play with geometric shapes and come to an understanding of how geometric forms structured objects in nature. For instance, the tenth Froebel gift was drawing on slates and paper. The catalogue description for the gift states “(t)his method of beginning drawing is the most systematic and perfect ever invented for young children. It is interesting to note how rapidly, by it, even the youngest pupils advance.”¹ Anna’s young son enjoyed making different shapes of rhomboids and trapezoids with these blocks.

His mother treated him like a king and always assumed that he was pre-destined for greatness. This may explain why a lack of self esteem was never a problem for him. In many ways, he was a pampered mama’s boy and remained so throughout his adult life. At no point in his life did he ever make his own bed, pick up his own clothes, or wash his socks. On the positive side, his mother’s cooking was healthful. It foreshadowed today’s heart healthy eating. She believed in simple stews, brown bread, fruits and vegetables served with their skins on, and no massive apple or cherry pies such as the ones you just ate. Perhaps it was due to this cooking that our subject lived a very long life.

His father was an introverted stern man. The marriage to Anna ended in divorce in 1885. The boy never saw his father again and did not even attend his father’s funeral in

¹ Edgar Kaufman Jr., 9 Commentaries on Frank Lloyd Wright (1989) at 26.

1904. Some have interpreted the ambition and drive of our hero as an effort to regain his father's lost love through winning fame and success.

The boy did not have a stellar academic career. He flunked algebra and had to repeat it. In other subjects, he had average to mediocre grades. His artistic side, however, flourished. When the family moved to Madison, he put a large sign on his bedroom door which said "Sanctum Sanctorum". Inside, he installed a printing press, a scroll saw for wood work, sheaves of paper, and loads of colored inks, pencils and oils. He also played viola and was taught the piano by his father who rapped his knuckles with a pencil when he did not pay attention.

Notwithstanding bad grades, he was admitted as a special student at the University of Wisconsin in January 1886 to take an engineering course. The next autumn, he took courses in drawing and geometry in which he received average grades. His mother realized that he was going nowhere fast in school and she wrote to her brother Jenkin, a minister in Chicago, who agreed to help the young man get a job in architect's office.

In 1885, Jenkin had hired Joseph Lyman Silsbee, an architect who was a new arrival in Chicago from the East Coast, to build a small chapel at the family farm in Wisconsin. The chapel was called Unity Chapel. Silsbee is believed to have been helped on the project by a young boy assistant, whose name was Frank Lloyd Wright.

Jenkin had also started a parish at 39th Street and Langley Boulevard in Chicago. He again hired Silsbee. Silsbee was known as a practitioner of the Shingle Style of design. The church he came up with for Jenkin looked like a Henry Hobson Richardson house.

When Wright arrived in Chicago in 1887, he was able to get a job as a tracer in Silsbee's office at a salary of eight dollars a week. Wright describes Chicago as a busy, dark, anonymous, confusing place. He was not a lover of the city. That fact helps explain why he decided to live in Oak Park and design comforting, light-filled, warm homes in a similar environment. Here is how he wrote of his arrival in Chicago:

Wells Street Station: six o'clock, late Spring 1887. Drizzling. Sputtering white arc-lights in the station, the streets, dazzling and ugly. I had never seen electric lights before. Crowds. Impersonal. Intent on seeing nothing. Somehow I didn't like to ask anyone anything. Followed the crowd. Drifted south to the Wells Street Bridge over the Chicago River. The mysterious dark of the river with dim masts, hulks and funnels hung with lights half-smothered in gloom -- reflected in black beneath. I stopped to see, holding myself close against the iron rail to avoid the blind, hurrying by.

I wondered where Chicago was – if it was near. Suddenly the clanging of a bell. The crowd began to run. I wondered why: found myself alone and realized why in time to get off, but stayed on as the bridge swung out with me into the channel and a tug, puffing clouds of steam, came pushing along below pulling an enormous iron grain-boat, towing it slowly through the gap. ... Wondered where to go for the night. But again if I thought to ask anyone, there was only the brutal, hurrying crowd trying hard not to see.²

By June 1897, he had his first drawing published in Inland Architect. It was for a Unitarian Chapel in Sioux City, Iowa. Wright's salary was increased to \$12 a week after a few months, but when another man was hired at \$18, he demanded the same. Silsbee refused and Wright walked out and got another job. However, he was soon hired back by Silsbee at \$18.

Wright admired how Silsbee was able to draw so freely and quickly. He tried to emulate him. His early drawings, did not win rave reviews. According to one biographer,

his drawings from that time have a “stilted, agonized-over feeling, the work of someone in terror of putting a mark in the wrong place” and “are conventional, stiff and quite lifeless.”³

Wright grew tired of turning out Queen Anne style drawings for Silsbee. He interviewed for a job with Louis Sullivan and told Sullivan that he had done abstract ornamental designs of the type favored by Sullivan. Sullivan asked to see some sample drawings and Wright said he went home and worked overnight to produce some. Wright started working for Adler and Sullivan in 1888. As a footnote, Sullivan originally met Adler, through an architect named John Edelmann, who was a member of the Cliff Dwellers. David Herz’s book on Wright describes the Cliff Dwellers as a “Emersonian men’s club on Michigan Avenue”.⁴

² Wright, *Autobiography*, 1932, p. 85.

³ Secrest, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, 1992, p. 93.

⁴ David, Herz, *Frank Lloyd Wright* (1995) at 12.

Wright began by doing drawings for the Auditorium Building. He became chief draftsman at the office. He also became acolyte of Sullivan. In his words, “(a) good pencil I became in the Master’s hand, at a time when he sorely needed one. Because I could be this to him he had more freedom now than he had ever enjoyed before.”⁵

Adler and Sullivan preferred to concentrate on large commercial buildings which were more profitable for them than private residences. Wright liked designing houses and he was given responsibility for residences which Adler and Sullivan felt they had to do to keep important clients happy.

Sullivan liked Frank so much that he entrusted him with designing two houses for himself, a cottage in Mississippi and a row house on Lake Street in Chicago. Wright’s early designs followed the Queen Anne and Shingle styles that he learned while working for Silsbee.

On his twenty-first birthday, Wright bought vacant land at the southwest corner of Forest and Chicago Avenues in Oak Park. The property had been owned at one point by a Mr. Blair, a Scottish landscape gardener, who had laid out Humboldt Park. Not surprisingly, the lot was chock full of lilacs, snowballs, violets, lilies of the valley and ginger. His mother had bought the eastern half of the lot. She moved into an existing Victorian clapboard cottage which was on the property. On the west side of the lot was an old barn of which Wright said, “Forest Avenue residents thought it was outrageous that Mr. Austin, Oak Park’s leading citizen, should leave his old ivy-covered barn there on the best street in town”.⁶

⁵ Wright, *Autobiography* at 126.

⁶ Wright, *Autobiography*, (1932) p. 102.

In June 1889, at age twenty-two, Wright married Catherine Tobin of Kenwood. They had met at a costume party where they were dressed as characters out of Les Miserables. They collided on the dance floor, fell down, and the rest is history. Catherine a/k/a Kitty also came from a Unitarian family. Her mother was the first woman to be a principal in the Chicago public school system.

Meanwhile, Wright's mother, Anna, had done her best to derail the marriage including having one of Wright's co-workers try to talk him out of it. The wedding itself was memorable. The bride's father is reported to have cried, and Wright's mother fainted. Wright and his bride moved to the property in Oak Park, living with his mother, while they began building their own home.

Wright's choice of Oak Park as a place to live was excellent for his budding architectural practice. Its population would double from 4,000 in 1889 to 8,000 ten years later. Its early arrivals included people who worked in Chicago in banking, insurance, manufacturing and retail. These people would become Wright's clients. Wright was a great salesman and he was good at marketing himself to the prosperous businessmen and industrialists who would then recommend him to their neighbors. A few blocks away from Wright lived Edgar Rice Burroughs, who wrote the Tarzan books, and Ernest Hemingway, who went to school with Wright's children.

Wright was also attracted to Oak Park for some of the same reasons that attract new residents more than 100 years later, ie. good schools, a citizenry who were active participants in drama, music theater, and enthusiastic readers. (If any of you doubt this, you should go the annual book fair which occurs every August at the high school. When

the doors open on Friday evening, a sea of humanity rushes in a way that evokes thoughts of the California gold rush). As evidence of this theatrical bent is the fact that an opera house accommodating 1,000 persons was built in Oak Park in 1902.

To build his own home, Wright borrowed \$5,000 from Sullivan and agreed to a five year contract as a draftsman at a wage of \$60 a week which Adler thought was too much money. It was a condition of his five year employment contract with Adler and Sullivan that he not engage in any moonlighting. It was not long before he broke the condition, but it was not until the fourth year of his contract that he was discovered to have violated it.

In 1890, Adler and Sullivan moved to the top floor of the tower at the Auditorium building. Wright occupied an office immediately adjacent to Sullivan. The favored treatment of Wright caused resentment amongst the other draftsmen. Wright took boxing lessons to protect himself. He got into fights and one of his opponents went for him with a knife. Wright fought back with a drafting T-square. Despite eleven stab wounds to his shoulder blades, Wright claimed victory.⁷

Wright left Sullivan's office in 1893 after his moonlighting had been discovered and he was fired. He had drawn designs for six moonlighting houses.

Wright often borrowed and sometimes copied designs and ideas from others. The design he submitted in an 1893 competition for the new Milwaukee public library bears a striking resemblance to a drawing for a Science and Art Museum done three years earlier by

⁷ Secrest, Frank Lloyd Wright (1992) at 111.

Charles Rennie Macintosh and published in the British Architect. Wright in speaking of some his early drawings admitted “I suppose I stole them”.⁸

When Wright set forth his guiding principles for building the organic house in a lecture he gave at Princeton in the 1920's, a number of the ideas were parallel to what had been written thirty years earlier by Baillie Scott in Studio magazine. The magazine was first published in 1893. Scott was one of the early British architects who had spearheaded the Arts and Crafts movement.

⁸ Genius and the Mobocracy, p. 78.

The ideas included reducing separate rooms to a minimum, matching a building with its site, eliminating box like feelings of rooms, eliminating the use of different materials and favoring monochromatic materials, incorporating furnishings with the building while making them simple for reproduction by machine, and eliminating the decorator.⁹

In opening his own practice, he printed an announcement on gray paper with red and black printing. He explained that architecture was a combination of fine art and business. In order to achieve full artistic expression, the architect needed to place himself in a serene environment away from the busy city. For that reason, Wright said he had opened a full studio and workshop in Oak Park where clients with a kindred interest in architecture were invited to join him. He noted that provision had been made for their reception and entertainment. To make sure they knew how to get there, he told them that Oak Park could be reached by Lake Street elevated lines connecting at 48th Street with the Chicago Avenue surface electric road. For purely business purposes, he established an office at the Rookery with limited hours from noon to 2:00 p.m. He did decide to keep duplicate copies of plans and drawings at the Chicago office for review by clients and contractors.

The Oak Park years lasted until 1909 during which time Wright transformed our neighborhood. It is time to take a walk down the street where I live. We will start by going out our front door at 203 Forest, crossing Ontario to pay homage to a bronze bust of the Master himself. We will then cross Forest to arrive at the Thomas house.

210 Forest Avenue Frank W. Thomas House 1901

⁹ Secrest, Frank Lloyd Wright, (1992) p. 154.

This house is one of the first Prairie style homes that Wright did. It was a wedding present from James Rogers to his daughter and son in law Frank W. Thomas. The site had originally been occupied by Grace Episcopal Church which was relocated to Lake Street a few years earlier.

Here is some what Wright had to say about Prairie style:

The horizontal line is the line of domesticity. The virtue of the horizontal lines is respectfully invoked in these buildings. The inches in height gain tremendous force compared with any practicable spread upon the ground. To Europeans these buildings on paper seem uninhabitable; but they derive height and air by quite other means, and respect an ancient tradition, the only here worthy of respect, - the prairie. In considering the forms and types of these structures, the fact that they are nearly buildings for the prairie should be borne in mind; the gently rolling or level prairies of the Middle West; the great levels where every detail of elevation becomes exaggerated; every tree a tower above the great calm plains of its flowered surfaces as they lie serene beneath a wonderful sweep of sky. The natural tendency of every ill-considered thing is to detach itself and stick out like a sore thumb in surroundings by nature perfectly quiet. All unnecessary heights have for that reason and for other reasons economic been eliminated, and more intimate relation with out-door environment sought to compensate for loss of height.¹⁰

Two of Wright's prototypical Prairie House designs were published in the Ladies Home Journal in 1901. They are based on a cruciform shape. The living room is in the center and on one side is a dining room and a library is on the other side. In the front is a bay window and covered terrace, while in the back is the kitchen. As a result of the cruciform shape, the major rooms all have windows on three sides to let in light. The bedrooms which tend to be small are on an upper floor. This is how the Thomas house is laid out and it represents a major departure from Victorian homes.

¹⁰ Wright, Introduction to Drawings and Plans of Frank Lloyd Wright, The Early Period (1893-1909).

For the entrance way for the Thomas house, Wright borrowed from Sullivan's Auditorium and incorporates a round archway. The approach to the archway is framed by two walls that protrude out to the street and invite the visitor in. The archway, however, is deceiving because at first glance, it appears to frame the front door. In fact, to enter the house, you have climb steps that go sideways and up and around to take you to the entrance which is on the second level. On the second level is a band of leaded windows which provide a panoramic view out towards the street. Yet, the privacy of the house is maintained against even the most aggressive tourist by the fact that the main living space and the horizontal strip of windows are on the second floor.

The Thomas house has a grade level basement. The dining room, living room and kitchen are on the second level. When you look at the house from the outside, it appears to be horizontal in nature because of the window band and the lines of the porch. If, however, you strip away the external horizontal porch, the house itself is a square box. Once again, Wright is masterful in designing a house which deceives the viewer. The eye follows the horizontal lines.

There are gothic Victorian row houses immediately adjacent on the south, and a single family home to the north, separated only by a driveway from the Thomas house. Wright, however, took full advantage of the site which has an uninterrupted view looking west down Ontario Street and also looks out onto a park named Austin Gardens. He lined all the windows up on the west side (with almost none on the south façade) so if you are inside in the living room or dining room looking out, you feel as though you are in the

country with a wide open vista at tree top level before you and no feeling whatsoever that you are in a suburb ten miles from the Loop.

As in other Wright houses in the neighborhood, the extensive porch on the second level functions as an outside room. It can be accessed from either the front hallway or through the living room. The porch is therefore an integral part of the living space of the house and creates an additional room off the main living area.

When Wright finished a house and was unhappy with any aspect, he would immediately make changes in the design. In the case of the Thomas house, he was not happy with the windows that he put on the third level. So when it came time to submit drawings of his completed houses to a publisher, he drew in non-existent double windows on that level. The justification is explained by his statement that “doctors bury their mistakes, architects have to cover them with vines.”¹¹

What do the present owners have to say about living in a Wright home? Well, the gutters leak and not surprisingly, they feel that whenever they contemplate any remodeling such as an updating of the kitchen or turning the basement into usable family space, that the invisible hand of Mr. Wright is squarely on their shoulders telling them to not destroy his vision. This feeling is understandable given that Wright said , “(v)ery few of the houses were anything but painful to me after the clients brought in their belongings.”¹²

¹¹ Secrest, Frank Lloyd Wright, (1992) p. 118.

¹² Wright, Autobiography at 145.

Additions have been made that are totally harmonious with the original house. In 1922, Tallmadge and Watson designed a large addition in the rear of the house which fits in perfectly with the original design and creates a great library/ family room

238 Forest Avenue Peter A. Beachy House 1906

If we now walk down the east side of the street towards the north, the Peter A. Beachy House sits two doors down from the Thomas house. This is not a typical Frank Lloyd Wright home. It combines strong horizontal Prairie lines with a more traditional Tudor gable roofed cottage. The house was a remodeling commission of a 19th century Gothic Revival cottage, but it is hard to discern the original cottage. Peter Beachy was a banker who lived in the house until 1942. Like many houses on the street, including our own, this house suffered a major fire in 1990. The house has now been restored to its original design after having been converted to a duplex prior to the fire. Like other Wright houses, the dwelling is at right angles to the street with the front door on the side.

6 Elizabeth Court Mrs. Thomas H. Gale House 1909

This house was done for the widow of Thomas Gale. Wright did two houses for Mr. Gale on Chicago Avenue. The exterior features very strong rectilinear forms. Wright did the drawing for the house in 1904. Interestingly, as with the Thomas house, Wright decided to embellish the drawing with a feature that is not actually on the house. In 1936, he had an apprentice, John Howe, add a roof trellis similar to what is on Fallingwater. Wright wanted to retroactively provide support for his statement that the 1909 Gale house was a “progenitor” for the 1935 Fallingwater.

318 Forest Avenue Arthur Heurtley House 1902

As we continue walking north and cross Elizabeth Court, we come to 318 Forest, otherwise known as the Heurtley house. The Heurtley house, like the Thomas house, is one of Wright's early Prairie style homes. Like the Thomas house, it has a large doorway arch on the ground level that is reminiscent of Sullivan's Auditorium building. Since this house was built for an affluent client, Wright could abandon the more economical stucco that had been used for the Thomas house. Instead, he employed brick in massive quantities. The brick was carefully laid to emphasize the horizontal lines and to avoid vertical seams. The orange color of the brick ties the structure to the ground. The huge brick front wall emphasizes the horizontal and creates a tremendous feeling of privacy for the back and side yards.

The entrance is a trademark Wright design. Instead of just walking directly into the center of a four square traditional home with living room on one side and the dining room on the other, a visitor to the home is led on a path of discovery that pinwheels around, goes up and down before reaching the final destination. Wright loved to use contrasting spaces. One often enters a small hallway that turns corners and then leads up to a surprisingly large spaces.

Wright has been criticized for building rooms with low ceilings. At one point he said that it was because he was only five feet eight inches tall. Yet, in fact, Wright understood that people can not differentiate between ceilings that are of modestly differing heights. So he intentionally created drama in his spaces by contrasting rooms with very low ceilings and very high ceilings.

The Heurtley house is an excellent example. You enter a hallway on the ground level and then a staircase takes you up to the dramatically contrasting open large loft like space of the living room and dining room. The dining room with its band of eye level windows offers a panoramic tree top view of the large open yard across the street. Once again, you feel like you are in the country. The living room has a high tent like ceiling and like many Wright houses, it is anchored by a large fireplace.

Wright made innovative use of interior illumination with cove lighting in the dining room and art glass in the living room ceiling which is lit from behind with electric light. The bedrooms are in the back on the second floor as is the kitchen which is fairly small.

Wright was famous for his ability to charm clients. Mr. Heurtley was no exception. Six years after his house in Oak Park was done, Heurtley told a friend that Wright was not only a great architect, but also a talented musician and that his character was impeccable. Wright's charm continued to be an indispensable tool. On another occasion, a client who had been ignored by Wright for months called unexpectedly and said that he wanted to meet Wright to review the drawings for his project which he assumed were finished. Wright said it was fabulous that the client had just arrived in town since Wright happened to be working on the project that minute. Of course, nothing had even been started. He proceeded in a frenzy of work. The drawings were ready when the client arrived a few hours later.

400 Forest Avenue Dr. William Copeland House Built 1873 Remodeled 1908

This house was one of the last remodeling projects undertaken by Wright before he left Oak Park in 1909. The house started out as Italianate. In his remodeling, Wright added

open porches, dramatically changed the entranceway, added a tile roof, and did a major renovation of the interior public spaces on the first floor opening them up tie to into the new entranceway and the hallway.

951 Chicago Avenue Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio 1889

At the southeast corner of Forest and Chicago stands the Wright home and studio. Construction on it began in late August 1889. It was finished in time for the birth of Wright's first son, Frank Lloyd Wright Jr. on March 31, 1890. I will talk both about the house and the family life inside which made it a home.

The house started as a relatively traditional cottage with a pyramidal gable over a recessed ground floor. The original structure was a design that was easily accepted by his neighbors. Only after it was finished and the architect's family grew, did he start experimenting with new designs and shapes that expanded the house expanded into its present irregular and non-traditional form. An upstairs bedroom was his work area until he completed the adjacent studio later. As with many Wright houses, the entrance is on the side and off center.

In 1895, he enlarged the home by building an addition that housed a kitchen on the first floor and a kindergarten on the second floor. The second floor playroom is a large space with a barrel vaulted ceiling. His son John described the playroom as follows:

My first impression upon coming into the playroom from the narrow, long, low-arched, dimly lighted passageway that led to it was its great height and brilliant light. The ceiling twenty feet high formed a perfect arch springing from the heads of group windows which were recessed in Roman brick walls. The oak floor marked off with kindergarten arrangements of circles and squares was always strewn with queer dolls, building blocks, funny mechanical toys, animals that moved about and wagged their strange heads.

The semicircle plaster panel above the fireplace was covered by a mural of the allegorical 'Fisherman and Genie' designed by Dad and painted by Giannini. At night the flames from six-foot logs lit up strangely the serene face of the Genie and, at the opposite end, the Winged Victory over the door, making it stand out white and strong against the shadowy galleries beyond.

Some commentators speculate that Wright built such a large playroom to compensate for his feeling a lack of privileges in comparison with some of the children with whom he attended school in Weymouth, Massachusetts. In this playroom, Wright reacquainted himself with the Froebel training system. From 1895 to 1900, he is reported to have spent afternoons instructing his children and children from the neighborhood in the method. The system focused on the repetitive use of a limited set of geometric shapes to construct different designs. His re-education in the system came at the same time that he was developing the Prairie style house. His Prairie style houses also employ repetitive use of simple shapes.

The studio was finished in 1898. The studio, which contains a drafting room and library, is on the Chicago Avenue side of the house. Chicago Avenue had a street care line and much more traffic than Forest. Wright solved the problem of having a public face on the studio which advertised his practice, while at the same time preserving his privacy and ability to do work. There are no direct eye level windows from which you can look out into the neighborhood. Instead, the drafting room is square on the ground level with an octagonal shaped tower on top. Horizontal windows on the top level let in an abundance of light. On the west side of the studio is an octagonal library where Wright entertained

clients. He used both the library and drafting room as a place to bring clients and educate them in his design concepts. The studio itself was the best way to solicit new clients.

Despite the relatively traditional exterior appearance of the original home, there were numerous progressive and eccentric features on the inside. The house was wired for electricity, even though the neighborhood did not yet have electricity. Further, as soon as you pass through the front door, you encounter a frieze of Greek gods. Next, over the objection of his wife, Wright had mottos carved around the dwelling. For instance, he had the words "Truth is Life" inscribed over the fireplace. He soon regretted that. He thought it should have said "Life is Truth". Underneath was the inscription "Good Friend, Around These Hearth Stones Speak No Evil Word of Any Creature". Like all of his Prairie homes, the large fireplace in the living room was a central feature of the house. It was a tenet of the Arts and Crafts movement that the fireplace was the spiritual center of a home. Wright also believed this. He wrote, "(t)he big fireplace in the house .. became now a place for a real fire."¹³ He belittled the mantels of the Victorian home as being merely frames for a few coals. He wrote that it comforted him to see a fire burning deep in the solid masonry of the house itself.

Wright fully embraced the tenet of the Arts and Crafts movement that the house should be a unified whole in which everything from structure to furniture to draperies should tie together. Wright delighted in designing every detail of a house. One of Wright's past times on a Sunday afternoon was to rearrange all the furniture in his house. Sometimes, he would perform the same favor for clients. When they were out of town, he

would enter their house and rearrange their furniture according to his conception of how it should be.

The interior rooms at the house were divided by screens instead of doors. Movable partitions were an answer to the small often box like Victorian rooms which rigidly divided a house. Wright preferred open spaces. This reduction of separate rooms into more open space was another concept that arose out of the Arts and Crafts movement.

The interior of the Wright home was filled with diverse artifacts including a bronze bust of Beethoven, a carved Chinese chair, a landscape by Turner and statuettes of Indians.

Son John wrote:

¹³ Secret, Frank Lloyd Wright, (1992) p. 152.

Horizontal lines; double-leveled rooms of one and two stories; scattered vases filled with leaves and wild flowers, massive fireplaces seemed to be everywhere. Here and there a Yourdes of rare beauty covered a floor. A Persian lantern, samovars, windows which met and turned the corners, lights filtering through fret-sawed ceiling grilles, sunshine and shadows These made the house that was our home.¹⁴

Domestic life at the house was chaos. After his first son was born in 1890, five more offspring arrived. Wright described himself as a terrible father and that is still a popular belief. He wrote that “(t)he children were their mother’s children and up to her”. When a friend grabbed one of his children and asked Wright, “what’s the name of this one?”, Wright got it wrong. Wright said that he did not look the part of a father, never acted it, did not feel it and did not know how.¹⁵ He said that architecture claimed the father in him and that his buildings were his children. Wright’s estranged relationship with his father left him with little confidence on his own ability to be a father.

However, the story of Wright as a father is not so simple. In fact, son John, takes an opposite view to his father. He said that his father loved fatherhood and that he was a lover of home and family.

It is not disputed that the house was a beehive of activity. John recounts that his father took no interest in his religious or academic education, but that when it came to luxuries and games, he was very involved. At Christmas, there were presents of mechanical donkeys, monkeys, oriental rugs, musical instruments and bicycles. For Wright's birthday on June 8th, his wife would adorn the birthday table with wild roses. On the Fourth of July, firecrackers, Roman candles, pinwheels and balloons were abundant.

¹⁴ John Lloyd Wright, My Father, Frank Lloyd Wright at 15.

¹⁵ Wright, Autobiography, (1932) p. 134.

As for the other parties, John wrote:

Papa's parties were best of all. He had clambakes, tea parties in his studio, cotillions in the large drafting room; gay affairs about the blazing logs that snapped and crackled in the big fireplace. From week to week, month to month, our home was a round of parties. There were parties somewhere all of the time and everywhere some of the time. Bowls of apples and nuts, great jars of wild flowers were everywhere ...¹⁶

Music was always present in the house. Wright encouraged each of his children to learn an instrument: Lloyd - cello; John - violin; Catherine - Voice; Frances - Piano; David - Flute; and Llewellyn - Guitar and Mandolin. Wright himself would stay up until two or three in the morning playing the piano in the playroom. His favorite composers included Mendelssohn, Schubert, and Beethoven.

Sundays in the playroom would often include a host of friends and distinguished visitors such as sculptor Richard Bach, Max Bendix, concertmaster of the Chicago Symphony, J. Freeman, a violin expert for Lyon and Healy, and lawyer Clarence Darrow. Other dinner guests that his son remembered included Honore Jackson, a French Indian who had escaped from prison in Canada after leading a rebellion, Rabindranath Tagore, a spiritualist from India, and a British architect named Ashbee.

¹⁶ Id. at 43.

In addition to neighborhood children who attended kindergarten in the playroom and the distinguished artists and musicians who visited the home, creditors were also frequent visitors. Grocers would come around with unpaid bills of \$850, and the sheriff reportedly slept in the kitchen one night so that he could secure payment on a debt. Wright's attitude was that so long as the family had luxuries, the necessities would take care of themselves. He said that the children's love for beautiful things, art and crafts, rugs, books, prints, kept the butcher, baker and landlord waiting.¹⁷ He also said that it was his misfortune that creditors trusted him. He would invariably charm them. When he fell seven or eight months behind in rent for an office he had at the Schiller Building, the manager would say, "Never mind Mr. Wright: you are an artist."¹⁸

Accidents were an integral part of life in the Wright household. Son John fell out of a tree, fell into a barrel of creosote, and fell off the playroom roof. Fires followed Wright. Eleven years before the 1914 fire at Taliesin set by Wright's deranged handyman, there was a tragedy in Chicago that almost claimed the lives of sons Lloyd, John and Wright's mother-in-law. It was December 30, 1903. Wright had bought them tickets to Mr. Bluebeard, a Christmas play at the Iroquois theater. The two boys and their grandmother were sitting in the third row from the front. All 1,800 seats at the matinee were filled. While a performer was singing "In the Pale Moonlight", a calcium light on stage exploded which quickly set fire to all the scenery. Panic ensued since many of the exit doors were locked and the asbestos safety curtain in front of the stage got stuck coming down. The boys'

¹⁷ Wright, Autobiography, (1932) p. 140.

¹⁸ Id. at p. 141.

grandmother saved their lives by staying calm and guiding them out of an exit. Over six hundred people died including one of the boy's cousins who was sitting in the balcony.

Wright had one of the first three automobiles in Oak Park which was nicknamed the Yellow Devil. It was a three seater Stoddard Dayton convertible which was capable of going 60 miles an hour when the speed limit on Oak Park streets was 25 miles per hour. The Oak Park Police threatened to confiscate the roadster because of the numerous speeding tickets that Wright got. Sons Lloyd and John inherited their father's penchant for speed. Lloyd was put in jail after one incident and it cost his father \$100 to bail him out. John wanted to impress a girl with the car but he did not reach her house before smashing into a ditch and destroying the front wheels and gears. It was in this car that Wright spent a lot of time driving around Oak Park with Mrs. Cheney which scandalized the neighbors and eventually led to the end of his marriage to Catherine. Wright ended up spending nineteen years at the house and studio in Oak Park.

1019 Chicago Avenue Robert P. Parker House 1892

If we venture one half block west on Chicago Avenue from the home and studio, we come to three of Wright's earliest houses. The first is the Robert P. Parker house at 1019 Chicago which was built in 1892. It was one of the moonlighting houses that Wright designed while he was still working for Adler and Sullivan. The house exhibits many of the traditional Victorian features with Wright modifications. The Robert Parker house is a modified Queen Anne. Wright put in a horizontal band of windows in the bay. Much of the ornamentation normally present on a Queen Anne has been stripped away such as the

spindle work. There is a uniform clapboard on the exterior cladding instead of a mixture of materials.

1027 Chicago Avenue Thomas H. Gale House 1892

Like the Parker house, this house is a modified Queen Anne. The porch is much simpler than the more elaborate traditional Queen Anne front porches. The interior, however, sticks to traditional style with separate parlors divided by pocket doors.

1031 Chicago Avenue Walter H. Gale House 1893

The Walter Gale house was done in 1893 after Wright had just left Adler and Sullivan. One again, like the Parker house, the turret features a band of windows not found in Victorians. There is a open porch with wide horizontal steps and a strong horizontal line in the porch railing in the front of the house. In addition, the dormer window is non-traditional and the front door has been moved around to the side. Walter Gale happened to be one of the first three graduates of Oak Park River Forest High School.

333 Forest Avenue Moore Dugal House 1895/1923

In 1895, Forest Avenue neighbor and attorney Nathan G. Moore asked Wright to build a half timber English tudor style house. Due to the financial pressure of a growing family and starting his own practice, Wright agreed. He designed a three story house with a huge gabled roof, medieval chimneys and diamond paned windows. On Christmas night, 1922, a large fire broke out and destroyed the roof and second floor which gave Wright the opportunity to rework his design. He added an even steeper roof than was on the original house. The redesigned house only had two stories and the new design featured strong horizontal elements.

1030 Superior Francis Wooley House 1893

If we take a short detour down Superior, we come to the Francis J. Wooley house which

Wright built in 1893. This house is even more a departure from the Queen Anne style than the Parker and Gale houses on Chicago Avenue. It strongly signals the evolution of the Prairie style. Wright used a hip roof instead of a traditional gable and brings the house closer to the ground. The knee walls and piers of the porch also signal the impending Prairie style home. This house had mechanical malfunctions earlier than most Wright homes. There were significant mechanical failures in the first five years. The irregular stones in the foundations were a carry over from the style of Joseph Silsbee.

313 Forest Avenue Hills DeCaro House 1906/ 1977

This house was a present by Nathan Moore who owned the adjoining house to his daughter and son-in-law. The house was moved from its original location on the south end of the Moore property and remodeled by Wright when it was moved. He added horizontal Prairie style elements including bands of windows and an open entry porch. He also designed many built in storage features in the interior. This is yet another house on the block that had a serious fire. It was almost destroyed in 1976. In 1977, the DeCaros did a major reconstruction.

Our walk ends where it began at 203 Forest, a Queen Anne style residence, known as the Orlando and Emily Blackmer House. It is described as follows in the guide books:

The Blackmer House has survived numerous threats to existence throughout the years, including fires of varying impact, a proposed demolition to provide land for a

five-story YMCA building [and most recently its purchase by Howard and Liza Prossnitz]. Despite its beleaguered existence, the character of the original house has survived.¹⁹

Or as the tourist guides often say when they gesture towards our house, “this is what Frank

Lloyd Wright was trying to get away from”. Wright, himself, had this to say about the style:

“(t)hose who lived in this ambitious Eastlake mimicry – called Queen Anne – were blissfully unaware of any serious losses or self-inflicted insults. And yet the monotonous iteration of this suburban-house parade like the sign-parade on Chicago streets compelled my attention willing or not.”²⁰

I am sure that Mr. Wright spent many a moment in our front yard with his back towards our house, contemplating the erection of the Prairie style home directly across the street.

¹⁹ A Guide to Oak Park's Frank Lloyd Wright and Prairie School Historic District (1999), at 25.

²⁰ Wright, Autobiography, (1932) p. 102.