

Presentation to the Downtown Oak Park Steering Committee – September 27, 2005

By Redd Griffin

The speakers in this DVD focus on the lives and impacts of only two of many Oak Parkers who have shaped the world far beyond our borders. But architect Frank Lloyd Wright and Ernest Hemingway were among those who best articulated the gifts and potential they found here.

Hemingway's contribution was to lead in developing a modern form of language to communicate values as old as western civilization. Wright's contribution was to use modern urban industrial technology to communicate values rooted in an agrarian way of life.

Their leading spokesmen on this DVD, Wright's grandson, Eric, and Hemingway's son, Patrick, here pass on what they see as our area's influences on the older Wright and Hemingway. They touch on the architect's and author's impacts on the world, and their value to all of us now.

The words spoken here link Oak Park's past, present and future in terms of large themes that should be kept in mind when planning Downtown Oak Park as part of the Village as a whole. They are: democracy, nature and honesty.

[A video scheduled, but not shown, due to technical difficulties]

In building our community now, we must respect and save what they have done whenever we can. But, more importantly, we must reflect on the questions they raise, the issues they join and the themes they present when making decisions about our village's character, as we are doing tonight.

The ideas and values presented here are part of a continuum linking Oak Park's beginnings with our present. This heritage, properly understood and utilized, can be of great value to us now culturally, psychologically, spiritually and ultimately, financially. Our heritage has not only given us our identity, our sense of place and mission in the world. It has built our morale and has been a boon to our economic development. It is indispensable to all we think, feel and do to make Oak Park a beacon of democratic civilization.

I suggest that the grand themes of national and world history played out in our community throughout its existence be kept in mind in all further planning. These themes should be considered in the overall planning of Downtown Oak Park, the design of parcels of its open space, the styles of its buildings and landscaping and its sites providing information to visitors. Pre-eminent among these themes are: American democracy, agrarian life, urban development, and Old World and New World architectural styles.

Other themes planners should keep in mind, include the way advances in transportation triggered development and population growth. Planners should also reflect on the innovative methods Oak Parkers used to preserve the Village's heritage as development and population burgeoned. This is symbolized in Wright's Unity Temple, where the architect found new ways to give visitors a sense of the agrarian life's nature and democracy in the midst of an urbanizing world.

Both Wright and Hemingway brought out the best of what they encountered early in Oak Park:

the gifts of space, light, form, liberty and equality. These same gifts—and more--were found by early settlers and later villagers. Most came here, seeking a better life. They found a community respecting openness, nature, freedom, participation, learning, art, health, privacy, community, progress and spirituality.

Let Downtown Oak Park celebrate these gifts in planning, execution and final enjoyment.