

Oak Park Historic Preservation Commission
January 10, 2008 Meeting Minutes
Oak Park Village Hall, Council Chambers – 7:30 pm

A. ROLL CALL

PRESENT: Chair Douglas Gilbert, Karen Doty, Bob Lempera, Frank Lipo, Kate Susmilch, Jeff Limberg, Marsha Moseley, Kristen Diamond, Doug Freerksen, and Tom Bassett-Dilley

ABSENT: Nick Kalogeresis

STAFF: Doug Kaarre, Urban Planner

F. FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT-PRAIRIE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE HISTORIC DISTRICT

The Commission discussed the proposed end date for the period of significance for the historic district. It's proposed as 1929/1930, and the 50-year cut-off date would be 1958, or it could be somewhere in-between. There is concern about losing properties with historic value or character after 1929. They have asked Staff to provide photos of the properties between 1930 and 1958 in the district. They have prepared the 1930s and 1940s, with the 1950s to be reviewed at their January 15 meeting.

Commissioner Lipo asked if they recommend a change in the period of significance would it affect the NHL designation? GET COMMENTS OFF TAPE Broadly there are other reasons, such as the continuation of the architectural stories, colonial revival, architects...

Commissioner Bassett-Dilley stated that it is interesting to see the evolution from the 1930s, Tudor-inspired, Deco influence. A Colonial period follows into the early 1940s. Later architecture seems so dreary, stripped down. Are they creating a museum of architecture through the 1950s or protecting a period when Frank Lloyd Wright and his contemporaries were working? He would hesitate to add the later decades. Some are bland but are characteristic of the era and aren't architecturally up to par with what the district was designated for. What are we protecting and why?

Commissioner Lipo stated that the current date is for 1929, but Wright left Oak Park in 1909 and Prairie was gone by 1919. They should get into "recent past" discussions. It is easy to be jaded by "blah" buildings due to the exuberance of earlier homes. They are leaving off the cultural history and architectural history with an earlier date. They are not Landmarks, but context for that era's development.

Chair Gilbert stated that he can see the continuation of 1920s architecture in the early 1930s. There are some new things, but a lot of Tudor Revival which was popular in the 1920s. A strong majority of 1930s buildings are similar to 1940s buildings before the war. There was a marked shift after World War II. The buildings are more plain, with ranches and infill buildings, though we'll review those on January 15. They shouldn't judge them but they're very different than what was built in the district. The war is a natural cut-off point.

They could be significant as their own district, but they don't fit well with the Wright/Prairie era. It is a glaringly different type of architecture. We want to be sensitive to the time. It is hard enough now convincing owners of Bungalows or Tudor Revival to preserve the character of their homes. They have also already set a precedent with allowing the demolition of ranches.

Commissioner Freerksen stated that 711 Thomas is exceptional. It would be nice to protect the good ones and not save the bad ones.

Chair Gilbert asked Staff to check the date for 211-213 N. Marion, as 1945 seems like an unlikely date. The end date is either based on something solid or arbitrary. He feels that 1929 is arbitrary. They should look at either the last Prairie-influenced house or at a time when there is a dramatic shift, which is WWII. They are still filling out the development of the area up to 1941. The development is piece-meal after the war.

Commissioner Susmilch agreed. They need to understand what happened after Prairie and how and why it changed. It is a logical place to stop.

Commissioner Doty agreed, but they need to say that is the reason. There needs to be a connection to the Prairie story. She quoted an article on the recent past from the Fall 2005 Forum Journal by Don Rypkema. It discussed credibility and quality in the 1950s.

Commissioner Bassett-Dilley stated that quality of design is another element linked to the Prairie school. You don't see that after the war. There was a loss of design and construction quality. He agrees with the 1941 cut-off. They still need to look closely at what is contributing and non-contributing and not just blanket to that date.

Commissioner Freerksen stated that there was a lot of crap built earlier in the century too. They've seen many projects on buildings that were contributing due to their date. Protect the era, not the crap. Can we even do that?

Chair Gilbert stated that they can, but only to a certain extent. They can exclude significantly altered properties or those that don't meet certain criteria. We can't pick and choose what we like. A few in the 1930s may have alterations enough to be non-contributing.

Commissioner Susmilch added that a building from 1915 could be non-contributing. They can determine what is contributing in a fair way.

Commissioner Lipo stated that the 1920s is 50 years prior to the 1972 National Register nomination. The current nomination talks about Wright's work in the 1930s and 1940s and the ranch house. He can see the logic for 1941, but they should use the 50-year cut-off to determine if a building is important for cultural and social history. The original name of the district was the Oak Park Historic District. There is a chance of making some properties non-contributing, but they should keep these buildings in their purview. Wright lived to 1959, and it fits into U.S. architectural history. People will always disagree with the status of a building, but 50 years is not arbitrary. They can knock some bad ones off the list and

include some ranches. What were the well-to-do, middle-class or developers building in 1955?

Chair Gilbert stated that it will help to see the 1950s properties at their next meeting. He doesn't seem many outstanding ranches with Wright's influence here. There are some cool ranches out there, but not many in Oak Park. The suggestion of going to 50 years and picking the bad ones out is a trap we don't want to fall into. They can be non-contributing only if they're altered.

Commissioner Bassett-Dilley stated that the 50-year cut-off would work against us.