

WEDNESDAY JOURNAL'S

WrightPlus 2005

Your guide to the housewalk in Oak Park and River Forest



A grand experiment

Rollin Furbeck House reflects Wright's period of transitional design

By LIZ JAROS

Even though their names would appear on the closing papers, Tom and Debbie Abrahamson knew ownership of the Rollin Furbeck House on Fair Oaks Avenue in Oak Park would never be theirs exclusively.

Purchasing a Frank Lloyd Wright residence—especially one like this, a showplace of transition and experimentation—would mean shar-

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"We like to be caretakers," Tom says. "We like a house that needs us. One with a 'honey-do' list." Letting in the occasional tourist, or even the thousands who will stroll through this Saturday on the 31st Annual Wright Plus Housewalk, would not be a problem either, according to Tom. It would be a part of the privilege. So the Abrahamsons went ahead and signed on the line.

A shared interest in architecture—the couple's first home in Oak Park was designed by noted local architect John Van Bergen—and a fondness for Prairie style had definite impacts on the decision, says Tom, "But we didn't set out specifically to buy a Frank Lloyd Wright house. We were just looking for something with a little history."

The Abrahamsons learned that their house was built in 1897 for \$6,000 on a \$2,250 piece of land. Stockbroker Warren F. Furbeck commissioned Wright to design the home as a wedding present for his son Rollin, the third of five boys. That same year, Wright's services were also employed to design a home just a few blocks away for Furbeck's first son, George.

Marking a period of experimentation, Wright departed from his previous, mostly rectangular designs when he drew plans for the Rollin Furbeck House. A multi-dimensional exterior, jutting east and west with a porte cochere to the south, represents the introduction of Wright's more sophisticated cruciform and pinwheel layouts. A massive three-story center tower, with a pagoda-style, hipped roof, reveals a distinct Japanese influence. It also provides vertical contrast to horizontal features like projecting limestone gills, brick string courses, banded windows and wide, overhanging eaves, all structural elements that would eventually become hallmarks of his mature Prairie style.

The home's entrance is veiled by an open, semi-detached front porch with imposing, 16-sided brick columns. The interior, according to Debbie, has a very "flowing and open



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floor plan" with abundant natural light. Throughout the first level, romantic alcoves break up the space and represent a drastic departure from traditional, box-style Victorian architecture. The rooms open into one another with a natural grace.

"It's really an incredible house for entertaining," says Debbie. "Even when we're not having people over, we feel like we should be."

Diamond paned, leaded-glass windows (similar to those found in the Home and Studio) and quarter-sawn oak floors

The dining room in the Rollin Furbeck House reflects the careful restoration of the previous homeowners. A new window and ceiling fixture include the design from the room's original art glass window, and the quarter-sawn oak floor is a skillful match to the original flooring.

define the home's mezzanine, which features a split staircase with a striking balustrade. An oversized picture win-



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Owners Tom and Debbie Abrahamson in the central inglenook in their living room. Most likely, it's the first incorporation of a pre-cast, concrete fireplace.

dow (believed to be the first use of its kind in a residential structure) and a central inglenook (most likely the first incorporation of a pre-formed concrete fireplace) are high points in the living room.

Responsible rehab

Built with painstaking attention to detail and materials of only the highest quality, the Rollin Furbeck House has stood the test of time, with many of its defining architectural features enduring the years brilliantly. Still, restoration and renovation are a part of any old home's history, and this one is no exception.

In the dining room, previous owners commissioned the reproduction of an original, north-facing art glass window for duplication in the south wall. And a ceiling fixture was

commissioned to incorporate the design, which features geometric patterns and a green/gold hue. Like those found in several of the home's other rooms, the quarter-sawn oak floor in here is a skillful match, not an original.

Tom credits his predecessors with "fortifying" the place during their years in residence, handling a lot of the "scary stuff" like plaster, wood, roof and gutter repair. He says it was their meticulous restoration efforts, which included rebuilding the front wall, that set the stage for him and Debbie to come in and do the fun stuff.

Any changes made to the home, which is located in the Frank Lloyd Wright Prairie School of Architecture Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places and designated a local landmark by Oak Park's Historic Preservation Commission, would need to be appropriate and responsible. But that was just fine with the Abrahamsons.

"We've always welcomed their advice and guidance," says Tom. "We wouldn't want to do anything here that wasn't in character with the home."

The Abrahamsons proved that to be true when they launched an extensive kitchen/family room renovation shortly after moving in five years ago. Ultimately, the kitchen was opened up and a family gathering space extended out into an enclosed rear balcony, where it is believed Wright first employed his cantilevered roof technique.

Taking great care to ensure that their new space would resonate with the rest of the home, the Abrahamsons utilized custom-made Motawi arts and crafts tiles, leaded glass cabinets, double glass doors and a balluster-supported center island in their design.

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"We like to be caretakers. We like a house that needs us. One with a 'honey-do' list."

Tom Abrahamson, homeowner

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"I learned that there are a lot of little details involved in this kind of project," says Tom. "You can't run out to Home Depot for quarter-sawn oak and moldings. I'd be on eBay all the time looking for a very specific kind of knob, things like that."

The couple also renovated the library, originally the porte cochere, embellishing it with reproduction windows, a vaulted ceiling and a Prairie-style light fixture.

"We spend a lot of time in there," says Debbie. "Especially the kids. You can see both the front and the back yards through the windows. It's very peaceful."

Tom says he and Debbie have always considered repair and improvement of their unusual home to be more of a hobby than a hassle. And they've prided themselves on making appropriate contributions to its character. "When people come through and ask, 'Is this original to the house?' we know we've done our job."

Show time

Saturday will mark the fifth time the Rollin Furbeck House has been included in the Wright Plus Housewalk and the second time the Abrahamsons have been a part of the event.

Tom admits that the prospect of turning over his keys for the weekend is a little unnerving, mostly because, "You know people will be coming into your house while you're not there, and you know they'll be evaluating your taste."

But according to Debbie, opening their doors to tourists is always a positive experience for the Abrahamsons. Not only because they usually return to a house that's cleaner than it was when they left, but because it makes them take a step back and say, "Wow, this is really a beautiful house. We're very lucky."



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The Abrahamsons have taken care to ensure that new renovations conform to the home's original design. Above, a library was created from the porte cochere. At right, the kitchen was opened up and a family gathering space extended out into an enclosed rear balcony.

