

HISTORY OF HYDE PARK

Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House, located in the culturally diverse and intellectually active neighborhood of Hyde Park, is in some ways a visual expression of Hyde Park's spirit during the turn of the century. Paul Cornell, a lawyer and real estate developer, bought a 300-acre tract of lakefront property in 1853. By 1856, Cornell had struck a deal with the Illinois Central Railroad to arrange for a stop in the area, thereby laying the groundwork for making Hyde Park accessible to, but distinctly separate from, Chicago.

By 1869, Hyde Park's excellent transportation, spacious parks, and success with public improvements made it a desirable suburb for city-weary businessmen. Many upper- middle class families moved into the area. In June 1889, the village of Hyde Park was annexed into the city of Chicago. Although now an urban neighborhood, Hyde Park residents worked to preserve its suburban look by maintaining its public parks, sprawling estates, and year-round greenery.

Daniel Burnham, chief architect and planner of the 1893 World Columbian Exposition, chose to locate the fair in Hyde Park because of the neighborhood's open grassy areas and its proximity to the lake and city. Frederick Law Olmsted, a prominent landscape architect who had designed New York City's Central Park in the 1850s and 1860s, was brought in to refurbish Jackson Park and the Midway Plaisance for the fair.

Architects, sculptors, and workers moved to Hyde Park in the spring of 1891 for the exposition's construction. Burnham's partner, John Root, as well as sculptor August Saint-Gaudens, lived in cabins in Jackson Park. Lorado Taft, whose sculpture can be seen throughout the neighborhood, moved to Hyde Park to supervise his workshop and remained in the area until his death. Architects like Louis Sullivan, Charles B. Atwood, and the firm of McKim, Meade & White also contributed to the fair's design. Frank Lloyd Wright was Sullivan's assistant at this time and may have contributed to the design of the exposition's Transportation Building.

The University of Chicago, which had opened its doors in 1892, was well on its way to making the social, moral, and economic well-being of Hyde Park part of its zealous mission. Although the exposition had attracted many new residents of diverse economic classes and ethnic groups to Hyde Park, the area immediately around the university remained inhabited by prosperous middle class families and university faculty well into the 1930s. Their architectural tastes varied, contributing to the area's eclectic appearance.

Henry Ives Cobb designed most of the university's Gothic structures as well as three private homes in Hyde Park. Howard van Doren Shaw designed fifteen

English Classical-style homes for university faculty who favored more traditional design over the innovative creations of modern architects like Frank Lloyd Wright.

Hyde Park was also the home of self-made businessmen and their well-educated wives. Frederick C. Robie, a prosperous bicycle manufacturer, married Lora Hieronymus in 1902 and moved into an apartment in Hyde Park close to the commuter train. As Mr. Robie's business and family grew, he began looking for a larger home. He purchased the site on the corner of 58th and Woodlawn in 1908. Lora, a recent graduate of the University of Chicago, appreciated living close to the university, where she remained active in campus activities. Mr. Robie chose Frank Lloyd Wright as the architect for his new home.

Wright took full advantage of the lot's long and narrow dimensions and its proximity to a progressive university when he designed the home. The house is a visual expression of the Midwestern prairie landscape that Wright interpreted as no other architect before him had. He saw beauty in its ground-hugging plains, low horizons, and endless vistas. At the time of its construction, the southern view from the Robie House stretched past the low tree-lined Midway Plaisance to 60th Street. In many ways, the view from the lot mirrored aspects of the Midwestern prairie that had inspired Wright's design of the house.

Unfortunately, the Robies, who lived in the house until 1911, and the Taylors, who occupied the house until 1912, enjoyed their Hyde Park home only briefly. The Wilber family lived in the house from 1912-1926 and saw the expanding university erect structures between their house and the Midway.

From its beginnings as a commuter suburb to its current status as a vibrant urban center, residents of Hyde Park have had a history of actively involving themselves with aesthetic, social, and economic improvements of the neighborhood. Today, Hyde Park and the University of Chicago community continue to set the pace in contemporary scientific and humanitarian developments. Not only does Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House maintain its status as the "cornerstone of modern architecture," as Wright himself dubbed it, but the house also stands as architectural evidence of the progressive spirit of the neighborhood of Hyde Park.

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO EARLY HISTORY

"There are two Chicagos—the city and the university. Always they have advanced together, moved by the splendid pioneering spirit of their leaders." -William Rainey Harper

In 1889, the annual meeting of the American Baptist Education Society (ABES) committed itself to founding a college in Chicago. At that time, the Baptist congregations in the Midwest were growing more than anywhere else in the country.

It was felt that without a college in the West, the Baptists would lose their intelligent members to colleges of other denominations or to the Ivy League universities on the East Coast. Chicago, at the hub of a burgeoning American commercial, industrial, religious, social, and educational network, was the obvious location.

At that time, there were small Baptist colleges in towns around the country, but no “great university.” Reverend Dr. Augustus A. Strong, an in-law of John D. Rockefeller Sr., had strong ideas for the need of a “great university:” a well-funded organization focused entirely on graduate work, which he envisioned being centered in New York. He “vigorously urged this project on Rockefeller.”

Rockefeller seemed to be committed to a university in Chicago, and the ABES secured a pledge for \$600,000 from him if another \$400,000 could be raised in one year. Marshall Field offered the prospective university “twenty acres of sand and swamp, laced with barbed wire fences” that he had owned since 1879. The University of Chicago (U of C) was incorporated in 1890 and opened its doors in October, 1892.

Unlike many other colleges and universities of the time, U of C mapped out a unified plan for campus architecture rather than adding buildings in new styles as need arose. Henry Ives Cobb was chosen as the architect for the campus. He was raised in Boston and attended MIT. He opened a Chicago office in 1881 and remained in the city until 1900.

The Gothic Revival style was chosen for the campus plan because of its reference to England’s venerable colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, a reference sorely needed out on the unsettled prairie. Gothic style allowed for individual variety in buildings while keeping to a unified overall style. Its forms referred to the past, but choosing the Gothic style was actually a commitment to the future—the U of C founders believed that if the Gothic style had survived for 500 years, it could survive at the University of Chicago eternally.

The limestone facades of the campus came to be known as the “Grey City.” The University of Chicago opened for classes in 1892, the same year as the World’s Columbian Exposition (although activities primarily took place in 1893). The Midway Plaisance, the long stretch of exposition revelry and entertainment, was positioned right next to the fledgling campus. From the Ferris Wheel, one could look out over the newly erected men’s dormitories. The University of Chicago’s founders and students saw the “White City” as frivolous and temporary, while their own institution was seen as eternal. This contrast was so important that it was put into the Alma Mater the following year:

The City White hath fled the earth,
But where the azure waters lie
A nobler city has its birth—
The City Grey that ne’er shall die!
For decades and for centuries

Its battlemented towers shall rise
Beneath the hope-filled western skies.

The first president of the University of Chicago was 30-year-old William Rainey Harper, a professor from Yale. From the outset, he was committed to luring the finest scholars to the new university. It was not always easy. Harper was to become well known for recruiting top-notch scholars in their fields. Using Rockefeller's endowment money, Harper was able to offer salaries much higher than the norm. The quarter system was an innovation of Harper's, allowing for year-round classes with a summer term. Harper saw no reason why learning should stop because of summer, and so U of C became the first college in America to offer year-round classes.

In 1901, Henry Ives Cobb was dismissed as the university architect due to an increasingly strained work relationship. His designs for university buildings were consistently larger, more ornate, and more expensive than U of C could afford. With Cobb's dismissal, new architects were invited to design Gothic-style buildings that complemented the ones already on campus. These included Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge, Dwight Heald Perkins, James Gamble Rogers, and Holabird & Roche.