

The Prairie School House

a Study Guide Prepared by Lloyd C. Engelbrecht

This study guide is based on my own observations and analyses, on discussions with other historians and with my students, and on the published sources listed below.

What follows is a summary of the characteristics of the Prairie School house. Some of these characteristics are also present in other types of Prairie School buildings, such as schools and churches.

I. General Characteristics of the Prairie School House.

These general characteristics of the Prairie School house are common to houses designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and by other Prairie School architects during the years from about 1900 to about 1915. In addition, many general and specific characteristics of the Prairie School house appear sparingly in watered-down “Prairie style” or “Prairieoid” designs, and are even present in some remodeling jobs of the period.

IA. General Characteristics, Primarily of Exteriors.

1. long, low and simple roof masses, gabled or hipped, with wide overhanging eaves
2. when a gabled roof is employed, it often extends further from the house at the peak than at the bottom of the roof
3. clear visual separation of storeys, marked by belt courses of stone, or wood trim, often coinciding with the tops of windows and/or doors on the first floor or the sill level of windows on the second floor, rather than the actual level of the floor plane
4. the windows are mostly of the casement type, and are usually arranged in ribbons, but sometimes are merely grouped
5. there are frequent triangular and polygonal extensions of the wall surface, viewed in plan; the polygons are often three or five sides of an “incomplete” octagon, or, put another way, an octagonal block, the mass of which seems to intersect with the principal mass of the building
6. exterior wall surfaces include large, flat unbroken areas, often framed by trim in a rectangular outline
7. the materials used include stucco over wooden boards covering the balloon frame, with machine-sawed, unplanned wood trim, stained in dark shades and sometimes waxed

8. on some houses both stucco and brick surfaces alternate
9. surfaces of wood sheathing are rare, except as horizontal boards and batten
10. when brick is used it is frequently roman brick
11. brick masonry, whether employing roman brick or brick of ordinary proportions, is usually of the raked mortar type (that is, the mortar is flush with the surface of the brick on the short side, but the joints are raked or recessed on the long side), and the mortar on the short side is frequently tinted to match the color of the brick
12. a number of Prairie School houses were planned for construction in concrete; of those which were originally planned for concrete and which were actually built, a few were executed in that material, and others were executed in wood covered with stucco
13. there are broad, oblong rectangular-block chimneys with projecting caps, and with the broad side aligned with the principal façade of the house
14. the underside of the eaves is often finished in a light hue, and often with trim in a darker hue; the light finish reflects light into the upper storey of the house, thus preventing the wide overhanging eaves from the darkening the interior
15. caps and cornices, usually of stone or concrete, top the rectangular, blocky masses which often flank the façade of brick Prairie School houses; these caps and cornices are similar to those on the parapets of porches and balconies, and on chimneys
16. Wrightian colors (see II 3, below) plus blues and greens are used on interior and exterior surfaces
17. pairs of planters often flank entrances to the houses; the planters are usually low sections (45 degrees or less) of a sphere, with simple feet or merely a flattened bottom, and a simple lip or no lip at all

I B. Other Characteristics, Primarily of Interiors.

1. though often irregular and complex, the interior spaces of the first floor of the house flow freely into each other, with wide openings between living, dining, hall, entrance, library, music and related areas—the rooms are not a series of enclosed boxes
2. the dark-finished, machine-sawed interior woodwork emphasizes straight lines and flat surfaces
3. the windows (see I A 4, above) often consist of pieces of clear and colored glass mounted in lead strips (zinc for windows in doors) to form straight-edged, angular, highly-stylized plant

designs, with colors chosen from reds, yellows, blues, oranges and greens

4. Wrightian colors (see II 3, below) plus blues and greens are used on interior and exterior surfaces

5. in the living room, and sometimes in other rooms as well, there are large brick fireplaces with plain, flat surfaces, sometimes trimmed in stone, and with proportionately small rectangular or arched firebox openings

6. there are often stair halls with large windows, frequently with designs in clear and colored glass as described above (I B 3)

7. lighting fixtures are often specially designed, with much use of flush ceiling fixtures containing colored and white frosted glass mounted in lead strips to form simple patterns, and lit by light bulbs and sometimes lit by natural light as well

8. there is some use of indirect lighting, in which light from a concealed source is reflected from walls and/or ceilings

9. furniture and accessories harmonize with the basic design of the house; typically, architect-designed or architect-chosen furniture, draperies, carpets, accessories, etc., predominate, and anything which might be called ornament is designed as an integral feature (*e. g.*, some use of painted and stenciled mural friezes) and there is little, if any, room left for pictures, sculpture or other works of art, and no role for interior decorators

10. much of the furniture is built in: inglenook benches flanking fireplaces, cabinets, sideboards, dining-room furniture, window seats and other items

11. many houses have rooms for live-in servants, and these usually are plain (except for the windows) and small

12. most bedrooms, whether for family, guests or servants, are boxed-in, enclosed rooms, although a few can be found with irregular shapes, alcoves, or sleeping porches and other features which modify the box-like effect

13. large, built-in closets and wardrobes are to be found in many of the bedrooms

II. Characteristics Primarily Found in the Work of Frank Lloyd Wright.

1. the main entrance to the house is often not obvious from the street, and leads to an entrance hall derived from those in shingle-style or Queen Anne houses of the 1880s

2. there is a strong horizontal emphasis resulting from the massing and from extended continuity of horizontal lines formed by trim or other devices

3. autumn, earthy colors, with creams, tans and browns and some reds predominating, are used on exterior and interior surfaces, although additional colors are sometimes used in windows (see I B 3, above)
4. the house is built on a low “water table” or platform, with the basement de-emphasized, although the basement is usually not completely eliminated during Wright’s Prairie period (his Robie house in Chicago is a rare example of a Wright Prairie School house with no basement; the entrance is at grade level, and this is the lowest level of the structure)
5. there is little or no attic space, and the master bedroom sometimes has a peaked ceiling rising all or part of the way to the underside of the roof
6. symmetry is sometimes suggested, but, with very few exceptions, avoided, and instead many highly complex agglutinative and pinwheel forms appear in plan
7. indoor-outdoor differences are minimized by the use of similar brick, wood or plaster/stucco materials inside and outside, and by the use of the same or similar autumn, earthy colors inside and outside
8. the visitor or resident feels that his/her experience of space has been manipulated by the architect through devices such as variations of ceiling heights in adjacent areas and the sudden appearance of unexpectedly long interior vistas

III. Bibliography of Published Sources.

1. Brooks, H. Allen, *Frank Lloyd Wright and the Prairie School* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1984. (See especially pages 9, 10 and 18-21).
2. Brooks, H. Allen, *The Prairie School; Frank Lloyd Wright and His Midwest Contemporaries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972). (See especially pages 3-7.)
3. Engelbrecht, Lloyd C. and June-Marie F., *Henry C. Trost: Architect of the Southwest* (El Paso: El Paso Public Library Association, 1981), frontispiece and pages 39-47.
4. Sprague, Paul E., “Book Review: *The Prairie School; Frank Lloyd Wright and His Midwest Contemporaries*,” in: *The Prairie School Review*, volume III, number 4 (Fourth Quarter, 1971), pages 14-18.
5. Whiffen, Marcus, *American Architecture Since 1780; a Guide to the Styles* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M. I. T. Press, 1969; revised edition, 1992), pages 201-202.
6. Wright, Frank Lloyd, “Prairie Architecture,” in: *Frank Lloyd Wright: Writings and Buildings*, selected by Edgar Kaufmann and Ben Raeburn. (New York: The New American Library, 1960), pages 38-55. (Reprinted from: *Wright, Frank Lloyd, Modern Architecture: Being the Kahn Lectures for 1930* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1931).