

The significance of Frank Lloyd Wright's Madison designs

Few cities have a more potent Frank Lloyd Wright legacy than Madison, Wisconsin. The architect is arguably the most famous person ever born in Wisconsin, the most celebrated architect of the twentieth century, and Madison is his hometown. Many buildings that were important to Wright's formative years still stand. For the Madison area, Wright designed 32 buildings, and they spanned nearly every category undertaken during his 66 years of independent architectural practice, 1893 to 1959. Counting Monona Terrace, 12 were built and 9 still stand.¹ The potential of these buildings for heritage tourism could be substantial.

The architectural importance of Frank Lloyd Wright's Lamp House

The Robert M. Lamp house (1903) is a far more important Wright design than many realize.² Against a backdrop of Wright's Madison designs, the Lamp house enjoys several distinctions:

1. It is Wright's most personal work in the city. Lamp and Wright were best friends from the time they met in the 1870s until Lamp's death in 1916.
2. It is Wright's earliest surviving work in the city.
3. The home was sited and designed to optimize Lamp's views of the capitol and Lakes Monona and Mendota. The lot occupied the highest point of Block 109 and one of the highest points on the Isthmus, about 100 feet above the lakes. Lamp said he wanted to watch sailboat races on Monona and Mendota through binoculars, and to allow his client to do this, Wright added fill to increase the elevation, raised the basement well above ground level, and added the roof garden.

Against a backdrop of all of Wright's work, the Lamp house possesses several distinctive qualities:

1. The floor plan is world famous and has been copied thousands of times. The compact and affordable plan proved popular with middle-class Americans.
2. The roof garden with its full pergola—a Japanese-influenced framework for vines and plants—is unique among Wright's designs. Wright routinely integrated landscapes with his architecture, but with the roof garden, he incorporated the heavens and the constellations.
3. The home is one of Wright's earliest experiments with more abstract shapes such as the cube.

These distinctions explain why the Lamp house was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976 and was made a Madison landmark in 1975.³

¹ See Paul Sprague (ed.), *Frank Lloyd Wright and Madison: Eight Decades of Artistic and Social Interaction*, (Madison, Wisconsin: Elvehem Museum of Art, 1990), pp. v, 1-7.

² See Jack Holzhueter, "Lamp House History Outline," a paper distributed to the committee on October 22, 2013, pp. 2-3; and Jack Holzhueter, "Wright's Designs for Robert Lamp," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 72 (Winter, 1988-1989), pp. 83-125.

³ Jack Holzhueter, "Lamp House," National Register of History Places Nomination Form, 1976; and Jack Holzhueter, "Lamp House," City of Madison Landmarks Commission Nomination Form, 1975