



The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/1S3ZmLm>

TRAVEL

Tracing Frank Lloyd Wright in Oak Park, Illinois

Pursuits

By JOHN L. DORMAN NOV. 18, 2015

NOV. 18, 2015

Pursuits

By **JOHN L. DORMAN**

As an architecture buff, I had been drawn to the work of Frank Lloyd Wright for years before finally seeing his innovative Frederick C. Robie House on the South Side of Chicago last year.

The art-glass windows throughout the structure bring in an incredible amount of natural light. On the second floor, the living space is a large open room, complementing the structural transparency that Wright worked to incorporate in his designs.

The experience only heightened my admiration for him. I wanted to see more of his buildings, but I was out of time. I had to return to New York the

next day.

This year, I made the time. I recently found myself back in Chicago riding an elevated train toward Oak Park, a leafy, diverse village adjacent to the city's western edge with a population of 52,000.

As the glamour of North Michigan Avenue and the bustle of the downtown Loop receded with each passing stop, I was happy to make my way to suburbia. That is because Oak Park isn't your typical suburb. It boasts 25 buildings that were designed or remodeled by Wright, the largest collection in the world.

Wright, a native of Richland Center, Wis., lived in Oak Park from 1889 until 1909, his formative years as an architect. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, he and a group of architects in Chicago and its surrounding area designed buildings that were heavily influenced by the Prairie School. The style reflects modernity, incorporating features such as horizontal, low-sloping roofs that emulated flat Midwestern prairies. The school also promoted the use of natural materials in open spaces throughout the houses, further connecting them to the environment.

I opted for the "Wright Around Oak Park Tour" (\$60), an extensive three-hour guided walking tour offered daily from April through October. The tours are limited to about 10 people and offer unrestricted photography privileges, and the opportunity to have a guide explain the intricacies behind each Wright home in the vicinity of Forest Avenue.

Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio

A 15-minute walk from the elevated train, the Wright Home and Studio are the only buildings that I could actually enter and walk through, as the other Wright structures are private homes.

The property includes the first house that Wright designed and built for

his family in 1889. He employed shingle-style architecture on the exterior of the home, rejecting the Victorian architectural rigidity that was in favor at the time. Like other shingled buildings in the late 19th century, the Wright home blends in with its surroundings.

Once I entered the home, I spotted a quote prominently inscribed above the Roman brick fireplace in the living room that conveyed the value of respect among people: "Truth Is Life. Good friend, around these hearthstones speak no evil word of any creature." The words are Wright's variation on a motto from the Lloyd Jones family, which included his Welsh maternal grandparents, Richard and Mallie Lloyd Jones.

In 1895, Wright converted the kitchen to a dining room and built a new kitchen and children's playroom at the rear the home; the studio was built in 1898. The playroom, the largest room in the home, receives light from intricate art-glass windows and a skylight. A piano is hidden under the stairway leading to a balcony in the room, which adds to the allure of Wright's designs. He had six children with his first wife, Catherine (Kitty) Wright, over the course of their 33-year marriage, so the addition gave the children some much-needed space.

Building the studio also gave Wright a professional space for himself and the architects who worked with him. The studio, anchored on the Chicago Avenue side of the lot, has a grand octagonal drafting room that includes a balcony. The space feels airy and regal, and I was immediately struck by how much of Wright's later buildings were inspired by some of his first designs in this space. There was beautiful green and gold stained glass in the waiting area at the front of the studio, which brought an array of light into the building. *951 Chicago Avenue.*

Thomas H. Gale House

Built in 1892, this is an attractive Queen Anne-style home with a turret

roof. It came to be known as a “bootleg” structure, though, because Wright designed it when he was working independently from his mentor, the American architect Louis Sullivan. *1027 Chicago Avenue*.

Forest Avenue Homes

Some of the finest examples of Prairie School architecture are on Forest Avenue, where Wright’s fingerprints are easily visible. The Dr. William H. Copeland House, at 400 Forest Avenue, was built in the early 1870s and remodeled by Wright in 1909, with the addition of a wraparound porch. The home, originally Italianate, was given a more subtle Prairie influence in the redesign.

The Nathan G. Moore House, at 333 Forest, is a classic Tudor Revival home whose design by Wright in 1895 has often been copied. The Moore House, one of Wright’s most traditional structures, still has its original garage and survived a fire in 1922 that obliterated the top floor and roof. Directly beside the Moore House is the Edward R. Hills House, at 313 Forest, which has its own interesting story. Built in 1883 and remodeled by Wright in 1906, the pagoda-influenced Hills House was rebuilt after a 1976 fire, with architects using Wright’s old plans as a guide.

In 1902, Wright designed the Arthur Heurtley House at 318 Forest. There is a wide expanse of grass in front, giving it a sense of a balance with the environment. A gently sloping roof accompanies outdoor terraces, with a brick extension of the house creating some uncertainty on the location of the front door until I saw a large arch marking the entrance.

The Frank W. Thomas House (210 Forest) and the Peter A. Beachy House (238 Forest) are both shining examples of Wright’s architectural development in Oak Park. The stucco-dominated Thomas House was the first house that Wright designed with Prairie-style sensibilities in mind. The structure is markedly elevated from the street and was not built with a

basement or an attic. With the redesign of the Beachy House in 1906, Wright emphasized the style of the distinct gables and the wood, stucco, concrete and brick exterior.

The Laura Gale House

Our guide invited us to find the next home that was designed by Wright, using our knowledge of his techniques, and we had a unanimous choice within a couple of minutes.

The Laura Gale House is tucked between two Victorian houses in an area so bucolic that I forgot I was anywhere close to America's third-largest city. After Thomas H. Gale died, his family commissioned the design of a Wright house where his wife, Laura, would live. The house has a classic Prairie design, with a cantilevered balcony and other horizontal elements dominating the structure. The entrance to the house is also hidden on the side, a classic Wright element. *6 Elizabeth Court.*

As I walked back down Forest Avenue, I realized how revolutionary the Prairie School was for its time. Wright and the architects in his fold built a genre based on their interpretations of how living spaces could evolve. So many elements of Wright's designs were bold, such as raised floors and roofs that extended significantly from their structures, while also retaining a strong sense of simplicity.

Even though Wright left Oak Park after 20 years, his influence spread to the greater Chicago region and, eventually, the world. It was great to see where it all started.

IF YOU GO

Oak Park is 10 miles west of the Loop, an easy trip from downtown Chicago. The village is served by the Green and Blue elevated train lines of

the Chicago Transit Authority, along with Metra commuter trains that travel east to Ogilvie Transportation Center in Chicago.

Lake Street is the main commercial corridor in downtown Oak Park, brimming with restaurants and shops.

With gluten-free options and a homey feel, **Delia's Kitchen** (1034 Lake Street, 708-358-1300; deliaskitchen.net) can send you to breakfast nirvana. Try the Mediterranean omelet (\$9.50), with feta, baby spinach and green onions.

The **Lake Street Kitchen and Bar** (1101 Lake Street, 708-383-5253; lakestreetkitchenbar.com) is a solid destination for farm-to-table fare. For brunch, try the carrot cake French toast, served with candied pecans and a cream-cheese glaze (\$11); and the smoked sockeye salmon and rye crepe (\$11). Pair meals with drinks like the Boulevard Blue, with raspberry vodka, blueberries and lemonade (\$10); and Smoak Park, with mezcal, ginger liqueur, orange juice and lime (\$13).

Sugar Fixé Pâtisserie (119 North Marion Street; 708-948-7720; sugarfixe.com/opmenu) has a variety of French pastries. The gluten-free lemon macarons (\$2), cupcakes (\$3 to \$3.75) and turkey and Gouda croissant (\$4.25) are winners.

Close to the Oak Park Green Line train station, **Maya Del Sol** (144 South Oak Park Avenue; 708-358-9800), a Latin fusion restaurant, is popular with locals. Start with the taquitos de camaron, with shrimp, roasted tomato sauce and onions (\$10). Then try the carne asada, with skirt steak, Brie and chimichurri (\$26).

© 2015 The New York Times Company

:cal SetSyn("html")