

Architectour of Chicago

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US architect Philip Johnson's 'corncobs' for Bertrand Goldberg's Marina City in Chicago

Standing across the road from Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House, you can see how it might have fazed visitors in 1910, the year of its completion. "There you are arriving in your horse-drawn cab," says Jim, our guide, "but where do you go? Where's the front door?" For in 1910 the 28-year-old Frederick C Robie had decided that horse-drawn transport was already a thing of the past. The design he commissioned from Wright included a garage for not one but three cars.

Located in Hyde Park (the area around Chicago University), the Robie House is still a showstopper. Long and low, with dramatic cantilevered overhangs, the house is Wright's most elegant rendering of the Prairie style. Inside, the Prairie themes unfold before you: the free-flowing living space, the secure central hearth, the uninterrupted ribbon of window connecting the room to the world outside.

Changes have been made over the years but the house is now being restored to the original design in time for its centenary next year – a date that, in the 1950s, it seemed unlikely to see. Back then the house was owned by the Chicago Theological Seminary, which seemed bent on demolishing it. Thankfully, there was an international outcry. The 90-year-old Wright joined the campaign to save it, remarking: "It goes to show the danger of entrusting anything spiritual to the clergy."

The world knows Frank Lloyd Wright as one of the 20th century's greatest architects, but, for many Americans, his melodramatic private life looms equally large. Nancy Horan's novel *Loving Frank* shot to the top of the 2007 New York Times bestseller list – and the real-life events it is based on amount to a terrible tale. In 1909, with his career beginning to soar, Wright left his wife and six children for Mamah Cheney, the wife of one of his clients, and the pair headed for Berlin to escape the scandal. On their return from Europe, Wright built a home for them in his native Wisconsin. But, not long after they moved in, one of the domestic staff suffered a mental breakdown and set the place alight. Mrs Cheney, two of her children and several of Wright's students perished in the



Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House

blaze. Wright married again in the 1920s but his new love died soon afterwards in a sanatorium. He rebuilt Taliesin East, his Wisconsin home, only to see it destroyed by fire for a second time.

These were desperate years for Wright. Hounded by the press and with commissions drying up, his career seemed finished. Yet, somehow he rebounded and would continue to roll out path-breaking designs for another 30 years. He didn't design the Guggenheim in New York until he was in his 80s. Chicago, however, was where he first made his mark.

Besides Wright, the city was home to Daniel Burnham (who designed the Flatiron Building in New York, and whose 1909 plan for Chicago gave the city the green spaces that make it so habitable today) and Wright's early employer Louis Sullivan, the "father of the skyscraper". In the 1930s, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was based there too. It is as if these men set a standard that the architects who've followed feel they must live up to. For, compared with New York, Chicago has relatively few mediocre skyscrapers built between 1960 and 1990. Philip Johnson's homage to Burnham and Sullivan at 190 South LaSalle and Bertrand Goldberg's riverside Marina City, known affectionately as "the corncobs", are just two of the impressive creations from that time.

Downtown near the Chicago Board of Trade on a Sunday, no sooner had I pressed my nose to the glass to peer into a fabulously ornate art deco lobby than a friendly security guard was gesticulating to me to come inside. Chicago is *the* place to learn about American architecture – not only are there dozens of tours (by boat or on foot), with fantastically erudite docents (guides) – but every Chicagoan seems eager to encourage you, too.

The Great Fire of 1871 flattened four square miles of the city and unleashed architectural creativity for decades to come. I was thrilled to find that I could stay in the very building that laid the template for the modern skyscraper. Designed by Burnham's colleague Charles Atwood, the 14-storey Reliance Building – now beautifully restored as the Hotel Burnham – must have amazed people when it was completed in 1895. With its revolutionary glass-and-steel frame, three-part bay windows and terracotta panels, it's a classic example of the Chicago School style. Upstairs, I kept expecting Sam Spade to emerge through one of the mahogany and frosted-glass doors, but it was doctors, not private eyes, who for many years resided there. Still in evidence, up near the ceiling, are the rows of cabinets where the drugs were locked away.

From downtown, I took the subway to Oak Park, where Wright lived and designed many houses before running off with Mrs Cheney. The area is home, too, to his beguiling Unity Temple. Dating from 1906, its weighty concrete exterior belies the lightness of the space Wright created inside. "Unity Church is where I thought I had it ... This idea that the reality of a building no longer consisted of walls and roof, so the sense of freedom began which today ... we call organic architecture," he said later. In his wonderful book *The Master Builders*, the architect Peter Blake points out that in the Unity Temple, Wright, "almost as an afterthought", laid the foundations for De Stijl, the Dutch artistic movement that expressed a new ideal of harmony and order: "Whenever one looks into the auditorium, one can see Mondrian's paintings – a dozen years before Mondrian!"

Too late to join a tour of Wright's house and studio, I set out to explore the neighbourhood armed with a map and audio-guide. It was one of those moments when you wonder what a Martian would make of the scene. Few locals were out and about but, everywhere, there were little knots of people, like myself, poring over maps and struggling with temperamental audios. I felt rather dispirited and later realised why. From the outside, Wright's buildings can be quite dour: to appreciate what he was trying to do it's essential to go inside.

Luckily, I could do just that at the Charnley-Persky house in Lincoln Park. Built in 1901, and sometimes known as "the first modern house in America", the design was a collaboration between Wright and Sullivan. The front door opens on to a three-storey atrium, unheard of in a non-commercial building. Was this Wright beginning to break up "the box"? It's unclear: experts still argue over who did what. From there, I explored the lakeshore to the north until my legs gave out, then returned along Michigan Avenue (Chicago's Fifth Avenue), timing it to catch the lights coming on across the city from the bar on the 95th floor of the John Hancock Center.

Whatever the angle or time of day, Chicago's skyline is exciting. Though at least one big project is now on hold because of the recession, it's hard to imagine that, two or three years hence, the city won't be bringing out the best in architects once again. Recent developments would suggest so. Each

morning, from my corner room at the Burnham, I watched the sun rise over Frank Gehry's gleaming bandshell erected in 2004 in Millennium Park. There's Trump Tower: in contrast to its glitzy counterpart in New York, it's a model of taste and simplicity. And Renzo Piano's new wing at the Chicago Art Institute, which opened in May. Graceful and elegant, with cantilevered overhangs, it makes a clear nod to Frank Lloyd Wright.

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Details

Robie House, tel: +1 773834 1847

Hotel Burnham, tel: +1 312 782 1111; www.burnhamhotel.com

Unity Temple, tel: +1 708383 8873

Wright's Home and Studio, tel: +1 708848 1976; www.wrightplus.org

Charnley-Persky House, tel: +1 312915 0105

Chicago Architecture Foundation offers tours, by boat, bus and on foot, tel: +1 312922 3432; www.architecture.org

Where to eat

Charlie Trotter will keep you guessing about some ingredients in the pricey but delicious tasting menus at his eponymous Lincoln Park restaurant, tel: +1 773248 6228; www.charlietrotters.com

Medici is near the Robie House. Try a Cajun chicken sandwich on the sunny upstairs terrace, tel: +1 773667 7394; www.medici57.com

Vivo, in the West Loop on Randolph Street, is a laidback modern Italian, tel: +1 312733 3379; www.vivochicago.com

Sushi Wabi, its Japanese neighbour, is equally inviting, tel: +1 312563 1224; www.sushiwabi.com

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