

## About Frank Lloyd Wright's Robert M. Lamp House and Its Site

1. **Who was Lamp and what was his association with Wright?** Robert Marquart “Robie” (with a long “o”) Lamp was Frank Lloyd Wright’s best friend from 1879 or so until Lamp’s death in 1914. Wright nicknamed his red-headed son, David, for Lamp. Robie was called both “Pinky” (a fact remembered by Wright’s associates) and “Ruby” (the name Wright used in his autobiography in a passage about the red-headed Lamp). Until his death in 1959, Wright referred to Lamp as his best friend. They shared a June 8 birthday; Wright was a year younger (b. 1867).

2. **How important is Wright?** Frank Lloyd Wright is the most renowned architect of the twentieth century both nationally and internationally. He grew up in Madison, effectively his home town, since he was pre-pubescent when he arrived and left only two years or so before he was married. Like most persons in Western culture, he accumulated knowledge and grew into an adult during those years.

3. **Where does the Lamp House fit in the sequence of Wright’s Madison work?** Of Wright’s around thirty designs (built and unbuilt) for Madison, the Lamp House (1903) is the earliest standing example; three buildings have been lost. The surviving built designs are: 1903, Lamp House; 1908, Gilmore or Airplane House; 1936, Jacobs I; 1938-41, Pew House (Shorewood Hills); 1944-49, Jacobs II (originally in the Town of Middleton, now in Madison); 1947-51, Unitarian Meeting House (Shorewood Hills); 1956, Erdman Prefab I (Van Tamen); 1958, Erdman Prefab II (Rudin); 1938-97, Monona Terrace (Tony Puttnam, architect of record in 1997). Lost buildings are Rocky Roost (Town of Westport), two versions, 1891 and 1901-03, fire; Lake Mendota Boathouse or City Boathouse (foot of Carroll Street), 1893, razed by the City of Madison; Laura and Arnold Jackson House (a version of Erdman Prefab I), 1957, moved to Beaver Dam.

4. **What is the Importance of the Lamp House design, as opposed to the siting and landscape designs?**

a. The floor plan (architects call this merely a “plan”) of the Lamp House is the earliest example of Wright’s use of what became a standard plan for American houses, 1907 to the present. The plan is based on an earlier one by Walter Burley Griffin who supervised Lamp House construction as a Wright employee. Wright made this plan famous through publication in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* in April 1907, and he used it repeatedly through the 1910s. The plan still is being copied by American architects. Two of Wright’s houses in which the plan is employed are museums today: the Stockman House in Mason City, Iowa, and the gardener’s house associated with the Martin House in Buffalo, New York. Both cities use these houses as tourist attractions and locally as educational tools. Both required restoration. Both Buffalo’s and Mason City’s governments cooperated in saving the houses. Most funds were raised privately, but some taxpayer dollars were involved.

b. The Lamp House has one highly unusual feature among Wright’s work. It is the only existing Wright house that had a full roof garden surrounded by a pergola—a wooden framework for planting and shade that surrounded the roof garden. The Booth House (1915) in Glencoe has a partially open roof adjacent to summer sleeping quarters on the third floor; there are hints of partial roof-garden spaces for the four Textile Block houses and Hollyhock House in Los Angeles (1920s); and several American System Built designs from the teens have partial roof gardens, although none was built. The Midway Gardens in Chicago (1914) contained numerous garden spaces atop the structure’s roofs. In 1911, the Lamp House open roof garden was enclosed as a playroom for Lamp’s stepson (who died) and then for

his adopted son, Richard. The pergola was retained. (Wright may have designed the enclosure.) The Lamp House roof garden and pergola could be restored without much difficulty. About 1962, the pergola was removed because of roof problems. I was then living on the second floor of the house and I saved a piece of the pergola. This 18-inch-long fragment can provide dimensions, paint color, and type of wood for restoration.

c. Wright integrated his landscape design for the Lamp House with the roof garden design. The 1903 realized design for the fence-enclosed grounds incorporates supports that echoed the house's pergola supports. Plantings covered the fences, creating a bower surrounding the dwelling and shielding it from the public. Wright routinely integrated "indoor" and "outdoor" design, but this is an especially instructive example because of its early date, compactness, complexity, and the involvement of the unique roof and an entire yard. Characteristic of his design philosophy, **Wright conceived the house and its surroundings as a comprehensive, inclusive design, not as a series of parts.** (We know what the roof garden looked like because of an early photograph; similarly we know what the grounds looked like because of early snapshots.)

**5. Why does the Lamp House have a roof garden?** A 1903 newspaper account and the long-term, close friendship of Wright and Lamp tell us that the garden was a mutually personal accommodation to the men's shared boyhood interests in Madison's lakes and boating. From the roof, Lamp, who had a withered leg from birth and who used crutches, could watch races on both lakes with the aid of binoculars—easier for him than traveling to viewing spots along the lakes. Overall, the Lamp House was a highly personal and unusual collaboration between Wright and his best friend. It was essentially a family undertaking for both.

**6. How did the Lamp House come to be where it is?**

a. In 1903, Madison was well into a growth spurt, so the need for new housing on the isthmus was intense. Property owners and developers were routinely subdividing lots and creating greater housing density.

b. Lamp and an uncle, William Lamp, engaged in real estate development (moreso his uncle). Lamp knew about real estate from having worked in the state's land office in the 1880s. He later went into the insurance and travel business with offices on South Pinckney in Block 89. He and his uncle for several years had shared a double house on the lake side of Sherman Avenue (not by Wright), but for family reasons he needed a new house to accommodate himself (he was unmarried), his aging parents, and an aged, widowed aunt. His uncle acquired the large Lamp House initial parcel (two lots on Butler and east parts of two lots on Webster) to create two investment properties and a convenient dwelling for his nephew, parents, and sister. Robert Lamp partnered with his uncle in this venture, eventually becoming the sole owner.

**7. How does the Lamp House fit into the block chronologically?** In 1903, it and the two dwellings associated with it at 20 and 24 North Butler Street (the Lamp House address is 22 North Butler Street) were the last dwellings erected on the block. The house at 20 North Butler is a fragment of the house that stood on the original Lamp House lot previously. (The original parcel was divided into three lots between 1903 and 1905.) It lost two wings and received a Prairie-Style-like second story, windowed extension at the rear whose design suggests the hand of either Wright or Griffin. The Lamp family owned this house for years after Robie's death in 1914. As intended by Lamp, the two-and-a-half-story, two-family

dwelling at 24 N. Butler (to the right of the driveway leading to the Lamp House) was erected in 1905 after the Lamp House was built. The portion of the block fronting East Washington Avenue lost its dwellings to commercial construction a decade or two after the Lamp House was built. Ray-O-Vac long occupied the multi-story building on East Washington, with the lots to the east converted to parking for many years; Pahl Tire was erected as a domestically scaled auto facility, blending with the neighborhood. (It housed a taxi service and was locally made memorable through a photograph by Angus McVicar published in *Double Take* by Zane Williams.) Fairly recently (late 1990s?), the multi-story Odessa apartment building was erected on lots to the southeast of the Lamp House. Apart from the Odessa and the development along East Washington, the block still looks as it did in 1903-05—an astonishing survival so near the Square.

#### **8. Who conceived the scheme to put three houses where there had been one?**

a. Lamp clearly commissioned Wright for the basic design work on all aspects of the project—house, site, landscaping/hardscaping. Only drawings signed by both Lamp and Wright survive as evidence —no contract. The signatures suggest they worked out the details side by side.

b. Given the complexity of the demands and the results, Wright was probably the one who created the subdivision and siting solutions, not Walter Burley Griffin whose hand and influence are seen in the house design. Wright never created something like the Lamp House ensemble again: a house in the middle of the block, a house sited and designed to provide rooftop views of lakes and the city, and only a block and a half from the capitol building/city center. This was a highly site-specific, one-off job for his closest friend. Nor was this a characteristic Griffin landscape design—like those he did for Mason City and for the capital of Australia, Canberra. They involved sweeping yards and ground-level vistas, not tightly controlled ensembles.

#### **9. How complicated was the problem?**

a. Any number of solutions could have been used, and the drawings suggest that the placement of the Lamp House went through perhaps three iterations, given various schemes for the entrance to the house. One plan would have put the walk to the side of the lot nearest East Washington; another had the approach from Webster Street.

b. The final solution was what has been in existence since 1905—the three dwellings at 20, 22, and 24 North Butler. Wright must have been the one (not Lamp or Griffin) who dreamed up the method of preserving part of the preexisting brick house as an investment/rental property (adding a modern sleeping porch on the rear of the second story). In 1904, he designed a second house for investment to have stood where 24 North Butler now stands; it went through three schemes and was never built, probably because of costs. Instead Lamp sold the lot for an investment by another developer. (If Wright's investment house had been built, the block would have contained two adjacent Wright dwellings, both of them extremely interesting.) Early histories confused the dating of the Lamp House, putting it at 1905 and the house for investment at 1904; the incorrect sequence of designs and mistaken dates still make appearances in new publications.

#### **10. What changes to the landscape were required to accommodate the three houses?**

a. The preexisting brick house originally had been set back from the sidewalk by 100 feet or more. That position would have enabled the residents to see Lake Mendota from windows and porches.

The house at 20 North Butler now stands about 10 feet from the sidewalk. Its rear yard was excavated, 1903-05, to form a flat terrace.

b. The natural slope of the block was reduced to accommodate the Lamp House (Thanks to glaciation, a sharp slope to the northeast traversed the Mifflin Street side of the block; a parallel slope traversed the State Street side of the Capitol Square. The Square and the Lamp House block were part of the same hill and drainage system.)

c. Infill soil, some at least from slope reduction, flattened the Lamp House lot on the Mifflin Street side.

d. A concrete extension of an existing stone retaining wall was erected along the Mifflin side to contain the infill. It had metal poles inserted to create a support for fencing on that side of the Lamp House front yard.

e. A second concrete retaining wall across the entire width of the Butler Street lot was erected, creating flattened back yards for both the 20 and 24 North Butler dwellings and creating the gently sloped, flat concrete drive from the Butler Street sidewalk to the steps to 22 North Butler's yard. The Lamp House lot includes this eight-foot-wide "keyhole" drive. Concrete steps with cyma-curve abutments lead to the elevated Lamp House lot at the end of the drive.

f. A grassy terrace with a slope leading up to it was created to the northeast of the Lamp House itself. It is parallel to Butler Street and adjacent to the terrace and porch on the house's northeast side.

g. A slight reduction in the level of the Lamp House yard was created along the south side, and curbs and walks were installed adjacent to the historic Jonas House property.

#### **11. Why was the Lamp House placed along the lot line at the west side of the parcel?**

a. The simple answer is that Lamp and Wright wanted to maximize the house's elevation so that the third story views also would be maximized. The house was sited with extreme intention, not "just because."

b. To further enhance elevation, the house was given an extremely high water table—an architectural element that divides the basement from the first floor of the house. Wright usually kept water tables quite low at this point in his design life. Here he pushed the water table upward to gain more inches of elevation. He made the ploy less obvious by including a large basement window on the left side of the façade. The extensive entrance terrace further masks this feature, abetted by the sloping grassy terrace (10.f).

#### **12. What effect did this placement have on how the Lamp House is approached and revealed?**

a. Wright often employed diversions to finding entrances to his houses, creating more privacy for residents. These diversions demanded that visitors take a journey of discovery of both house and grounds. The "path" Wright designed for entering the Lamp House is among his most complex, highly suitable for a house hidden in the middle of a city. I count eleven elements.

1. The stair from the street to the sidewalk. 2. Crossing the sidewalk and walking up the drive to the concrete steps in the low retaining wall that runs parallel to Butler. 3. Mounting the steps and passing through the bower (which which comes and goes; when it is there it enables visitors for the first time to see the entire house). 4. Walking up the slightly curved concrete walk to the first set of terrace steps. 5. Climbing those steps. 6. Turning right and crossing the landing; 7. Ascending the second set of steps to the terrace. 8. Crossing the terrace. 9. Turning left, opening the screen door, and entering the screened porch. 10. Turning left and entering the closed vestibule on the porch. (The vestibule is highly

compressed, thus preparing the visitor for the “release” into the comparatively small living room that runs the length of the house’s façade. Wright often used “compression, release” –an ancient architectural device.) 11. Entering the house.

b. Wright also controlled views of the house from the street. It cannot be seen as a whole when the plantings and fencing are intact. It was a place to be wondered about, to be discovered, to be magnetic. From the street and sidewalks, the roof garden could be seen. As one approached the bowered entrance, the roof garden would disappear from view. Once through the bower (which was originally gated), the unexpected delight of the Lamp House ensemble was fully revealed: a magical house with magical gardens within view of the capitol. (This sense of magic applied also to Rocky Roost, Lamp’s cottage, with Melville Clarke, on a tiny island at the north side of Lake Mendota. The cottage appeared to rise mystically out of the water.)

### **13. What do I conclude?**

This collaborative endeavor between architect and client demonstrates architectural inventiveness at its finest. Wright’s extraordinary creativity resulted in a path-breaking house plan, a stunning landscape concept that stretched from the roof to the fence line, and the realization of the goal to make a house in the center of the isthmus the equivalent of a home on both of the city’s lakes simultaneously. Because of their rarity in Wright’s work, the unified roof garden and landscape plans may be more important than the house plan itself since Wright created many influential (even revolutionary) building plans (Prairie School, solar, Usonian, ecclesiastical, and more), but fewer influential landscape plans. This urban house on two lakes is a remarkable achievement and an underappreciated and virtually unknown gift to the city he called home.

Jack Holzhueter, June 12, 2013