

original architecture

A HIDDEN HISTORY

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT & THE ROBERT M. LAMP HOUSE

BY ERIN ABLER

Pop quiz for Frank Lloyd Wright aficionados: What residential Wright design sits tucked away from sight on a block near Madison's Capitol Square? Hint: It was created for Wright's boyhood friend, portions of whose biography Wright may have borrowed for his own use¹. Stumped? Don't feel too badly. The Robert Lamp house, at 22 North Butler Street, was designed to give its owner privacy—a plan that was realized so successfully that it may threaten the very existence of the building. But just who was Robert Lamp? And how did he come to figure so prominently in the life of Frank Lloyd Wright? Unlikely as it seems, the answer begins in a pile of autumn leaves.

LIFELONG FRIENDS

"They were born on the same day, but a year apart," says historian Jack Holzheuter, a scholar of Frank Lloyd Wright's life and work. "Lamp was a year older than Frank Lloyd Wright. They did not meet until probably when Lamp was 12 and Wright was 11, when Wright tells the story in his autobiography. Lamp was handicapped. Some kids took away his crutches and buried him in a pile of leaves, and Wright came to his rescue. I don't know why. [Wright] likes to say, of course, that he was a right-minded boy. And they became very close friends."

Weathering a period of cool distance² and working back to a close companionship, Lamp and Wright maintained a friendship that spanned the entirety of their lives. "Lamp was pretty successful," says Jack. "He had some money from his real estate development and his travel and insurance businesses. This also meant that he would've been in Chicago from time to time. The two men must've seen each other fairly regularly." Jack notes that the archivist at Taliesin remembers Frank Lloyd Wright talking about Lamp years after Lamp died. "He considered him the best friend he ever had," says Jack. "Lamp was very bright. Wright was very bright. And Lamp had a magnificent

sense of humor. They remained close until Lamp's death."

CUSTOM DESIGN

It was in the early 1900s, "during a time of great development in Madison in intensity of housing density," that Wright conceived a plan to create three lots for dwellings near the Capitol. One would be a new primary residence for Lamp, one a rented house for investment, and the last a reduction of an existing mansion. Though the latter two projects never came to be, the first—a house for Wright's good friend—came to fruition in 1903.

Contrary to common belief, the Lamp house did not begin as a lone house on a plot later surrounded by new developments. Instead, the unusual mid-block construction was a purposeful choice. "All the houses around it were preexisting," says Jack. "Nothing has been built around it since. This was a concoction of Wright's, to put a new house in a preferred position that would accommodate his good friend."

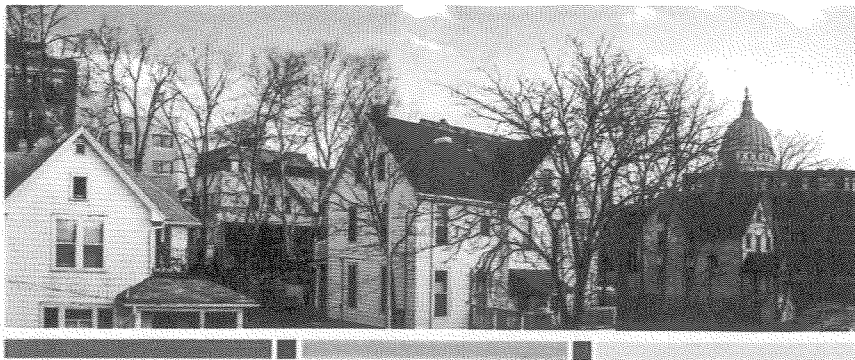
Lamp and Wright had a mutual interest in sporting activities on the lake, which Lamp continued to pursue despite his handicap. He particularly enjoyed racing



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sail canoes. "Lamp liked to compete with records of his," Jack says. "As he aged, he probably found it difficult to keep that up. But he still liked to watch races, and he could do so from his house."

Built on a rise, the house was designed to provide Lamp the lake view he needed. "In 1903, Wright generally was putting the water table quite low to the ground, but not here," says Jack. "It's much higher than normal. And that was to give the house as much elevation as possible. So you could look over the rooftops around you and get views of both lakes."

"The house was also given more privacy through the addition of a pergola, which gave the roof a garden-like appearance. It truly is a roof garden, and probably the only one in Madison. Wright designed many, but this was probably the one most fully realized. Lamp could enjoy this kind of life—being sort of in the country, not having to go out to see things. He could go upstairs to see what was going on around the city."

"It was a very well-realized kind of design that Wright created for an individual who was also his best friend. He spent a lot of time on this. This was really an urban retreat in a suburban manor for his best friend."

"The landscaping also gave it a sense of real privacy and reserve from the rest of

the city. Very substantial retaining walls were erected. The wall on Butler Street there is a concrete block that goes all the way from the street, not just the sidewalk, up to the entrance of the yard where the concrete steps were made. You can see there was an incredible amount of landscaping to achieve the goals that Wright had, which was privacy."

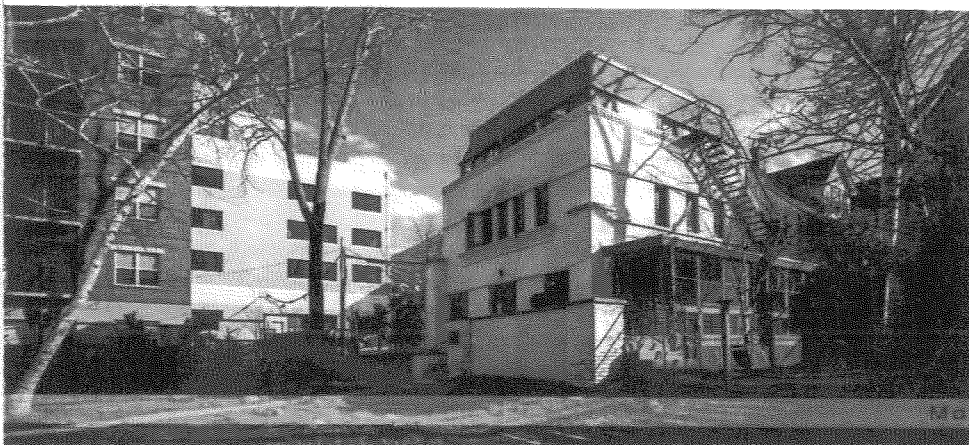
"That's why it's an important house," says Jack. "It's part of Wright's personal biography. Very few houses or buildings in general are part of his personal biography. Unity Temple in Chicago is a very personal building for Wright. But when an artist designs a house for a good friend or family, that's different. The Lamp house was in that family category, and Wright transformed that landscape to accommodate the needs of his client. This is truly unique, I think, in Wright's approach. He did not fuss with urban landscape all that much. Wright was in the business of creating beauty and it had an appropriateness, both for the client and for the community, where I think developers today are interested only in making money."

BUILDING TO SCALE

Bob Hartmann feels similarly about the Lamp house. As president of Frank Lloyd Wright Wisconsin, Bob heads the only statewide organization dedicated to the preservation of the legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright in his native state.

"I think it's quite important," Bob says of the house. "It doesn't rank with his most famous projects because most of his most famous projects are on a much larger scale, but it's a unique example of Wright's residential architecture. 1903 is the date of the Lamp house. At that time, Wright is really peaking at the beginning of the first Golden Age. He's also working on the Larkin Building in Buffalo—a major piece of original reactive design applied to an office building—and also working on the Unity Temple. If you look at pictures of those buildings, you see flat roofs on the building, rectangular geometric forms, and most importantly, piers on the corners. Most of the design of that time is still reflecting all the European values of the time, with steeply pitched roofs. Well, Wright does a flat roof."

"Wright does not do another home like the Lamp house, ever. He makes other attempts at modest-cost structures, but he really never repeats himself on the Lamp house. Wright was a unique architect in that he could work very well on both a large scale and a small one."





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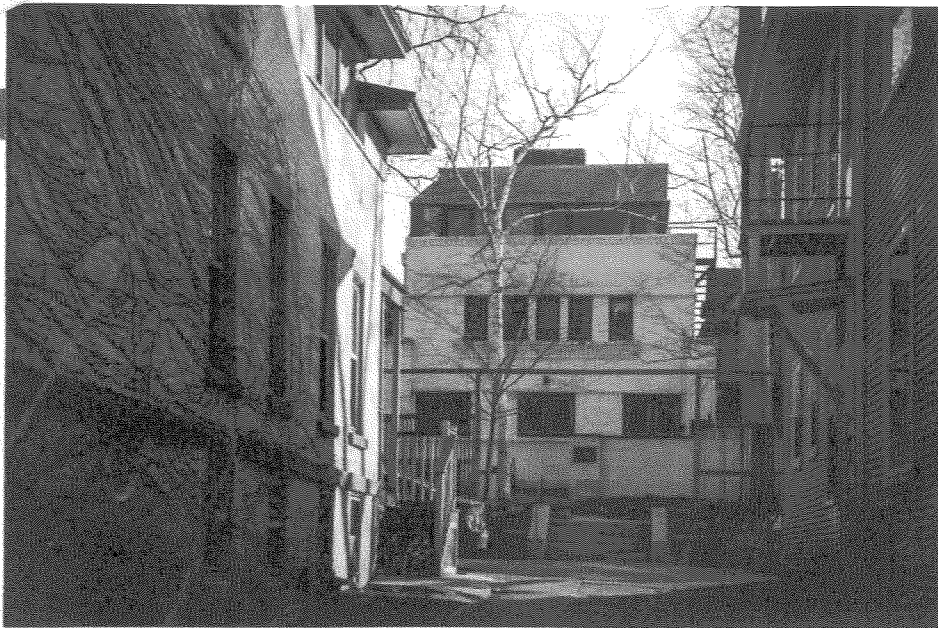
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It was his theory of organic architecture that allowed him to design small and large alike. All the parts of a building added up to be more than the single parts of the building. [He also] designed structures from the inside out. He didn't just select the style and place it on the exterior facades of the building. He created a new work. There was always a unifying theory behind each design."

IN THE SHADOW OF CHANGING TIMES

Of course, even a unifying theory can fall short of being universal. Two different development plans are currently under consideration that would affect the land surrounding the Lamp house. One, a 10-story hotel, is slated to replace

the Pahl Tire Co. property at 202 East Washington Avenue. The other proposes the demolition of four houses on the same block for the construction of a five- to six-story apartment building.³ While some in favor of the development feel that change in the area is unavoidable and will not disrupt the Lamp house, those with an eye to historical context are not as sure.⁴

Bob expresses concern that the type and mass of the proposed development "will diminish the scale" of the Lamp house. "We know that this proposed residential project does not threaten the destruction of the Lamp house," he says. "But the context in which you will see the Lamp house will change with this development. Views either out from the Lamp site or into the Lamp site would disappear. All of the sudden it becomes imprisoned by larger, modern structures around it. It changes the way you can appreciate that house. It's so unique, it's so rare, it's Frank Lloyd Wright—you just would like to see very, very sensitive thought given to any of these projects that might impact the context of the site. Clearly it would be changed. It would be enclosed, it would be more in shadows—those tantalizing little glimpses would be gone."

As Bob points out, others outside Madison feel they have a stake in the pending development decision. "The eyes of many folks in the State of Wisconsin are on this," he says. "Those who either own Frank Lloyd Wright property or are

representatives of Frank Lloyd Wright properties think this is important. While the house is located in Madison, because of Frank Lloyd Wright's involvement with it, it's much bigger. It's statewide, it's national, it's international. This isn't just the president of Frank Lloyd Wright Wisconsin saying it's important. It's something that is really a treasure for the entire state."

Jack Holzheuter agrees. "The city has a chance to make a reputation for itself around the world by taking care of the Lamp house. Madison doesn't think of these things for now. Historic preservation is not emphasized by the city government. The politicians and developers look at preservation as an impediment to progress rather than an asset to progress."

Bob allows that low awareness is a hurdle for contextual preservation, but not an insurmountable one. "This is a great, great resource for the City of Madison. It should be thought of as something bigger than just a little house in the middle of a block that can hardly be seen. It's always things in your backyard that don't seem as important as things that you must travel many miles to see. Often we think we have to go somewhere else to see what this or that city has done with their Wright building. But we have the chance to do that right here in Wisconsin."

Erin Ablor is a Wisconsin native and a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She divides her time between online content strategy, information architecture, and freelance writing. Photographs by Bob Hartmann.

1. Holzheuter, J. (Winter, 1988-1989). *Wisconsin Magazine of History*. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin. 72: 2. Pp. 88-90.
2. *Ibid*, p. 90.
3. *Wisconsin State Journal*, Developer proposes new hotel near Capitol Square, Madison.com, host.madison.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/developer-proposes-new-hotel-near-capitol-square/article_847b50be-472b-58fa-bc4b-a0ecfd570287.html, June 5, 2012.
4. *Ibid*, June 5, 2012.

Wisconsin State Journal (Madison), April 30, 1933.

