

Life of stewardship Many take pride in doing their part to keep a Wright home a Wright home, but it is a commitment others can't make

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Author: WHITNEY GOULD, Staff: Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Living in a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright can be both burden and joy. You can't just pop down to Home Depot to replace, say, a broken door. Over time, you may get hemmed in by urban development. And when it comes time to sell, you might have a long wait for the right buyer.

But many of those living in homes created by the Wisconsin-born master builder (1867-1959) prefer to dwell on the upside: the quality of light, the rooms' intimacy and craftsmanship, the feeling of oneness with the environment. Some compare the experience to owning a Rembrandt: You don't so much own such a house as lovingly care for it. And that stewardship tends to transform people's lives.

"It requires a very specific kind of personality," says historian and Wright buff Jack Holzheuter. "You need a crazy, dedicated, lifelong Wright nut to sustain one of these houses."

Bob and Barbara Elsner aren't crazy, but they are undeniably dedicated.

For 50 years, the Elsners — he's 81, she's 78 — have owned the Frederick C. Bogk House, a Wright landmark built in 1916 at 2420 N. Terrace Ave. on the east side.

It's one of some 44 buildings, 38 of them houses, that Wright built in Wisconsin over a nearly 60-year period.

"I'm just the custodian; she's the curator," Bob quips, with a nod to Barbara.

In fact, their roles are inseparable.

When it comes time to replace a copper-filament light bulb in one of the Elsners' recessed, leaded-glass sconces, they both head to a supplier in Chicago. (Only copper-filament bulbs give off the soft glow that Wright wanted to achieve.)

When famous architects and art historians come to town and respectfully ask to see the widely admired house, the Elsners are only too happy to oblige.

"Who else has a house that people all over the world come to?" Bob asks. Barbara adds: "They come in with tears in their eyes."

It's easy to see why. Built for a real estate and insurance executive at a time when Wright was working on the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, the boxy, horizontal house has strong Japanese influences: a wide, overhanging hip roof, rather like that on a temple, and an elegant, tapestry-like façade whose deep brick pilasters flank art-glass windows with slanting rows of gold-leaf insets that gleam like jewels.

The interior is just as striking. From a hidden front door off the driveway, you step into a rather claustrophobic entryway, then up into a light-filled living room paneled in walnut, with an inglenook in front of the tall brick fireplace.

Much of the angular furniture was designed by Wright and executed by his Prairie School collaborator, the Milwaukee-born artist George Mann Niedecken. But the orange rug is a reproduction; the original is on loan to the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Go up a few more steps and you're in a welcoming dining room, with its long, Wright-designed walnut table and built-in sideboard, both banded with black marquetry squares. Over the years the platform-like space has doubled as a stage for the Elsner children and grandchildren to put on plays.

Everywhere you look there are little surprises worthy of a Japanese garden. Peer through a framed opening in the low bookshelf that divides the entry hall from the living room and you'll see a functioning goldfish pond on the other side of the room, guarded by a stone plaque incised with two stylized storks.

"It took me 20 years to notice that view," Bob, a retired business executive, says.

Except for the couple's Arts and Crafts pottery, there is very little art in the house. Wright, for whom architecture was the highest art, doubtless would approve.

"That's just my taste," Barbara says. "Like Wright, I don't like clutter."

Relaxing in style

Yes, there are headaches. Those light bulb odysseys, for example. And the deteriorating silk tassel hanging from a leaded-glass chandelier in the dining room: Finding a replacement for that could be tricky. Then there's the inadequate garage. And the boxy, chartreuse chairs designed for Henredon by Olgivanna Lloyd Wright, the architect's wife. "A bit too '60s," Barbara says, laughing. Don't even get her started on the taxes and insurance costs.

But for the Elsners, who raised five children in this four-bedroom house, the pleasures of living with Wright by far outweigh the drawbacks. They love how the tall, narrow windows let in just enough light; they treasure the way Wright detailed even the smallest spaces. The house lets them feel both connected to the city and in a private world apart from it.

And they have never felt as if they were living in a museum. Even the clutter-conscious Barbara allows, "It accepts mess."

The couple modernized the kitchen about 45 years ago, saving the original marble countertops and the white subway tiles over the sink. And, because the house never had storm windows and the single panes frosted up, they installed thermal windows in the 1970s.

As they have learned how to make Wright work for them, the Elsner family has in turn been shaped by his philosophy of an organic architecture in sync with the earth. All of their children developed an interest in art and architecture. Bob pursues a longtime passion for restoration ecology at the couple's 150-acre vacation getaway in Sheboygan County.

And Barbara is a fierce lioness for preservation, with a particular zeal for saving Wright houses and older neighborhoods like her own, a historic district. High on her agenda right now is making sure that an upcoming expansion of nearby Columbia St. Mary's Hospital doesn't overwhelm its tree-lined setting—almost a replay of a struggle she waged in the 1970s.

"If the neighborhood goes, that would be real trouble for everyone," she says. "You can't just think in terms of saving a house; you have to save what's around it."

For Peter Stephenson and Mary Massey, owners of a Wright house in Madison, that battle has already been lost.

Once the couple had splendid views of Lakes Monona and Mendota from the roof garden of their house on N. Butler St. just east of Capitol Square — the plain, squarish dwelling with banded windows that Wright designed in 1903 for political leader and real estate entrepreneur Robert Lamp. Stephenson and Massey could also see breathtaking sunrises.

Now, after 22 years in the house, those views are blocked by massive state office buildings and apartments.

"They've pretty much destroyed the space," Stephenson said ruefully.

While others may thrive on living with Wright, he sees mostly negatives: tiny bedrooms, inadequate storage, no garage and setbacks so tight that it is all but impossible for workers to squeeze in on either side of the house to make repairs.

"We're just surviving in it," he says. "If someone doesn't just stroll up and say they want to buy it, we'll probably start to do something serious" about getting the house ready to sell.

"It's not everyone's cup of tea," Maureen Greenberg says of living in a Wright house. "It more or less takes over your whole life."

But Greenberg, whose husband, Maurice, built a Wright-designed house cantilevered into the side of a hill near Dousman in 1955-'56, wouldn't trade the experience for anything. Yes, the bathrooms and closets are too small; there are only two bedrooms. And yes, repairs cost a fortune. Also, there was sometimes a tension between Maurice's desire to keep the treetop house "pure" and Maureen's urge to put her own stamp on it.

"But you can't come into these houses and gussy them up," Maureen says she learned. "You have to leave them alone." In exchange, the house offers its own rewards: "You get up in the morning and the sun is shining through the house, and everything all flows together so beautifully. It really is like owning a piece of art."

It's not easy to part with such a treasure. But for the English-born Maureen, a retired cancer researcher whose husband died in February 2004, the house has become too much for one person to maintain.

She recently sold the property, along with 11 acres of its Kettle Moraine setting, for \$1 million to a Wright buff who plans to add on the bedroom wing that Maurice Greenberg never got around to building.

One consolation in letting it go, says Maureen: "It will always be known as the Greenberg House."

Living heritage

Betty Iber remembers the day in 1956 that Wright came out to inspect the 5-acre site where he would build a house on the edge of a creek in Stevens Point for her and her husband, Frank, a doctor.

There was Wright in his flowing cloak and porkpie hat. "This is where it goes," he said with typical certitude.

The architect was equally adamant about design details.

"He didn't want long windows," Iber recalls. "I had to fight for those. And I wanted a mud room. He said no. And he didn't believe in garages, only carports. But we had to have a garage. We won that one."

The limestone and mahogany house, built on a diagonal, would present further challenges over the years. The mahogany cladding had to be replaced twice, the cedar-shake roof three times. The inadequate kitchen was also replaced.

But Iber, now widowed, understands what it means to be part of the special fraternity of Wright-house owners. They all bought into a way of life that has brought them closer to the land, and the transcendent vision of their architect.

"The house doesn't just sit on the property like a big glob," she says. "It becomes a part of everything around it. Wright knew what he was doing. He thought he was the best, and in many ways he was."

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