



EHLINGER & ASSOCATES

# ARCHITECTURE

THIRD QUARTER 1994



**THE ROBIE HOUSE  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

Frederick C. Robie was an extraordinary client for an extraordinary architect: Frank Lloyd Wright. Robie was an engineer by education and training and was an entrepreneur in the business of manufacturing bicycles. He was very successful in his business, and had acquired the resources to commission Wright to design a home for his growing family. As such, Robie fit the profile of the "carriage trade" type of client that Wright catered to in his early years of practice. These clients were different from their counterparts in other locales in that they were open to new ideas, very direct and unpretentious.

Robie himself said "I wanted to look out and down the street to my neighbors without having them invade my privacy." He wanted none of the usual curtains, shutters, and other interior bric-a-brac of the homes of the time. These were unusual desires for a house in such an urban setting, but it fit the personality of the owner, while providing a framework for the architect. It should be pointed out also that here was a male "head of household" taking just as active a role in what house he would live in, as he did in his business, rather than capitulating to his wife and having no input whatsoever.

Wright produced a masterpiece. The Robie House is of Wright's Prairie School genre of designs, with emphasis on the horizontal line, dramatic cantile-

vers, and centripetal spaces about the hearth.

The Robie House design creates functional zones per story in a three story scheme on a corner lot with the family's three bedrooms and two baths on the third floor; the guest bedroom & bath near the foyer, servants bedrooms in the rear over the garage, kitchen, living & dining on the second floor (which functioned as the main floor); and the garage, playroom & billiards room (den) on the first floor (which functioned as a raised basement).



The three dimensional expression balances very strong horizontal elements - roofs, masonry balustrades, etc. against the vertical massing of the central chimney core. This issue's limited edition signed print by Ladd P. Ehlinger shows these elements in tension with a view of the house looking toward the street corner. All spaces in the house interconnect with open planning (there are few interior partitions) and revolve around the chimney core which includes the main stairway. There are fireplaces on each of the three levels. Wright was an advocate of the hearth and home concept, and used the hearth as a symbol of family and security.

The bold, dramatic cantilevered roofs, the band of continuous windows all served to give Frederick Robie his desired view of his neighbors and the world, while the leaded stained glass, and the shading of the overhangs of the roofs served to maintain privacy for the

Robies. The scale of the house is different as a result of the design of the main porch in the front being midway between the first and second level. It does not appear at first glance to be a three story house. The massing and interplay of the components of the house reduce its apparent size and height.

Wright also designed all of the furniture within the house. The most notable piece was the dining room table. It had built in lights with stands located just off the four corners of the table, for flower arrangements. With a typical flower ar-

range in the center of the table, the diners can't see each other. With four flower arrangements at the corners, the diners can experience the flowers as well as each other. This table and the chairs are handsome, an exception to typical Wrightian furniture, in the writers opinion.

This house has been recently restored to satisfactory condition. It is presently owned by the University of Chicago as the campus envelopes it now. It is well worth a visit, as it is the *tour de force* of Wright's Prairie School houses.

## IF YOU'RE GOING THAT WAY...

Any trip to St. Louis, MO ought to include a visit to the Wainwright Building in addition to the Arch and other obvious attractions. The Wainwright Building was designed by Louis Henri Sullivan of the Chicago architectural en-

gineering firm Adler & Sullivan. Louis Sullivan was the mentor of Frank Lloyd Wright and a great number of the architects of the Chicago or Prairie School of architects. Sullivan was a genius who attended the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris without finishing, moved to Chicago and became Adler's partner, and was designing huge complexes at the ripe old age of 26.

At first, Sullivan's expressions of buildings was derivative of the Richardsonian Romanesque style propounded by Henry Hobson Richardson. These buildings were characterized by large Romanesque arches with brute proportions, use of brownstone, red sandstone, and terra cotta.

The Wainwright Building was the first building designed by Sullivan where he broke away totally from Richardson's influence, while at the same time creating the first aesthetic expression of the high rise building. Prior to the Wainwright Building, tall buildings were designed by architects as layer cakes, one facade piled on top of the other, with no feeling for the verticality of the structure.



Here Sullivan expressed the organization of the building -- a base of storefront commercial, a middle of offices, and a top of mechanical elements expressed by the terra cotta cap and frieze. The commercial base has large open windows for window shopping, the office areas are expressed by multiple

vertical brick piers soaring from the base to the cap.

While the high rise building was invented in Chicago, its first aesthetic expression of the verticality was in St. Louis. The building is ten stories tall -- not very tall by today's standards, but the design of the facades makes it seem much taller.

## WELCOME ABOARD!

E&A welcomes Claudia Seligman and Paulette Lizano to our Metairie office.

Claudia is a 1975 Bachelor of Architecture graduate of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, where she was the recipient of the Alpha Rho Chi Medal and co-recipient of the Ricketts Prize. She worked in a New Orleans architectural firm for seven years and then spent twelve years helping run the family's shipbuilding business. Claudia is licensed in Louisiana.

Claudia has been a Board Member of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Greater New Orleans from 1991 to present. She also is a volunteer speaker for Associated Catholic Charities of New Orleans, and a member of St. Pius X Church and Parish.

Paulette is a May 1994 Bachelor of Architecture recipient from L.S.U. During her fifth year at L.S.U., she participated in a national competition conducted by HABS (Historic American Building Survey) where her team measured and produced measured drawings of the historic Prudhomme House in Opelousas, LA. She just received the results: her team won third place and its \$1,000 prize to be divided equally among the ten team members! Congratulations!

HABS is a section of the National Park Service that was initiated during the great depression to support starving architects and architecture students during their summers by documenting historically and architecturally significant buildings for posterity. The measured drawings and photographs are recorded in the Library of Congress and serve as a

foundation for historic restoration and preservation. This is a very worthwhile program.

Paulette is a member of the Construction Specifications Institute New Orleans Chapter, a freelance artist and calligrapher. She has experience with stained glass in her dad's studio. Paulette has recently volunteered at the Aquarium of the Americas as a Naturalist Volunteer (*Is she planning to swim with the sharks?*).

## TRICK OR TREAT?

The coming of the "Great Pumpkin" along with the witches and goblins signals a change in the air around us. This is a good time to remember to "treat" yourself to a few helpful winterizing reminders and not to "trick" yourself into thinking that you still have a lot of time until the first winds of winter have arrived.

Those of you with furnaces and either oil or gas-fired boilers will be lighting them soon when the first gush of cold air blows in. Have you had that yearly routine maintenance check before firing up? Is there a repair list from last season to work on? A little early preparation can save not only time but also headaches and cold feet.

A routine maintenance check is also in store for all electric heaters as well as any space heaters that you may use.

Winterizing does not only apply to heaters, but also to any emergency equipment that you may have such as emergency generators, engines that are located outdoors, etc. A simple check of these can make for many happy campers when the weather does turn frigid.

Of course, we should all make sure that all walkways, sidewalks, front steps and other paths of travel are in good shape and safe for use by everyone -- especially those little ghosts, goblins and witches.

Just remember every year at this time, don't trick yourself into thinking that there is plenty of time before winter strikes. Rather, treat yourself to an enjoyable winter season by a little preparation before it becomes necessary.

And yes, it is true, I always have the carburetor on my broom checked at this time before the coming of the "Great Pumpkin".

*Claudia Seligman*