

The Robie House: An Inspirational Design

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"His home environment may face forward, may portray his character, tastes and ideas, if he has any, and every man here has some somewhere about him."¹ This quote of Frank Lloyd Wright discusses the American homeowner and suggests a direct relationship between the homeowner and the nature of the house. This sentiment directly captures the house of Frederick C. Robie. An architectural genius, Wright put all his effort into every house he designed, from bottom to top, from floor to ceilings, from flowers to furniture. Wright's design of the Robie house, one of his premier Prairie houses, reflects not only Wright's notion of the appropriate house but Robie's interests as well.

Born in 1876, Frederick C. Robie was driven by his passion for bicycles and automobiles. He attended the Yale School in Chicago and the Chicago Manual Training School. Robie journeyed to Lafayette, Indiana to continue his studies at Purdue University, where he received an engineering degree. His father owned the Excelsior Supply Company, which specialized in the manufacturing of bicycles as well as, eventually, making automobile supplies. Robie began working for his father's company and became the president of the company in 1910.² Automobiles and mechanical elements fascinated Robie and this interest became the link between Frank Lloyd Wright and Robie's dream house.

As his success grew, Robie wanted to build a house for his family that reflected his position. He chose a plot of land in the Hyde Park community of Chicago, Illinois and on May 19, 1908, he bought the sixty by eighty feet piece of land for 13,500 dollars.³ Robie needed an architect and found his way to Frank Lloyd Wright. According to Robie, "I contacted him, and from the first we had a definite community of thought. When I talked in mechanical terms, he talked and thought in architectural terms. I thought, well, he was in my world".⁴ The mechanical engineer and the architect both thought in terms of lines, angles, and space.

The price of the land represented, as it turned out, the more inexpensive part of the project. Wright ultimately required a budget of 35,000 dollars to create Robie's house. This budget was seven to ten times the amount necessary for the construction of a 'modest' house.⁵ However, a modest amount would not have resulted in a masterpiece. This generous budget allowed Wright to design the structure with freedom and create a distinctive character for the house.

Situated at the corner of 58th Street and Woodlawn Avenue, the Robie house stands very close to the University of Chicago. The Gothic Revival architecture adopted by the University of Chicago, which projected a strict and "sentimental" environment, was directly at odds with the structure envisioned by Wright and Robie.⁶ "Radical and masculine the Robie house would be built in a part of Chicago characteristically stern and urbane."⁷

Large brick houses and the streets book-ended the site and accentuated its horizontality and the physical constraints represented an influence on the shape the house would ultimately take. Important as well were the ideas Wright drew from his interest in German culture. During this period, he defined many things by the ideal of "the comprehensive and unified work of art, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*."¹ "Discipline, unslackening vigor, power in place of prettiness: those were the German preferences that would inform the house."⁹ The combination of the narrow nature of site and the German influence resulted in a structure that mimicked "a great steamship at anchor."¹⁰ "Everything about the site suggested a long, low, streamlined, shiplike house: the prairie, the nearby lake, the new sense of speed, the still unshaken faith in the machine, and the shape of the lot, three times as long as it was wide."¹¹ The house, although considered, "the distilled essence of Wright's Prairie School style and the culmination of his search for a new architecture," Wright himself acknowledged this German influence on his work.¹² He claimed that the house became known as *Dampfer* in Germany, which was steamship architecture.¹³

By March of 1909 Wright had finished the drawings for the house and construction for this masterpiece began. Harrison Bernard Barnard was the builder for the Robie house and he worked on the project from the spring of 1909 until its conclusion in the spring of 1910. At the time of the construction of the house, Wright faced distractions from his home life. Ultimately, he turned over the final bit of construction to his assistants and turned his back on his Oak Park practice. He and his new love and mistress, Mamah Borthwick Cheney, left for Europe.¹⁴

The materials used for the house were brick, cut stone, reinforced concrete, wood, tile, and steel. The brick was for the walls and the cut stone was for the copings and sills. The wood-trimmed floors and the balconies were constructed of reinforced concrete while the beams were made of steel.¹⁵

During the construction important innovations to the house emerged. For example, Wright introduced a new type of indirect heating into this structure. The radiators lined the doorways and windows, hidden from the eye, and the pipes laid beneath the floors, allowing the homeowners to never have to step foot on a cold floor.¹⁶ There were other modern innovations placed in the house during construction such as electric lighting, telephone equipment and even the installation of a burglar and fire alarm system.¹⁷

Despite the German influences which had an impact on the Robie house design, the structure was built during a time when Wright was building prairie style houses. It resembles greatly the Tomek House of 1907 built by Wright in Riverside, Illinois. Anchored by a large chimney, the house has "two parallel, rectangular two-story masses," with "a smaller, square third story."¹⁸ Like all of the prairie-style houses designed by Wright, "the exterior formulation of base, wall, and cornice... is repeated in every part of the elevations."¹⁹ The house is very horizontal because of the extended cantilevering roofs and the thin Roman bricks Wright used to accent the elevations. Along with this sense of horizontality, both the roofs and walls of the house seem as if they are floating. The roofs and walls gained a certain level of independence because of the hidden support and exaggerated roofs. The support piers are built nearer to the house and the cantilever beams hold the weight.²⁰ The roofs appear even closer to the ground due to the absence of an attic.²¹ Wright's ideas of "asymmetric balance" are clearly articulated in the Robie House.²²

The bold and modern lines and spatial arrangement suggested in Wright's design certainly capture Robie's mechanical and engineering interests. The Robie house appeared as a bold structural statement for a man who wanted a modern house. Wright's incorporation of the homeowner's interests exist in other ways as well. The tall wall and larger iron gates to the drive surrounded the courtyard area in which Robie's children could play, reflecting Robie's fear of kidnappers and burglars.²³ Robie's desire for privacy resulted in the placement of the main entrance to the house in the rear of the structure:

"[t]he intentions of the house, however, have nothing to do with the supplication of the gods of sun or rain, the steps express instead the stages of privacy, for the house exists to be lived in".²⁴ Reflecting Robie's passion for automobiles, Wright did not construct stables. Instead, Wright had garage ports built and they became "the first attached three car garage in the world."²⁵

The strong and massive exterior of the house belies the fluidity of the interior. On the ground floor, the billiard room, playroom, kitchen, living room, and dining room all connect with and flow into one another. "Each leads to the next, and one is allowed to detract from the harmony of the whole, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*."²⁶ In keeping with the idea of bringing nature into the house, the rooms flow into balconies, into terraces, and the large playroom on the first floor opened to a "walled playground."²⁷ As well as fluidity, Wright incorporated the sense of family into the house by dividing the rooms into both living and dining areas centered around the hearth.²⁸ Inspired by Wright's travels to Japan, Wright incorporated eight oak screens in to the house's design.²⁹ The ceiling was separated into panels that held two different types of electric light. Glass globes hung on the sides of the main area and there covered bulbs hid behind the wooden grilles in the lower spaces at the edges of the panels, reflecting Wright's desire to combine decorative elements with structural necessities.³⁰

Unfortunately, the excitement this new house generated turned sour due to the death of Robie's father and the need to pay off business debts. Domestic troubles further destroyed Robie's world when his wife, Lora, left him in April of 1911, taking the children with her, and she divorced him on March 1, 1912. Robie was forced to abandon his dream house in December 1911. He sold it to David Lee Taylor, the head of the Taylor-Critchfield Co., an advertising firm.³¹ Following Taylor's residency, other owners occupied the house and today it has been preserved and is a museum.

The Robie House still stands today on the campus of the University of Chicago and is one of Wright's most famous structures. Built on a constricting plot of land, Wright designed an imposing house that dominated the streetscape. While drawing on German influences as well as Wright's prairie design elements, it's a house that showcased, however briefly, the essence of the modern that Frederick Robie, with his mechanical bent and passion for automobiles, desired. It suggests the dynamic combination of the desire and character of a homeowner and the vision of the architect.

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- Kruty, Paul. "Frederick C. Robie House," In *AIA Guide to Chicago*, ed. Alice Sinkevitch, 433-34. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993.

Endnotes

- ¹ Donald Hoffman, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House: The Illustrated Story of an Architectural Masterpiece* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984), 35.
- ² Joseph Connors, *The Robie House of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 5.
- ³ Donald Hoffman, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House: The Illustrated Story of an Architectural Masterpiece* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984), 6.
- ⁴ Joseph Connors, *The Robie House of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 6.
- ⁵ Donald Hoffman, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House: The Illustrated Story of an Architectural Masterpiece* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984), 14.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ¹⁰ Paul Kruty, "Frederick C. Robie House," in Alice Sinkevitch, ed. *AIA Guide to Chicago* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993) 433.
- ¹¹ Donald Hoffman, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House: The Illustrated Story of an Architectural Masterpiece* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984), 17.
- ¹² Paul Kruty, "Frederick C. Robie House," in Alice Sinkevitch, ed. *AIA Guide to Chicago* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993) 433.
- ¹³ Donald Hoffman, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House: The Illustrated Story of an Architectural Masterpiece* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984), 14.
- ¹⁴ Joseph Connors, *The Robie House of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 59-60.
- ¹⁵ Donald Hoffman, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House: The Illustrated Story of an Architectural Masterpiece* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984), 32.

¹⁶ Ibid., 82.

¹⁷ Brendan Gill, *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1987) 194.

¹⁸ Paul Kruty, "Frederick C. Robie House," in Alice Sinkevitch, ed. *AIA Guide to Chicago* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993) 433.

¹⁹ Ibid., 433.

²⁰ Donald Hoffman, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House: The Illustrated Story of an Architectural Masterpiece* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984), 40.

²¹ Ibid., 42.

²² Ibid., 21.

²³ Ibid., 57.

²⁴ Ibid., 38.

²⁵ Ibid., 57.

²⁶ Ibid., 47.

²⁷ Brendan Gill, *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1987) 194.

²⁸ Colin Davies, *Key Houses of the Twentieth Century: Plans, Sections and Elevations* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006) 32.

²⁹ Donald Hoffman, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House: The Illustrated Story of an Architectural Masterpiece* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984), 49.

³⁰ Colin Davies, *Key Houses of the Twentieth Century: Plans, Sections and Elevations* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006) 32.

³¹ Donald Hoffman, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House: The Illustrated Story of an Architectural Masterpiece* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984), 89.