

Two stories for two Wright houses in Chicago



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The back of Frank Lloyd Wright's recently restored Bach House in Rogers Park. (Abel Uribe, Chicago Tribune)

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Frank Lloyd Wright's houses enchant us with their inventive geometry yet torment many of their owners with leaking roofs and other functional woes. Like all landmarks subject to the passage of time and the pounding of the weather, they require a mix of sensitive treatment and substantial funding to creatively make the past a part of the present.

Two variations on that theme are playing out on Chicago's South and North Sides —one at Wright's Frederick Robie House in Hyde Park, a grandly scaled 1910 masterwork that culminated the architect's Prairie Style; the other, at his Emil Bach House, a diminutive 1915 gem set amid the apartment-building cityscape of Rogers Park.

Both homes are affiliated with the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust, a nonprofit that conducts public tours at them and three other Chicago-area Wright sites, including the architect's Oak Park Home and Studio. Both have the same preservation architect, T. Gunny Harboe.

From there, their stories diverge: the Bach House has been beautifully restored by billionaire Jennifer Pritzker, while the trust is scraping together funds to return the Robie House, easily the more important of the pair, to its original glory.

Like life, fundraising to save old buildings isn't fair.

Located at 5757 S. Woodlawn Ave., amid the campus of its owner, the University of Chicago, the Robie House is renowned for horizontal lines that evoke the Midwest prairie and a steamship-like shape that anticipated modernism's sleek future. Its restoration got a significant, if largely symbolic, boost last week when the Los Angeles-based Getty Foundation announced a \$50,000 grant to the trust that will fund its long-term management plan of the home.

The grant is one of the first 10 made by the Getty's new "Keeping It Modern" initiative that backs the conservation of modern architecture — a far-sighted program at a time when many 20th-century landmarks are underappreciated, underfunded and in danger of demolition. Other recipients include such path-breaking icons as Jorn Utzon's Sydney Opera House. By putting the Robie House in such stellar international company, the Getty drew much-needed attention to the trust's ongoing efforts to restore the house.

The restoration calls for everything from an enhanced climate control system to shoring up the deteriorating supports of the house's dazzling art glass windows. Installing a replica of Wright's dining room table and chairs — the originals are in the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art — is also on the agenda. The long-term plan, thought to be the first of its kind for a Wright property, will sketch out how the house will be maintained once the restoration is complete.

Even though the Robie House occupies a prominent place in architectural history books, fundraising has not been easy. The trust has raised \$2 million and needs an additional \$4 million. Splashy new buildings to which donors can attach their names offer tough competition, according to Celeste Adams, the trust's president.

The Robie House "does not have ... the surprising showmanship of some contemporary architecture that captures the public imagination," she said. "Having the Getty remind the public at large of the significance of these buildings in terms of world heritage and American culture is a wonderful message of support...It's validation for us at an important moment when we would like to bring the restoration to its conclusion."

There was no lack of funds in Rogers Park, where the Pritzker-owned Tawani Enterprises transformed the Bach House, located at 7415 N. Sheridan Road, into a vacation rental home and site for meetings and events. The trust offers public tours at the house on Wednesdays from May through September —

the last one for this year is Wednesday.

Pritzker's efforts to turn historic buildings into inns have run into roadblocks in Evanston, where officials turned down her plan to convert the landmark Harley Clarke Mansion into a luxury hotel, and in Hyde Park, where neighbors quashed her attempt to turn two Wright-designed homes into bed-and-breakfasts. But the Bach job went forward despite neighborhood opposition to a four-story, 250-space garage she's building in North Sheridan's 7300 block. A rendering shows the garage will be a structure of exposed concrete and sleek channel glass.

Completed in May, the restoration is a sweet little job, something to enjoy even if you can't afford the superexpensive nightly rental fee of \$1,495. That price gets you the whole house, with a maximum occupancy of five, according to a Pritzker spokeswoman.

On the exterior, Harboe has restored Wright's earth-toned palette of yellow textured brick, trellises with a natural wood finish, stucco and concrete. Six replicas of original art glass windows enliven the projecting second-story window bays. Atop a first-floor screen porch, an extra room added by a previous owner has been removed, freeing the house to again become a dynamic sculptural composition.

Inside, the flowing space shared by the living and dining rooms is enlivened by the original "Sunshine Yellow" color of the walls as well as contemporary furniture selected by Evanston architects Morgante Wilson. Upstairs, the three bedrooms, small in size and height, are still enticing because each comes with a balcony, built-in furniture and plenty of natural light.

The small house packs more creativity than a 10,000-square-foot McMansion. It would be great to see the same transformation at Robie.

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