

AT HOME WITH BARBARA AND BOB ELSNER Their house is all - Wright

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Pick a detail in Barbara Elsner's Frank Lloyd Wright home and try to tell her it looks like Prairie School design. Go ahead and try.

"You're totally wrong. Of all his houses, this reflects the Japanese most. This is not Prairie," she says emphatically. "It's post-Prairie."

Barbara Elsner wasn't always so sure about this and other aspects of the Frank Lloyd Wright home she and her husband, Bob, bought in March 1955.

Less than a month earlier, her sister-in-law had died in the middle of the night of a brain aneurysm, leaving a 10-day-old baby and a 4-year-old. The children went to live with the Elsners, who had two toddlers of their own.

"I didn't buy it because it was a Wright house," Barbara Elsner says of the east side home, built in 1916 for Frederick C. Bogk, an alderman and businessman.

"We needed a bigger house," she says. "It had the space I needed, and the price was right. You know, they were giving these away."

Sprucing up the place

And so the Elsners and their brood of four became the third owners of the Bogk house, settling into the four-bedroom home (with a fifth sitting room upstairs).

After about a year, the two children the Elsners took in went back to live with their father, and the Elsners eventually had three more children.

Barbara Elsner describes the décor of the previous owners this way: "Beer steins and terrible bed spreads."

She adds, "Fortunately, they didn't destroy anything." At the time, the home was "pretty unrecognized," she says.

That would change. Barbara Elsner saw to it, along with her husband.

In the 54 years since, Elsner and her husband have become experts on Wright. They host tours and events for visiting architects and scholars in their home, turning over any fees to another passion — preservation of Wright's American System-Built Homes on W. Burnham St., an early effort at low-cost housing. The project was started with seed money from the Barbara Meyer Elsner Foundation.

One of the homes, at 2714 W. Burnham St., is under heavy renovation but still open for tours once a month (see story on 8N).

Asian touches

Wright designed the Bogk home while he worked on the landmark Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, and Asian influences can be found all over, from a plaque depicting cranes over a built-in goldfish pond to a 17th-century Chinese painting in the dining room, chosen by Wright for the space above the built-in buffet, where it fits perfectly.

A focal point is the cast concrete figural frieze running under the front roofline.

"Some scholars say they're abstracts of Mayan gods," she says. "Or they could be Japanese. Nobody knows."

Over the years, design elements of the home revealed themselves to the Elsners.

For instance, Barbara Elsner learned that Wright liked to have a piece of sculpture at the front door and was surprised to find none in the house. Then one day, she stood on a step leading up from the understated main entrance (typical of Wright designs) and took in the view. She looked through the shelf of a built-in bookcase and discovered she could see clear across the living room to the crane wall plaque. That, she figured, was Wright's front door sculpture statement.

Tragedy strikes

The home was built at a time when Wright's personal life was attracting some attention, and not the good kind. He left his wife in 1909 and ran off to Europe with Mamah Borthwick Cheney, the wife of an Oak Park, Ill., client. A few years later, the scandalized couple moved to Wisconsin, where Wright built Taliesin (Welsh for "shining brow") on his family's land in Spring Green. The press called the home the "love bungalow."

In August 1914, while Wright was in Chicago overseeing a project, a disgruntled servant murdered Borthwick and six others, then set the home on fire.

Wright had struggled to find work, but he landed the Imperial Hotel and Bogk home projects shortly after the fire.

"No one was hiring him. He was a total disgrace," Barbara Elsner says. "That's why he spent so much time designing this."

Saving attitude

Barbara has been an ardent preservationist for more than two decades. She served on the original board of the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, a national group devoted to saving Wright homes. She is a member of the board of Frank Lloyd Wright Wisconsin, which holds its annual Wright and Like Tour on June 6.

She was a founder of what is now the Historic Water Tower Neighborhood Association and serves on the Preserve Our Parks board.

The Elsners have grown accustomed to interest in their home, from tourists and scholars to architects who've come from as far as Australia and Japan. Interest has grown this year, the 50th anniversary of Wright's death. It's also the 50th anniversary of one of his most controversial creations, the Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

Criticized at times because its spiral design made hanging artworks rather impractical, the Guggenheim toasts the anniversary with "Frank Lloyd Wright: From Within Outward," an installation exhibit of Wright projects. It runs from May through August.

Barbara Elsner says she frequently gets visitors at her door who ask, "Can we come in?" She opened the door recently to talk about her absolutely Wright home.

Q. What was your first impression of this house when you walked in?

A. I just thought it was beautiful. I had very little knowledge (of Frank Lloyd Wright). This area was so out of style — everybody was moving out. I can remember the real estate man saying, "Well, now, you can divide this house up." That's what they were promoting in this area.

Q. What did you know about Wright when you bought this house?

A. A little. I graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and, of course, there were a few Wright houses there.

Q. Have you changed anything since you moved in?

A. We all want to do things when we buy a house, right? So frequently, people buy with no knowledge and make no records.

You don't know much when you're 25, and regretfully, when we re-did the kitchen, I never took a picture of the original. We did the kitchen in 1970, with (guidance from) Taliesin (Wright's home in Spring Green is a center for

Wright preservation and education).

From a preservationist point of view, you certainly want people to live in their houses comfortably. So re-doing a kitchen is not a negative, but you want to keep historical records. Well, I didn't know that.

Q. What changes did you make to the kitchen?

A. Listen, it was a 1916 kitchen, and it was designed for maids. In its day it was fairly contemporary. We made it a family kitchen, really. With a table. There was a lot of storage (in the original kitchen), but it was across the room. I have storage now near the dishwasher. I did save all the marble (counter tops) and much of the tile on the walls — not all of it.

Q. Is there anything you would have liked to have changed but didn't feel you could because this is a Wright home?

A. I don't really believe so. Now, you must realize that basically my taste was dominated by owning this.

Q. What's your favorite spot in the house?

A. There's no answer. I view it as a work of art.

I think the best room is the dining room, because it's my own taste. The scale is very Wrightian. You see how narrow the table is? You see how wide the room is? That is Mr. Wright. The table was designed by Wright for the house. He always wanted to do everything. (The table was acquired by the Elsners from the daughter of the original owner.)

Q. How would you describe your own decorating style? It seems faithful to the pared-down contemporary feeling associated with Wright.

A. Actually, I don't know. We have a tiny house in northern Kettle Moraine. There I have '50s contemporary. I like all architecture. I like all decorative arts.

Q. This house seems full of subtle details. Any favorite elements?

A. One of the things I love is the windows. You get a gorgeous reflection, a pattern, on the ceilings, on the walls. I love the play of light.

In the Burnham house, it's the same thing. You have this tiny little bungalow, but he's got this heightened entrance, and the play of light there is incredible, in his little 800-square-foot house. . . . We are talking about genius.

Q. People talk about Wright's ability to make small spaces seem large. How has he done that here?

A. A normal house of this period, like across the street or next door, you have a center entrance, and then you have a hall. So you've divided the house in half, and that, of course, makes each room not as large.

Here you don't have any hallway, really, in the whole interior downstairs. It's all one space except for the kitchen. So that makes it feel much larger than it actually is, because we're used to having the space divided. The only wall here — interior wall — is the fireplace. Rather than having a fireplace on a wall, it's the wall.

Q. Tell me about the furniture — all contemporary, bold colors of lime green and teal blue. How did you choose it?

A. My husband wrote Wright a letter and asked if there was a landscape plan. He wrote back, "Congratulations! Great house in a great period for a great client. Go see my furniture." No landscape plan. He was very terse. . . .

At that time, Heritage Henredon built a whole line of Wright. None of those did we buy at the time — we could hardly afford the house! But subsequently they came up for auction at different places. That desk and the built-ins obviously were designed for the house. The remaining furniture in here was designed by Wright. The orange carpet is a reproduction of a Wright design, made specifically for this house.

Q. What challenges are there in living in a Frank Lloyd Wright home?

A. Upkeep — on the concrete. It's early concrete. This was a primitive mix. And, of course, we had the windows reglazed. There were never any storm windows. Just to find qualified people is not easy — who's the best plasterer,

who's the best woodwork man? You know, I'm really living in a work of art. And so, I can't violate that.

Q. Any projects in the works?

A. I hope not.

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SEE THE SIGHTS

A Frank Lloyd Wright home being renovated on W. Burnham St. is available for tours. 8N

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