

Averting a Wright Wrong

by Douglas Martin

Mason City, IA

Adolph Luker, a retired hardware company employee and amateur woodworker, is pleased to help out. "Beats staying home twiddling my thumbs," he says.

Mr. Luker sits in the solarium of a restored 1908 Frank Lloyd Wright house collecting \$3 admissions and selling postcards to a steady stream of visitors. He lets it drop that there are 16 clocks in the house. He knows because he made a wooden case for each.

Mr. Luker is one of the scores of volunteers in this town of 30,000 people in northern Iowa who banded together to save the house, which Wright designed for a Mason City physician after adapting a design he had published in the April 1907 *Ladies' Home Journal*. The volunteers gave money along with what expertise they could glean from books and from experts who heard about their efforts and just had to pitch in.

Most important, from doctors to construction executives to school teachers to farmers, they donated untold buckets of sweat in the belief that there are special pieces of America that ought to last.

"It wasn't like a philanthropic organization took it on as a project," said Randy Cram, a local architect and volunteer. "It just kind of happened."

The house was structurally sound, but the volunteers found plenty to do. They rebuilt the roof soffits, re-shingled the roof, filled cracks in exterior stucco and interior plaster, put in new wiring and plumbing, refinished floors, replaced damaged parts of windows, scraped off layers of paint and

wallpaper and put on fresh paint inside and out.

After more than a year's work, they reopened the house as a museum 18 months ago. A week from today, in celebration of the lowans' efforts, members of the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy will gather here for their annual meeting. This posse of Wrightophiles -- owners of Wright buildings, architects, authors, general enthusiasts -- has previously met in better-known shrines like the architect's studio in Oak Park, IL, and his breathtaking Fallingwater in Bear Run, PA. Here they will celebrate the preservation of a humbler Wright masterpiece and its unlikely band of saviors.

The house, designed for Dr. G.C. Stockman, is being used by the conservancy to highlight an aspect of Wright often overlooked: his interest in designing housing for people of moderate means. The Stockman project was an effort to build "the \$5,000 house" he designed for the *Ladies' Home Journal*.

Like that design, it has an open floor plan, ribbon windows, a central fireplace and overhanging eaves. But he extended the block-like plan with a covered porch on one side (accessible from living and dining rooms) and a covered entry on the other. It was given a hip roof rather than a flat one. In that design, Wright used Prairie School techniques to link indoors and out, including a band of windows that bring the outside in. He made the house a cube, the simplest and cheapest shape. Blank planes left by the concentration of windows were broken by inexpensive wooden moldings that extend the look of the house to the passer-by.

Stockman sold the house in 1924, and at least six owners succeeded him. The house had its suicides, its weddings, its financially strapped times, its years as a bedraggled photography studio. It fell into such disrepair that some people thought a post used to prop up a cantilevered roof was part of the original design.

But the relative lack of care was a godsend. From 1908 into the 1980s, little was done to modernize the house, so it remained very much as Wright had designed it. As such, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on January 29, 1980.

Seven years later, Sally Cottingham, the last resident, died, and her two daughters hoped to sell the property for \$200,000. At auction, the only bidder was the adjacent First United Methodist Church, which wanted the land for a parking lot and offered \$57,500.

This was below the minimum acceptable, \$85,000, and was rejected. Meantime, a fear that the church would buy the house and demolish it seized the Mason City volunteers, newly organized as the River City Society for Historic Preservation.

Enter David Murphy, an industrialist with a dozen patents in his pocket, including a lucrative one under which he makes corn-drying machines. He offered \$20,000 to help the church buy the house if it agreed not to tear it down, but to give it away. A done deal, at \$67,500. The house was given to the city and later sold to the society for a nominal amount.

After screaming arguments among members of a city commission and the volunteers over which of three sites to move it to, it went to a residential

neighborhood near Prairie Style homes by other architects.

Next came big tussles, common to preservation efforts everywhere, over how much authenticity is sufficient. Is a good plaster job enough, or must the plaster contain horse hair as it did in Wright's day? Must shingles be made of oak?

"No" was the answer to both questions. But the group nonetheless sought to portray the house in its original architectural integrity. Jonathan B. Lipman of Prairie Architects in Fairfield, IA, who showed up one day to volunteer his services after reading of the house in a newsletter, called for the strictest approach.

At his urging, the group sent core samples of the walls to a Chicago paint analysis laboratory. To everyone's surprise, the original living room walls were found to be a dark, mottled brown -- not the expected gold. The effect is stunning.

Sometimes he was overruled, but his final judgment is laudatory. "They were just a handful of lay people who wanted to save a building," he said. "What they succeeded in doing was mind-boggling."

The lay people who restored the Stockman House are certainly a varied group.

Dr. Robert McCoy, an orthopedic surgeon, retired early from his practice to devote more time to his job as co-chairman of the effort. He has lived for three decades in a house designed by Walter Burley Griffin in a nearby enclave of homes in the low-slung Prairie Style created by Wright, Griffin and a few contemporaries.

David Christiansen, a high school history teacher and full-time farmer, became

involved after taking part in unsuccessful efforts to save an old Mason City movie theater and a Civil War memorial. He became a founder and is the president of the preservation society.

Peggy Bang, an art professor at North Iowa Area Community College, decided she simply could not live with herself if a Wright house was torn down in her community, so she learned as co-chairwoman of the effort, to write grant applications.

Herbert Kennedy, a retired contractor, called together a cadre of carpenters, painters, electricians, plumbers and roofers to lead the army who had only elbow grease and love to contribute.

Then there was Mr. Murphy. At critical junctures, he wrote checks to keep the enterprise on track.

Now 76, he remembers riding his bicycle past the house as a boy and admiring it. He says he once considered joining Wright at Taliesin, his center of operations in Spring Green, WI, to learn architecture.

The story of the Stockman House project is full of last-minute rescues, emotional battles and individual heroics by the two dozen or so who shouldered most of the burden.

There have been miracles, as when a chain of coincidences led to the discovery of photographs of how the house was furnished along with a few pieces of the Arts and Crafts furniture that had been in the house. Another nice moment was locating Wright's original drawings for the house in the Wright archives at Taliesin West, near Phoenix.

There have been moments of rejection, like the time the local newspaper editorialized against saving a house when city budget cuts were gnawing at police and fire protection.

But hard work made the wheels turn. Mrs. Bang attended a grant-writing workshop and ended up landing \$40,000 from the state historical society. The total expenditure of around \$150,000 has also been met through smaller grants. Mr. Murphy's gifts and pennies collected after the group placed old parking meters in stores and asked for contributions.

The existence of the house is emblematic of a time when the shape of America was less formed, when Mason City still dreamed of becoming another Chicago.

Then, this was a rail hub and home to nine large clay-product plants. Two cement plants, a meat-packing plant, a sugar beet processor and other industries also sprouted as the population grew from 6,746 in 1900 to 11,230 in 1910. That year, J.H. Wheeler wrote in "History of Cerro Gordo County" that Mason City was "the most important town in a wide belt of country" between the Great lakes and the Pacific.

This wealth and sense of self-importance are what brought Wright -- who had been commissioned to design a hotel and a bank -- and other leading architects to Mason City. The grand civic dreams are gone now, but their architectural legacy remains.