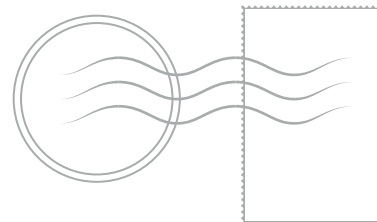


POSTCARD

Chicago



David Whitley explores some of Chicago's best low-rise architecture on the Frank Lloyd Wright trail

For a city so famous for its skyscrapers, it's ironic that the most-celebrated Chicago architect was defiantly low-rise. Frank Lloyd Wright never attempted to reach for the skies, and it is fitting that his biggest impact was in Oak Park, an archetypal model of pleasant, leafy suburbia.

Lloyd Wright designed several buildings in Oak Park – which can be strung together in a walking trail – but the key place to start is his home and studio. From 1889 to 1909, he based himself here, adding the studio in 1898.

Tours here show off how inherently organic Lloyd Wright's approach was. Wherever possible, fixtures and furniture are carefully integrated, benches are built into the alcoves created by the bay windows and enlarged passageways rather than doors lead from room to room.

It feels oddly dark and claustrophobic inside, though – ceilings are low, and the natural green and brown colour palette subdues any brightness that might seep in through the windows. He uses lowered ceilings with recessed lighting covered by rice paper and wooden fretwork panels, while the fireplace is given a central position – it is designed to be the focal point and emotional heart of the home.

Elsewhere, Japanese block prints are on display – Lloyd Wright collected 10,000 of them, and he liked them for "the elimination of the insignificant". The Japanese influences made their way into his more decorative work – furniture, lamps, carved motifs – and are evidence that the Prairie School wasn't solely the product of the prairies.

Arguably Lloyd Wright's single most impressive work in Chicago, however, is Frederick C Robie House. On the south side, this was the first building to be declared a National Historic Landmark based on its architectural qualities. And while it is often considered the definitive example of the Prairie Style, it hasn't got the spacious grounds to fully sprawl out.

Construction began in 1909, near the end of Lloyd Wright's stint in Oak Park, and the restoration of the building to its former glory was completed in 2019. At the time, neighbours reckoned it looked like a battleship from the outside. But it's most impressive inside, particularly the living area, which is one giant room partitioned by dividers. Again, the focus is drawn to the hearth, but there's such a wealth of detail to enjoy as well. The art windows are adorned with stylised prairie grass designs. Window lights are done in the style of what became Lloyd Wright's signature – a circle, within a square, cut through by a cross. Sumptuous wooden ceiling trim and arresting high-backed chairs complete a distinctive picture.

And that's the thing with Lloyd Wright. His style evolved over the years, but it is always strikingly different and unmistakable. **TW**



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TOP: A house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in Oak Park, Illinois
 ABOVE: Unity Temple, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and built 1905-08

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