

Oak Park Historic Preservation Commission
January 15, 2008 Meeting Minutes
Oak Park Village Hall, Room 101 – 7:30 pm

A. ROLL CALL

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

ABSENT: Kristen Diamond, Nick Kalogeresis

STAFF: Doug Kaarre, Urban Planner

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

The Commission continued discussion on the end date for the period of significance for the district and reviewed building photos from 1950-1958. Discussion at the previous meeting suggested 1941 may be a better end date due to the gap in construction during the war.

Commissioner Lipo asked what happened post-WWII to differentiate from buildings before the war.

Commissioner Bassett-Dilley stated that there was standardization of materials after the war that went with a new way of thinking regarding design and construction – modular, standardization to save costs. There was a mixing of systems. There was more hand-crafting pre-war and machine crafting post-war. More use of veneer after the war, which gives a different sense than solid masonry. It would have been steel and concrete with a brick/stone veneer. Materials and aesthetics are connected.

Commissioner Lipo stated that the district is an important American architectural story. Buildings in the 1950s may not be great aesthetically, but they are true to the style and period. He read a bio of 1950s architect Martin Braun. What about other 1950s architects? Ranches are tied to the Prairie style. The historic district is eclectic. You have a foursquare next to a Victorian next to a two-flat – variety. The nomination refers to or implies that building stopped by 1929 until after the 1940s which is not really true. Whose to say the 1950s buildings won't seem more important in 20 years?

Commissioner Bassett-Dilley stated that the styles and buildings of the late 19th century followed precedent, then one architect breaks the mold masterfully. Quality is the key to it all. The quality is generally very low in the 1950s – a stylish handling of production and materials. There were more building trades and craftsmen pre-war. Some 1950s examples do stand out as good examples and could be Landmarks, but that is different than including them as contributing to the district.

Commissioner Lipo stated that some 1950s buildings are attractive in their own way. It is part of the ongoing history of the community. Some are good examples or contributing, some not. The HPC needs to educate the community about architecture other than Prairie.

Non-contributing buildings can be replaced at any time by anything. The historic district allows changes all the time. Many 1950s buildings may have been built in side yards or to replace previous buildings. They could incorporate ranches as they were within Wright's lifetime. There may be more appreciation for them in 10 years.

Commissioner Doty stated that she is moving in the direction of agreeing with Commissioner Lipo. They should look at quality to determine contributing status for 1950s buildings. If that is not a good idea as suggested at the previous meeting, then she is less in favor of including the 1950s in the period of significance. Ranches are a kind of continuation of the Prairie style.

Chair Gilbert stated that it is a slippery slope to determine which buildings are non-contributing by what we don't like; it's too subjective. We would have to do that for the entire district. We need to follow the criteria for a contributing resource. There are some nice buildings between 1930 and 1958, but it's all or nothing within the period.

Commissioner Susmilch stated that they need to apply the criteria for contributing resources consistently in all decades. They can't pitch out ones they don't like.

Commissioner Freerksen stated that many of the 1950s designs as shown would be saved if included in the period of significance, even ones we may consider ugly in 2008.

Chair Gilbert stated that even some of those buildings that are simple boxes are representative of the era and would be considered contributing.

Commissioner Freerksen stated that even foundations were built differently before and after the war. You had a mule and a cart before the war that resulted in shallower basements. Today we have bulldozers.

Commissioner Lipo asked why the 1950s era does not deserve inclusion in the period of significance. Is it due to aesthetics or because it has no relation to the Prairie style or Oak Park development? Why use World War II instead of the 50-year cut-off. They exist in the historic district in Oak Park now. Is it because the architecture isn't as good? They are part of the development of the community.

Commissioner Susmilch stated that it would be a marked change from their current approach of telling the story of Oak Park development through Frank Lloyd Wright and the Prairie style. There is a big difference in pre- and post-war design, technology and materials.

Commissioner Lipo stated that they have already been reviewing 1930s and 1940s buildings without a list of contributing resources. The district's significance has always been Oak Park architecture and history led by the Prairie school. The Hasbrouck-Sprague survey led to the designation of the district, which was focused on the Prairie style, but it's always had a broader context.

Chair Gilbert stated that they have to set an end date. 50 years is a guideline to assure some perspective when reviewing the significance of a building. He thinks people are too

quick to say 50 years. It's not always the best date. There are three dates they could pick: 1) the date the very last Prairie-influenced building was constructed in the district – not sure when that is, maybe in the 1920s; 2) the 50 year cut-off of 1958; or 3) a date somewhere in-between on a legitimate breaking point where the architecture dramatically changed. World War II seemed natural – there was no construction for a few years and a radical change to the approach of design and construction afterwards.

Commissioner Bassett-Dilley stated that history tells a story of the Prairie style. This is where it happened. It's beautifully told through its early development, of the Prairie style and its influence on other buildings from an outpouring of the style, and then it spread out around the country. Oak Park is not where that Ranch story is told. The culmination of the Prairie story is told in Oak Park and probably should be the end of the period. Some time in the 1920s?

Commissioner Lipo stated that there are different layers of architecture and history before and after that help define the Prairie style.

Commissioner Bassett-Dilley stated that you need to look elsewhere for the later story.

Commissioner Lipo stated that in the district you can see how Prairie relates to other American architectural styles. The district has the opportunity to shed light on the range of architecture. Without a contributing resource list we've been looking at buildings 50 years old with integrity. They can further educate the community on the scope of American architecture in the district even through the 1950s.

Chair Gilbert stated that the Prairie school is the most significant aspect of the district but you need the context to understand it. Victorians and Revival styles were built contemporary to Prairie, before and after. They're not going to start the period of significance at the construction of the first Prairie house, nor should they end it on the last. The style fades out and is replaced by others. The question is how far beyond to go. It's true that the 1950s is part of our history. But is it part of the architectural context of this historic district? He still thinks 1941 makes the most sense. There is no real change from the late 1920s through the early 1930s, so 1929 doesn't make sense as an end date. The 1930s and the 1950s are radically different though. 1941 seems the most natural place to cut it off. He is sensitive to preserving the recent past, and if these buildings were cohesive in location they could be a historic district, but they are scattered across the district. The reality is that the best examples from the 1950s are average next to an average example from 1915: they are radically different. It would be an uphill battle to include them.

Frank Heitzman, 111 N. Marion Street, stated that ranches are descendent from the Prairie style. They have overhanging eaves and picture windows.

Chair Gilbert stated that some do, such as 301 N. Euclid which is great, but many don't.

Commissioner Moseley stated that 1950s houses are so common and not exclusive to Oak Park, not like some of their earlier housing stock.

Mr. Heitzman stated that its important to show what's before and after the Prairie style.

Commissioner Lipo stated that many of these properties are endangered. Several ranches have had second floor additions recently, and several have been demolished.

Commissioner Susmilch stated that 1950s architecture is interesting but not really part of the character of Oak Park. You don't think of Oak Park when you see it. It is a small percentage of the district – 60 out of 2,000. It's the story of Oak Park and the Prairie style.

Commissioner Bassett-Dilley stated that he counted 60 buildings from the 1950s and 32 are one-story ranches.

Commissioner Lipo stated that the Hasbrouck-Sprague survey identified around 66 Prairie style buildings, which is also a small percentage of the district. There are more influenced by the style, but numbers is not the best way to approach. The more of the story being told the better. What is the overall story? There is an NHL story and a local story.

Commissioner Moseley asked if there was a way to pick out the ranches to save.

Commissioner Bassett-Dilley stated that ranches are common in the suburbs but not in Oak Park. It's easy to dismiss the style, we all grew up with it. And it's true they are endangered. That's a good segue into their later discussion about requiring a COA for new construction. These buildings could be replaced with a Dry-vit monstrosity or beautiful new architecture. It is a strong point in favor of COAs.

Commissioner Lipo stated that Frank Lloyd Wright died in 1959 so the period date of 1958 would include his lifetime.

Chair Gilbert stated that Wright was gone from Oak Park for many years. Just because he was alive is not a valid reason to extend the period of significance. Yes, the ranch evolved from Usonian, but there is not a lot here.

Commissioner Bassett-Dilley stated that the late 1930s-early 1940s is almost purely Colonial – a true rejection of the Prairie style. It makes a good book-end.

Chair Gilbert stated that IHPA wanted 1930 but they haven't looked at the buildings of the 1930s through 1958 like the Commission has.

Commissioner Lipo stated that the nomination refers to ranches in Section 8, pages 384 and 385 as coming out of Wright's influences – that Usonian houses were the prototype of ranches. Should this be said even if we're excluding the 1950s from the period of significance? He didn't design them in Oak Park.

Chair Gilbert stated that Wright did Prairie in Oak Park but never did Usonian. It was important and influential work but not in Oak Park. The nomination should discuss Wright's full career to put him in context, but the period of significance puts the district in context.

Mr. Heitzman asked the Commission to imagine Oak Park with no ranches. There aren't many due to Oak Park being so built up, but they still made it here.

Commissioner Doty stated that they have previously discussed the fact that the outstanding examples from each era could be potential landmarks. They should be put on the Potential Landmark Inventory.

Mr. Heitzman stated that they could also do a thematic ranch district.

Chair Gilbert asked for a straw poll on the three choices for an end date for the period of significance:

- 1) A date uncertain in the 1920s as the last of the Prairie buildings constructed: None
- 2) 1941: 7 with one wavering between 1958
- 3) 1958: 1 with one wavering between 1941

They asked Staff to provide their recommendation on the date to Thomason & Associates and IHPA.