

HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT
AMERICAN SYSTEM BUILT HOMES HISTORIC DISTRICT

I. NAME

Historic: American System Built Homes Historic District

Common: Burnham Street Historic District

II. LOCATION

Street Address: 1835 South Layton Boulevard
2714, 2722, 2724-26, 2728-30, 2732-34 West Burnham Street

Legal Description: Leander Comstock subdivision in NE ¼ SEC 1-6-21 Block 1, lots,
6,7,8 and 9

III. CLASSIFICATION

Historic District

IV. OWNER

Multiple

V. YEAR BUILT

1915-1916

Architect: Frank Lloyd Wright

VI. DESCRIPTION

A. General Character

The six houses that comprise the district are all located on the north side of the 2700 block of West Burnham Street in a modest, working class, early twentieth century residential area of single-family and duplex bungalow style houses located about three miles southwest of the central business district. The district is distinguished by the similarity in design of the structures, since the same architect designed all in the early twentieth century Prairie Style. The four duplexes were originally identical structures, while the two single-family houses share a common design vocabulary. The houses are sited in equal distance back from the sidewalk behind a narrow front lawn and are spaced very close together with only a few feet between them.

B. Architectural Character

The six structures are all flat or low-hip-roofed buildings originally clad in stucco with banded wood casement windows and wood board trim. All have wide overhanging eaves and strongly rectilinear massing emphasized with board trim. Four of the buildings are two-story, flat-roofed, stuccoed duplexes that were originally identical in design. Each of these long, narrow houses features a projecting front block fenestrated with a group of three casement windows with boxed-out planting boxes beneath the sills of both the first and second story windows. Adjacent to the projecting front block is a recessed open staircase to the second story that rises to a cantilevered open porch at the second story level containing the entrance to the upper unit. The entrance to the first floor unit is tucked under the cantilevered porch on the side of the house. Board trim unifies the sills of the wide bands of windows and decoratively outlines the fenestration on the front. The broad fascia boards provide further horizontal emphasis. All of the duplexes originally had stucco exteriors, but one, 2724-26 West Burnham Street, was resided with aluminum siding in 1980.

In addition to the four duplexes, there are two, one-story cottages built at the same time. "Cottage A," as it was originally identified, is located on the northwest corner of South Layton Boulevard and West Burnham Street. This simple rectangular cottage is a low-ground hugging structure that has a hipped tile roof and broad overhanging eaves. The focal point of the exterior is the entrance tucked into the cutaway corner, which is emphasized by a broad, stone chimney pylon and an open terrace boarded by a low masonry planter. The horizontal design emphasis of the structure is further expressed through the use of broad bands of casement windows. Originally the exterior was finished in stucco with board trim, but in 1956 it was resided with precast coral stone. The glazed tile is a replacement for the original asphalt roofing. The originally open side porch has been glazed for year round use.

"Cottage B" is located at 2714 West Burnham Street immediately to the west of Cottage A. It is a small, rectangular, flat-roofed, stuccoed structure. The low roof monitor, the wide board fascia, the broad bands of casement windows, and the board trim unifying the windowsills provide the horizontal design emphasis. The exterior of the structure has remained relatively unaltered since its construction except for the glazing of the originally open front porch with casement windows in 1939.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE

The American System Built Homes Historic District is architecturally significant as an important surviving early experiment in low cost, standardized construction by master architect Frank Lloyd Wright. The district is believed to be a unique demonstration project undertaken by Wright during his Prairie Style phase manifesting relatively early in his career his lifelong interest in designing a housing system that could make his innovative housing concepts available to the middle-class at a reasonable cost. There are no other known urban developments of this type by Wright incorporating both small, single-family houses and duplexes. The buildings themselves are fine examples of Prairie Style design.

VIII. HISTORY

The houses were built in a newly developing section of the city at the southeast corner of a then recently subdivided former celery farm know as the Comstock tract that extended from Lapham Street on the north to Burnham Street on the south between South Layton Boulevard and South 31st Street. Arthur L. Richards, a real estate developer, acquired these lots through one of his real estate holding companies. They were transferred to his City Real Estate Company, which as the entity that built and originally owned the subject houses.

Arthur L. Richards was born in Milwaukee in 1877, the grandson of pioneer settler Daniel Hamilton Richards, who established the City's first newspaper in 1836. Arthur Richards was active in real estate and construction in the early years of this century, developing both houses and hotels. He was involved in the formation of the Lake Geneva Hotel Company in 1911 and engaged Frank Lloyd Wright as architect in November of that year. Thereafter, he apparently promoted Wright as an architect, possibly attempting to secure commissions for him in Milwaukee. Between 1911 and 1917, Wright designed a number of projects for associates of Richards including unbuilt houses for Abram Esbenshade (1911, Edward Schroeder (1911), and William J. Kellogg (1913, as well as an unexecuted restaurant for Charlie Toy (1915) and the Munkwitz Apartments, which were built in 1917 (razed). Richards' friend, Frederick C. Bogk, had Wright design the house that he later had built at 2420 N. Terrace Avenue in 1916-17. Curiously, Richards never seems to have had Wright design a house for him.

The American System Built Homes on Burnham Street were constructed as a speculative real estate venture by Richards' City Real Estate Company between November of 1915 and July of 1916 from plans developed by Wright between 1911 and 1914. It apparently was believed that the daringly different new houses would create a sensation and there would be a public demand for similar houses to be built in Milwaukee and elsewhere. Richards must have had great faith in the popular appeal of Wright's design work because he executed a contract with Wright to become the world manufacturer and distributor to sell American System Build Homes through a dealer organization Richards would set up. The intent was that local dealers would build demonstration units and then arrange for the construction of additional homes for private homeowners on their lots using local contractors. The Richards Company would obtain additional plans from Wright for the local dealers as needed. Apparently the popular appeal of the already rapidly fading Prairie System Built houses are believed to have been constructed, none which were in Milwaukee except for the now demolished Munkwitz Flats. The Burnham Street houses were apparently rented until the early 1920s, when they were sold to individual owners.

It is known that Wright took an interest in low cost housing systems in the early 1900s and started developing plans. Demonstration houses were designed for E. C. Waller of Chicago, Illinois as early as 1908, but never built. Wright's studio was working on a number of plans for different model houses for the American System by 1911.

Antonin Raymond was working as a draftsman for Frank Lloyd Wright during the crucial years from 1912 to 1916 when the American System Built Homes were being designed. He recalled in his 1973 autobiography his involvement in the project. ". . . We worked on a prefabricated scheme for small residences, which was a predecessor of so many projects done by others in later years. Although the work accomplished on this problem

was prodigious, it never amounted to anything serious as far as actual execution concerned. Wright visualized the component parts of the structure to be delivered on the job site, some precut and some prefabricated. The module was three feet, an idea apparently originating from his experiences and observation on one of his trip to Japan. Two-by-fours, inch planks, stucco, and plaster were the basic materials. The prefabricated scheme shows Wright in the amazing capacity of combining characteristics of a true artist with those of a shrewd businessman.

“Several models were actually designed, and I was kept busy drawing pages for the catalog, which was actually produced by a woodcut process from Japan . . .”¹

Wright himself discussed the American System Built Homes concept in an article that appeared in the Western Architect magazine in 1916. “The idea{in} back of the American System has been in my head for years . . . They are developed according to a principal. They grow from the inside out, just as trees or flowers grow. They have that integrity . . . I don’t want any mistakes about this new ‘System.’ These buildings are not in any sense the ready cut buildings we have all heard of where a little package of material is sold to be stuck together in any fashion. The American System Built House is not already cut house, but a house built by an organization, systematized in such a way that the result is guaranteed [to] the fellow that buys the house . . .”²

The 1920s and early 1930s were hard years for Wright, but he continued to explore new technologies that could be used to reduce construction costs. Wright returned to his long interest in standardized, low cost housing in the later 1930s and explored the possibilities using new building materials and methods. The innovative small houses of this late phase of his career, his Usonian period, are much better known today than the American System Built Homes, to which they are conceptually related.

Bibliography

The historic resource material used in this report is derived from original research contained in the “American System Built Homes-Burnham Street District Nation Register Nomination” prepared by Shirley DuFresne McArthur and dated January 15, 1985.

IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the American System Built Homes Historic District be designated as a result of its fulfillment of criteria e-5, e-6, e-7, and e-8 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 308-81.2.e.

¹ Antonin Raymond, An Autobiography (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1973).

² Frank Lloyd Wright, “The American System of Housebuilding.” Western Architect, Vol. XXIV, Sept., 1916, pp. 121-123.

X. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

The following preservation guidelines represent the principal concerns of the Historic Preservation Commission regarding this historic designation. However, the Commission reserves the right to make final decisions based upon particular design submissions. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or the restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

A. Guideline for Rehabilitation

The American System Built Homes Historic District is important as a fine collection of Prairie style buildings designed as a unified grouping by master architect Frank Lloyd Wright using a common palette of materials and design elements. These guidelines are based upon those contained in Section 308-81(10) of the historic preservation ordinance. These guidelines are not intended to restrict an owner's use of his/her property, but to serve as a guide for making changes that will be sensitive to the architectural integrity of the structure and appropriate to the overall character of the district.

1. Roofs

- a. Retain the original roof shape. Dormers, skylights and solar collector panels may be added to roof surfaces if they do not visually intrude upon those elevations visible from the public right-of-way. Avoid making changes to the roof shape that would alter the building height, roofline, pitch or gable orientation.
- b. Retain the original roofing materials wherever possible. Avoid using new roofing materials that are inappropriate to the style and period of the building and neighborhood.
- c. Replace deteriorated roof coverings with new materials that match the old in size, shape, color and texture. Avoid replacing deteriorated roof covering with new materials that differ to such an extent from the old in size, shape, color and texture so that the appearance of the building is altered.

2. Exterior Finishes

- a. Masonry
 - (i) Unpainted brick or stone should not be painted or covered. Avoid painting or covering natural stone and unpainted brick. This is likely to be historically incorrect and could cause irreversible damage if it was decided to remove the paint at a later date.
 - (ii) Repoint defective mortar by duplicating the original in color, style, texture and strength. Avoid using mortar colors and pointing styles that were unavailable or not used when the building was constructed.

- (iii) Clean masonry only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible. Sandblasting brick or stone surfaces is prohibited. This method of cleaning erodes the surface of the material and accelerates deterioration. Avoid the indiscriminate use of chemical products that could have an adverse reaction with the masonry materials, such as the use of acid on limestone or marble.
- (iv) Repair or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the old as closely as possible. Avoid using new material that is inappropriate or was unavailable when the building was constructed, such as artificial cast stone or fake brick veneer. Consider removing the cast stone veneer from 1835 South Layton Boulevard and restoring the stucco.

b. Stucco

Repair stucco with stucco mixture duplicating the original as closely as possible in appearance and texture.

c. Wood

- (i) Retain original material, whenever possible. Avoid the removal of architectural features that are in most cases an essential part of the building's character and appearance.
- (ii) Repair or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the appearance of the old as closely as possible. Avoid covering architectural features with new materials that are inappropriate or were unavailable when the building was constructed such as artificial stone, brick veneer, asbestos or asphalt shingles, vinyl or aluminum siding or composition panels. Consider removing the siding from 2724-26 West Burnham Street and restoring the wood and stucco.

3. Windows

- a. Retain existing window and door openings that are visible from the public right-of-way. Retain the original configurations of panes, sash, lintels, keystones, sills, architraves, pediments, hoods, doors, shutters and hardware. Avoid making additional openings or changes in the principal elevations by enlarging or reducing window or door openings to fit new stock window sash or new stock door panes or sash. Avoid discarding original doors and door hardware when they can be repaired or reused.
- b. Respect the stylistic period or periods a building represents. If replacement of window sash or doors is necessary, the replacement should duplicate the appearance and design of the original window sash or door. Avoid using inappropriate sash and

door replacements such as unpainted galvanized aluminum storm and screen window combinations. Avoid the filling in or covering of openings with materials like glass-block or the installation of plastic or metal strip awnings or fake shutters that are not in proportion to the openings or that are historically out of the character with the building. Avoid using modern style window units such as horizontal sliding sash in place of double-hung sash or the substitution of units with glazing configurations not appropriate to the style of the building.

4. Trim and Ornamentation

- a. There shall be no changes to the existing trim or ornamentation except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. Replacement features shall match the original member in scale, design, color and material.

5. Additions

Additions are not recommended. If unavoidable, make additions, which harmonize with the existing building architecturally, and which are located so as not to be visible from the public right-of-way, if at all possible. Avoid making additions which are unsympathetic to the original structure and visually intrude upon the principal elevations.

B Guidelines for Streetscapes

The visual character of the streetscape in the district is maintained by the general consistency of the blockfaces in terms of materials, scale, siting and density. This has resulted in a compact, cohesive building stock with no intrusions that detract from the district's historic character.

1. Use traditional landscaping, fencing, signage and street lighting that is compatible with the character and period of the district. Avoid introducing landscape features, fencing, street lighting or signage that are inappropriate to the character of the district.

A. Guidelines for New Construction

It is important that additional new construction be designed so as to harmonize with the character of the district.

1. Siting

New construction must reflect the traditional siting of buildings in American System Built Homes Historic District. This includes setback, spacing between buildings, the orientation of openings to the street and neighboring structures, and the relationship between the main building and accessory buildings.

2. Scale

Overall building height and bulk; the expression of major building divisions including foundation, body and roof; and, individual building components such as porches, overhangs and fenestration must be compatible with the surrounding structures.

3. Form

The massing of new construction must be compatible with the surrounding buildings. The profiles of roofs and building elements that project and recede from the main block must express the same continuity established by the historic structures.

4. Materials

The building materials that are visible from the public right-of-way should be consistent with the colors, textures, proportions, and combinations of cladding materials traditionally used in American System Built Homes Historic District. The physical composition of the materials may be different from that of the historic materials, but the same appearance should be maintained.

B. Guidelines for Demolition

Because of the exceptional architectural significance of these structures, demolition will generally not be permitted unless a structure is damaged beyond repair by fire or other natural causes. Although demolition is not encouraged and is generally not permissible, there may be instances when demolition may be acceptable if approved by the Historic Preservation Commission. The following guidelines, with those found in subsection 9(h) of the ordinance, shall be taken into consideration by the Commission when reviewing demolition requests.

1. Condition

Demolition requests may be granted when it can be clearly demonstrated that the condition of a building or a portion thereof is such that it constitutes an immediate threat to health and safety.

2. Importance

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building is of historical or architectural significance or displays a quality of material and craftsmanship that does not exist in other structures in the area.

3. Location

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building contributes to the neighborhood and the general street appearance and has a positive affect on other buildings in the area.

4. Potential for Restoration

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building is beyond economically feasible repair.

5. Additions

Consideration will be given to whether or not the proposed demolition is a later addition that is not in keeping with the original design of the structure or does not contribute to its character.

6. Replacement

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building is to be replaced by a compatible building of similar age, architectural style and scale or by a new building that would fulfill the same aesthetic function in the area as did the old structure (see New Construction Guidelines).

E. Signs

The installation of any permanent exterior sign other than those now in existence shall require the approval of the Commission. Approval will be based on the compatibility of the proposed sign with the historic and architectural character of the building.