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**Frank Lloyd Wright's Burnham Street Vision**



Modest homes by a great architect

*"I would rather solve the small-house problem than build anything else I can think of..."* —Frank Lloyd Wright, 1938

It was surprising to learn that Frank Lloyd Wright designed homes for modest-income clients. Though not much of a Wrightian, I was nonetheless familiar with the epic scale of some of his projects and the outsized ego of the man. I assumed his work was always on a large scale and his clients always well heeled. Turns out I was wrong. Six little-known structures on West Burnham Street stand as testimony to the truth.

As enthusiasts already know, Wright created designs for affordable housing throughout his career, culminating with his "Usonian" houses in the Depression. He called it "Democratic Architecture" for average Americans of average means, and it fascinated him. Before the United States entered World War I, Wright was already at it on Milwaukee's South Side.

In 1915 Milwaukee real-estate entrepreneur Arthur L. Richards contracted the 48-year-old already-famous (and infamous) architect to create designs for a big experiment: American System-Built Homes for modest-income clients. The launching location would be on Burnham, between 28th Street and Layton Boulevard, then the edge of Milwaukee. There, six demonstration houses would be built where streetcar lines ended and celery fields began. The dwellings, Richards imagined, would sell like hot cakes, becoming a part of a large development to be replicated across the country.

It didn't quite turn out that way. The United States became involved in World War I, money and materials became tight and the project went belly-up.

Yet those six Wright-designed dwellings on Burnham Street remain. Remarkable preservation efforts have been afoot since 1996 to stabilize this unique block of two bungalows and four duplexes. Three buildings have been purchased by a nonprofit organization, and one of those has been restored. The site is well worth a visit.

All six structures reveal the characteristics of Wright's later period on a small scale. Some exhibit the accretions of successive decades (siding, thickened stucco, outbuildings). Two have received remarkable restoration and respect—one privately owned (2722) and the other a diminutive single-family house (2714) that is now open for tours. Outside, "pebble-dash" stucco, cypress wood trim and banks of 30 windows create strong horizontal lines. Overhangs frame the porch and main doorway on the side (Wright disliked "front" doors). Planting boxes underline windows and porch. Inside, horizontals rule as well: Wood banding wraps around walls of earthy tints (unpainted, Wright's preference); built-in gumwood cabinets (refinished and glowing) offer functionality; windows "bring Nature in," creating privacy and light; wooden grille-work charms; and a brick fireplace anchors the entire space. Despite its tiny size (800 square feet), a lovely spaciousness and light pervade.

Wright embraced modern technology and mass-production methods. He and Richards used pre-cut lumber and sized windows to fit 24 inches on center studs (allowing windows to be easily set in), thereby minimizing on-site skilled labor costs. Although pre-cut modular building systems existed then (the Sears "kit" houses among them), none had Wright's commitment to modernity and inside-out design. He created 960 drawings offering clients different roofs, cantilevers, built-ins, sleeping porches and art glass windows.

#### Life in Crisis

Wright's life was in crisis when he began the American System-Built Homes project. In 1914, a disgruntled servant set fire to his Spring Green home, Taliesin, and then killed seven people with an axe (including his companion Mamah Borthwick Cheney and her two children). Perhaps the Burnham project offered needed distraction and stimulus for his stalled career. After completing it, Wright left the country for Japan and a new chapter in his work: Tokyo's Imperial Hotel.

The Burnham restoration was conceived by individuals from UW-Milwaukee's School of Architecture and Urban Planning and Historic Preservation Institute, Bruce T. Block, and The Frank Lloyd Wright Wisconsin Heritage Tourism Program (spearheaded by Barbara Elsner). This volunteer nonprofit purchased 2714 W. Burnham and two more duplexes (2724-26 and 2732-34), receiving two highly competitive "Save America's Treasures" federal matching grants: \$150,000 in 2006 for restoring the exterior and interior of 2714 (matched dollar for dollar by local donations); and \$393,762 in 2009 for the exterior of the duplex at 2732-34. Two recently bestowed preservation awards (Mayor's Design and County Historical Society) may help generate matching funds.

The project deserves visits and support. These American System-Built Homes tell the story of a unique, exuberant moment in Milwaukee and U.S. history. For Wrightians, the structures offer a new perspective on the architect's oeuvre and imagination. Touring 2714 made a Wright admirer out of me, and it may others as well. His vision of beautiful and affordable housing was revolutionary indeed.

- Marie Kohler

*photograph courtesy of Shepherd Express*