

# The Wright Stuff

## Prairie Style Homes on the Prairie



*Clarence Shepard's design for the Gates House, located at 4146 Cambridge in Kansas City, comes late in the Prairie School lineage.*

**T**he Prairie style of regional architecture was popularized by Frank Lloyd Wright (1867- 1959) in the early part of the twentieth century. This low-lying, horizontal planar form was a reaction to the massive, highly decorative Victorian styling of the nineteenth century. Linked with the Arts and Crafts movement, the Prairie School was based on the belief that form follows function, i.e., the form of the building is determined by its function. The defining characteristics of the style include an integrated relationship between the building and the setting, low horizontal lines, and open flowing floor plans. The style was residential in conception and application.

### Creators of Prairie Style

It was in the Chicago studio of Louis Sullivan that Wright and others, including Marion Mahony and Dwight Perkins, worked on developing the designs that became known as the Prairie School. Known as the "Eighteen," the group practiced at Steinway Hall in Chicago from 1894 until 1902. Wright became the dominant figure and left to establish his home studio in Oak Park in 1902.

Wright's seminal designs were generated during this time and include the 1893 Winslow House in River Forest and the 1901 Willits House in Highland Park, both in Illinois. By the time Wright

designed his most famous Prairie style house, the 1909 Robie House in Hyde Park, Illinois, he had left the Steinway Hall and formed his Oak Park atelier or studio. These three designs show the style moving from a box to an extended series of horizontal planes.

Although Wright is the most influential of the Prairie School architects and is most often associated with the style, the Steinway Hall group was influential in their own right. Among the talented architects were Mahony, Perkins, Walter Burley Griffin, William Gray Purcell, Percy Dwight Bentley, and William Drummond. Mahony was the only woman among them, the first woman

## Architectural Style in Kansas

**This is the fifth in the series of architectural style articles to be published in *Kansas Preservation*. The articles are designed to provide general background information about architectural style and may also be used as context statements for National Register nominations.**

# Prairie



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*(Left) Builder examples of the Prairie style include window banks, horizontal massing, and deep eaves.*

*(Lower left and below) Japanese pagoda influences were incorporated into the Shepard and Belcher design for Mount Barbara in Salina. The geometric cut glass found in this Mount Barbara window is a classic example of the Wright tradition.*



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## Glossary

*Casement window - a window having at least one window sash which swings open along its entire length; usually on hinges fixed to the sides of the opening into which it is fitted*

*Eaves - the lower edge of a sloping roof; that part of a roof of a building which projects beyond the wall*

*Stretcher bond - bricks laid horizontally with their length in the direction of the face of the wall*

*Usonian - small, affordable houses designed by Frank Lloyd Wright during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century featuring flat roofs, carports and open living spaces; (Usonia was Wright's term for the United States of North America, with an 'i' added for pleasing sound.)*

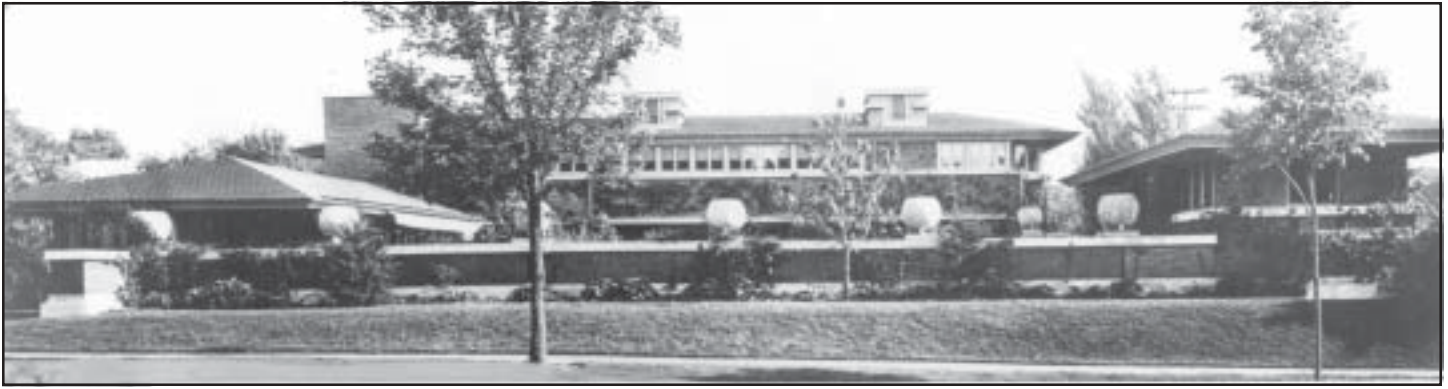
graduate of Massachusetts Institute of Technology's architectural program, and the most talented delineator in the group. Her contributions include an extensive group of Prairie Style residences in Mason City, Iowa. Many other lesser known architects were associated with the group over time, and by extension, the impact of the Steinway Hall studio had a significant ripple effect nationwide.

The concept of the atelier or studio is one of fundamental importance in the field of architecture, with apprentices working under the master. The Prairie School grew out of such an atelier. Wright went on to

establish the Taliesin West studio in 1932; it still serves as a school for architects. Many of Wright's own designs as well as Wright-inspired designs can be purchased from Taliesin, allowing modern materials to be used for a Prairie School-inspired design.

From Wright's point of view, the Prairie School evolved because of his interest in affordable housing for the middle class. This was a theme he began with and ended with later in his career with Usonian houses. In between, however, the homes he designed and built were for the upper class. These are the





*The Henry J. Allen House (255 North Roosevelt, Wichita) is the only Kansas residence for which Frank Lloyd Wright supervised the design and construction.*

homes, like the Robie House in Hyde Park and the Henry J. Allen House in Wichita, that are the landmark examples of the style.

But in the beginning, the style grew from the simple, regional four-square farmhouse with a hipped roof. Wright transformed this basic form into a new architectural genre by lowering the profile; emphasizing the horizontal; organizing horizontal, continuous window bands; using stucco and stained wood; and shifting the entrance to the side. Two prototypical designs were commissioned by and published in *Ladies Home Journal* in 1907. "A Fireproof House for \$5000" became Wright's most influential design, as it reached thousands and introduced the style to the middle class.

The Prairie style was popularized by builders who picked up elements or entire

concepts of the design. Across the country there are examples of homes with low-standing eaves, low walls, and window banks. Many of these designs were ordered from building catalogues or were the work of local builders.

While the style was most popular from 1905-1920, its impact is still felt today. A close look at the common ranch style home constructed from the 1950s to the present reveals antecedents to the Prairie style in its geometry, horizontal emphasis, and open simplicity of floor plan.

Publications such as the aforementioned *Ladies Homes Journal*, *Architectural Record*, and *House Beautiful* helped to disseminate the style. William Radford's Chicago-based architectural and engineering publication company blended the Prairie style with twentieth century concrete building technology in a 1909 publication for builders.

## Elements of Prairie Style

Organic in nature, the Prairie style used native building materials for its form. Throughout the long, low horizontal planes, the subtle influence of Japanese architecture pervades. This horizontality translated nicely into the suburban medium of residential architecture. Conceived around a large hearth, the floor plan was open and flowing, integrating gardens and terraces with the interior of the house. Low sloping roofs, overhanging eaves, and tall casement window



*Vernacular examples of the Prairie style were often built as Foursquares.*

banks were key design features that placed the house within the landscape rather than on it. With the number of parts reduced and the extension of horizontal planes, the house could be integrated naturally into the landscape.

Typically Prairie style houses are two-story, sometimes three. The traditional basement is eliminated by raising the house off the ground. The major living quarters were up one flight of stairs for a better view. The visual and functional emphasis is placed on the top half of the residence.

Often built of masonry, either rough stone or brick laid in stretcher bond, the designers of Prairie style homes sought a material that would blend naturally with its surroundings. Stucco and wood were also used frequently for lower end homes. High style homes featured beautifully finished interior woodwork. Heating, lighting, plumbing, and mechanical systems were designed as architectural features. Often the architect would design the furniture and carpeting, to make the building as one.

The following publications may be helpful for determining and describing style:

H. Allen Brooks. *The Prairie School: Frank Lloyd Wright and His Midwest Contemporaries*. New York: Norton, 1972.

Alan Gowans. *The Comfortable House: North American Suburban Architecture 1890-1930*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986.

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James C. Massey and Shirley Maxwell. *House Styles in America: The Old-House Journal Guide to the Architecture of American Homes*. New York: Penguin, 1996.

William A. Radford. *Radford's Cement Houses and How to Build Them*. Chicago: Radford Architectural Company, 1909.

Marcus Whiffen and Frederick Koepfer. *American Architecture, 1607-1976*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981.

## Prairie Style in Kansas

Although Kansas sits squarely on the prairie, the state boasts only one residential example of Frank Lloyd Wright's work. The Henry J. Allen House was built for the prominent Kansas statesman and his wife Elsie between 1917 and 1919. While Wichita has many vernacular examples of the style, some dating before the construction of the Allen House, Wright's mark stands clearly on this landmark example. Coming late in the first phase of his residential designs, the house includes a courtyard, garden teahouse, and massive brick wall. Its low horizontal sprawling yet palatial appearance clearly shows the influence of Japanese design.

Kansas City-based architect Clarence Shepard worked in the Prairie style, with landmark examples in Salina and Kansas City. Shepard may have worked as a draftsman for Wright during the Oak Park studio period, between 1902 and 1905. He is said to have preferred the Prairie style above all others, designing his own home in that genre. Shepard had an extensive residential practice in the Kansas City metropolitan area and was associated with the J. C. Nichols Company.

Shepard collaborated with Hardborne Belcher to design a three-story, native stone villa in Salina for Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Albert "Bert" Nelson. Constructed between 1916 and 1918, Mount Barbara stands prominently overlooking the city of Salina, yet, because of its use of native stone, low hanging eaves, low horizontal lines, projecting eaves and window banks, the massive house blends naturally with its wooded surroundings.

Several years later, Shepard designed a straight-forward landmark example of the Prairie style for Judge Louis Gates. Located on a small suburban lot in Kansas City, the two-story stuccoed, frame house is surmounted by a hip roof with wide overhanging eaves. Constructed in 1922-1923, the Gates House is a late example of the style.

Throughout the state stand other landmark quality residences done in the Prairie style tradition. Additionally there are even more residences that stand as vernacular examples of the style. As a class of buildings, these are typically well built and stand the test of time. Many could be listed on the National Register because of their architectural significance as examples of the Prairie style.

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*This article was written by Martha Hagedorn-Krass, architectural historian with the Cultural Resources Division.*

## Walgreens Targets Historic Properties

*Cont. from page 5*

Landon home will be lost if the surrounding buildings are destroyed or if the home is moved. Local preservationists are working to see the building protected.

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## Heritage Trust Applications Available

The Kansas Historic Preservation Office (KHPO) announces the availability of applications for the 2005 round of Heritage Trust Fund (HTF) grants in early September. The HTF is a state program that provides matching funds for the preservation of properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places or the Register of Historic Kansas Places. This is a competitive grant program in which applications compete for the funds available for that year.

The deadline for applications in this round of grants is March 1, 2005. Applications must be complete and post-marked by the March 1 deadline. If an application is hand delivered, it must be received no later than 4:30 p.m. at the Kansas Historic Preservation Office on that date. Final selection of projects will be made at the May 2005 meeting of the Kansas Historic Sites Board of Review.

Preliminary applications, which the KHPO staff will review and provide

comments on, must be submitted by 4:30 p.m., January 18, 2005. Preliminary applications are not required but are highly encouraged.

HTF grant workshops will be held in locations around the state. The first will be held in Topeka at the Kansas History Center, Potawatomi Mission, Potawatomi Room (second floor), on Thursday, September 16, 2004, at 2 p.m. Other dates and locations are included in the calendar on the back cover of this issue.

Additional information about the HTF grant program can be found on our web site at [kshs.org](http://kshs.org) under "Preserve," "Buildings," "Find Funding."

To request an application packet, please contact the Kansas Historic Preservation Office at (785) 272-8681 Ext. 216 or [cultural\\_resources@kshs.org](mailto:cultural_resources@kshs.org) or write Heritage Trust Fund, Kansas Historic Preservation Office, Kansas State Historical Society, 6425 SW Sixth Avenue, Topeka, Kansas, 66615-1099.