

About the Robie House

About Frank Lloyd Wright

America's best-known architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, was born in 1867 in Richland Center, Wisconsin. His mother, a schoolteacher, surrounded his crib with drawings of cathedrals, determined her son would become a great architect. She gave him a set of wooden Froebel Blocks when he was nine years old—a gift he later said taught him lifelong

lessons in geometry and design. As a boy, Wright enjoyed art, books and music, but the rural Wisconsin landscape inspired in him a deep love of nature.



After studying engineering, Wright set out for Chicago in 1887. After working for a few prominent architects, including Louis Sullivan, he opened his own architectural office in 1893. This early part of his career, up until 1909, is often called his “first golden age,” because it was a period of intense creativity. During this time, Wright designed more than 125 buildings—a quarter of his life's work—and invented a totally new form of architecture, the Prairie style, which is the style of the Robie House.

The Prairie style of architecture reflects the Midwestern terrain with earthen colors and flat, horizontal lines. After Wright made the style famous, many other architects adopted it, sprinkling the country with variations of the Prairie house.

Wright is the most influential figure in American architecture. He designed more than 1,100 projects, nearly half of which were built. He died in 1959. Few artists in any field have matched his energy, productivity or imagination.

The Prairie Style

The Robie House of 1910 is generally considered to be Wright's “best” Prairie style work. This style is characterized by a dominating horizontal axis, banded windows, and a spacious and open interior plan. The exterior is dominated by a low hipped roof, simple building materials (mainly brick, wood, and stucco) and suggests a union of the site and the building.

Homes like these typically gave their owners great vistas from the many windows and balconies. Open spaces on the first and second floor of the homes' interiors were intended to continue to the outside through these windows. The relationship between architecture and nature—one of the most important influences on Wright—is emphasized through the open and flowing design of the Prairie style.

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Construction of Robie House

In 1908, Frederick C. Robie, a successful Chicago businessman, decided to have a “sturdy, functional and strikingly modern” home constructed for his family in Hyde Park, an elegant Chicago neighborhood and home to the campus of the University of Chicago.

Robie wanted a house with an abundance of light and great views of the surrounding neighborhood, yet one that also maintained his family’s privacy. He didn’t like small confining rooms and thought that flowing spaces were essential in a well designed home. He soon realized Frank Lloyd Wright was the architect who could provide these elements; they were all part of the Prairie style that Wright developed.

The Robie House site helped determine Frank Lloyd Wright’s plan. The corner lot is three times as long as it is wide. These dimensions caused Wright to think of the home in terms of long, narrow rectangles. In fact, the home consists primarily of two long and narrow “vessels,” each similar in shape to the hull of a ship, one set on top and slightly off-center of the other. When viewed from above, the two vessels are easy to see; however, from the street, each blends into the other, forming what looks like a single, continuous horizontal structure.

The Robie House is constructed of red Roman brick and was one of the first residences to incorporate steel beams into its design. These strong beams were necessary to create the cantilevered balconies, which appear to be suspended in mid-air.

The ground floor of the home was designed to take the wear and tear of everyday use, with a billiard room, playroom, and service areas. The first floor contains the home’s formal areas, including the living and dining rooms. These stretch in opposite directions from a central fireplace, a typical device in Wright-designed homes. The first floor also contains a kitchen and guest room. The second floor contains the private family spaces: three bedrooms surrounding a central hall. The first floor features a long balcony that stretches nearly the entire length of the home.

When clients like the Robies asked Frank Lloyd Wright to design a home, they received more than just a house. Wright typically also provided designs for furniture, lighting fixtures, wall hangings, rugs, and, in some cases, even dishes and clothing. Frank Lloyd Wright strove to create organic architecture and relied on such detailed instructions to create a complete environment. Though Wright himself never fully defined organic architecture, it is an approach to design that tries to unite—or relate—all the elements of a structure, such as its site, materials, ornament and even the human users. Of course, achieving perfectly organic architecture was difficult even for Frank Lloyd Wright.

History of the Robie House

Around the spring of 1910, Frederick C. Robie, his wife Lora Hieronymus, son Fred Jr. and daughter Lorraine moved into their newly built house. Around that time Robie's father became ill and he learned that his father had borrowed a great deal of money to finance Robie's new business ventures. Before his father passed-way, Robie made a promise to repay all loans. He spent the next two years selling businesses and settling debts.

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Robie sold the house and a majority of the custom-designed furnishings to David Lee Taylor in December 1911. Taylor bought the house as a Christmas present for his wife, Ellen, and their six sons. His Christmas card read: "To Momma/Our \$50,000 house/Pop."

In October 1912, Taylor died and his widow sold the house that November to Marshall Dodge Wilber and his wife, Isadora. They, along with their two daughters Marcia and Jeanette, moved into the house on December 3, 1912. Marcia graduated from University of Chicago with a degree in philosophy. She died in 1916 at the age of 25. The Wilbers had a series of interior photographs taken that same year. These are the first known interior photos since 1910.

In January 1926, the Wilbers sold the Robie House to the Chicago Theological Seminary. The seminary used the house as a dormitory and dining hall for married students.

In 1941 the Chicago Theological Seminary announced plans to demolish the Robie House and erect a new, larger dormitory on the site. A letter-writing campaign to save the house was organized and Wright wrote a letter calling the house "a source of world-wide architectural inspiration." The house was saved.

Again in 1957 the Chicago Theological Seminary announced plans to demolish the Robie house to build a larger dormitory. Frank Lloyd Wright, at the age of 90, visited the house to draw attention to the need to save the building from demolition.

Demolition of the Robie House was stopped when William Zeckendorf, president of a New York-based development firm, bought the house from the Chicago Theological Seminary in August 1958. He donated the house to the University of Chicago in 1963.

The Robie House received two special distinctions. In April 1957 it was the first building to be declared a Chicago Landmark as part of the newly formed Commission on Chicago Architectural Landmarks. In November 1963 the house was certified a United States Registered National Historic Landmark. It was the first national landmark in the city of Chicago and the first to be selected solely on the basis of its architectural merit.

Robie House Pictures

The great thing about the Robie House in *The Wright 3* is that it really exists! See where Tommy dug up the fish, the bedroom window where the super-sleuths escaped and find the invisible man. All of these pictures, and more, are available at

<http://www.wrightplus.org/robiehouse/wright3/wright3.html>