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Wright in Wisconsin Welcomes Bill Swan

New office administrator brings deep ties to our group and enthusiasm for Frank Lloyd Wright by MARK HERTZBERG

Bill Swan’s Wright resume has gotten even more impressive as he settles into his duties as Wright in Wisconsin’s new office administrator. He succeeds Sherri Shokler, who left in August, after more than 20 years with us, to pursue a new career path. Swan, who lives in Sun Prairie, is a familiar face to Wright and Like participants.

He has been a docent on our tours each year since 2012. If that is not enough to bring him into our fold, he was a bus captain for the 2015 and 2018 Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy conferences in Wisconsin. If that is still not enough for you to bring him into our fold, also consider that he has been a docent at Wright’s Laurent House in Rockford, Illinois, since 2015, and that he has done extensive research into the house, including in the Wright archives at the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library at Columbia University.

He has visited or stayed overnight in Wright sites nationwide (benefits vary by location).

To join, visit us at www.wrightinwisconsin.org or contact us at the number or address below.

Wright in Wisconsin Member Newsletter
Editor: Mark Hertzberg
Design and copy editor: Brian R. Hannan
Special thanks to Patrick J. Mahoney for the vintage postcard and to Robert Hartmann for his vintage pictures.

Bill Swan continues on page 27

Our newly reorganized board of directors meets at the Hardy House (1905) in Racine. Members include (left to right): Henri St. Maurice (Arnold House, 1955), Curt Smyczynski (Hardy House), Brian R. Hannan, George Hall, and Bill Swan. Mark Hertzberg, our long-time board secretary, took the photograph.

As we begin the new year, thank you to those of you who recently sent in unsolicited memberships and contributions, testing to your faith in this organization. And to all of you awaiting the start of our annual membership campaign, thank you for your patience.

You are the ones I have in mind as I write this column. In the past six months, we have regrouped and committed ourselves to rebuilding the organization.

We now have a streamlined board, including two new members: Brian R. Hannan, our new vice president for communications from Evanston, Illinois; and Curt Smyczynski, our new treasurer from Racine. They join our continuing board members: Ken Dahlblin; Mark Hertzberg, our secretary and newsletter editor; Henry St. Maurice; and myself.

We expect the eight public sites to shortly name their own representative to the board. Our intent is to work individually with each public site to learn its unique needs and how we might better develop services of value. We have earmarked funds to assist the public sites (and the Frank Lloyd Wright Trail) with reprinting what we call our sites brochure, a rack card distributed at many Wisconsin tourist information centers.

We hired Bill Swan, as office administrator, to assume the many tasks that Sherri Shokler, our former office administrator, so ably performed. Bill, a mechanical engineer with an abiding interest in Frank Lloyd Wright, brings skills to us from the private sector, as well as experience as a long-time volunteer with the Laurent House in Rockford, Illinois, the Madison Trust for Historic Preservation and the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy. We look forward to working with him on your behalf.

In addition to announcing our upcoming Wright-related speakers, we’ll soon have a save-the-date announcement for a fall bus tour to Minneapolis that’s being planned with former board member Karen Bergenthal. She also helped with the logistics for our 2017 and 2018 tours of the Wright at 150 exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan and our excursion to Mason City to stay in Wright’s Park Inn Hotel and see Wright’s Stockman House — along with Walter Burley Griffin’s Rock Creek/Rock Glen subdivision.

You may well read this column before our 2020 membership campaign finally unfolds. It’s delayed while the board proactively gets our corporation back up to speed, including developing several surveys to help us better plan a range of events and services that meet your interests — as well as the demands of the preservation community and the owners of these marvelous buildings that inspire us all.

Your Wright in Wisconsin is built on volunteer help. As we round out our reorganized board, we hope to find Wright-inclined members with a variety of areas of expertise, including a bookkeeper to assist our treasurer and an attorney familiar with nonprofit law. If you’d like to volunteer, please reach out to us at wrightinwisconsin.org/contact.
Wright and Like heads back to Mad City for its annual architectural tour, set for June 12-14

With George Hall taking the lead on our annual big event, planning is in full swing for Wright and Like™ tour in Madison, scheduled for the weekend of June 12-14.

Those of you who attend our annual tours know that every year we usually feature, along with homes by Frank Lloyd Wright, a nearly forgotten mid-century architect or little-known homes by Taliesin apprentices or associates.

This year’s tour in Madison will be different.

Our house list is currently expanding as the steering committee pitches ideas and we speak with owners. Meanwhile, a three-day event is shaping up.

It begins with a Friday afternoon Wright exhibit at an art museum that isn’t yet fully vetted, followed by an evening presentation by Jack Holzhueter on the John Howe materials in the Wisconsin Historical Society archives that concludes with conversation and heavy hors d’oeuvre catered by the University Club in the society foyer.

For Saturday, we’re considering several sites tour headquarter sites, along with homes by Wright and apprentices and associates of Wright, several of which have never been available for tour.

On Sunday, a pontoon boat excursion will enable a viewing of Wright’s several Lake Mendota sites of note (Pew House from the water, the site of Rocky Roost, designed for Wright’s Madison school friend Robert (Robie) Lamp and the site of Wright’s Lake Mendota boat house) to round out the weekend.

Helping with this year’s tour is a steering committee comprised of: Terri Boyd, Ken Dahlin, Robert Downing, Mary Jane Hamilton, Brian Haman, Mark Hertzberg, Traci Schnell and Gary Tipler. We look forward to seeing you in Madison.

The Rudin House (1957), a Marshall Erdman prefab house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in Madison, will be open for tours during the upcoming Wright and Like.

Wright’s vision for a restaurant near Taliesin takes shape with Wisconsin River Terrace project

Frank Lloyd Wright had long envisioned a restaurant along the sloping site overlooking the Wisconsin River on Highway 23 near his home and studio, Taliesin.

Wright’s first proposal for this site was a speculative scheme for Glen and Ruth Richardson for a service station, restaurant and residence in 1943. It never came to fruition.

A decade later, Wright’s restaurant plan clearly emerged. The red square on Wright’s original concept drawing for The Wisconsin River Terrace and Restaurant bears his initials and the date 1953. Construction on the project was initiated in 1954.

Progress continued in 1955, including the installation of huge steel beams that Wright had purchased in 1948 as salvage from the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Wolverine. These beams elevated the restaurant above treetops along the banks of the river and would eventually provide breathtaking views of the water and Wisconsin hillside when the restaurant was completed.

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The Spring Green restaurant nears completion during the summer of 1962. Windows and exterior trim work are being installed on the north face of the building. Wood batten strips on the soffit above the windows are not yet in place.
Remembering Ron McCrea
by MARK HERTZBERG

Ron McCrea, Wright scholar and former journalist, died December 15, 2019, of cancer. He was 76. McCrea, the long-time survivor of a liver transplant, was in hospice care in Fitchburg, near his home in Madison.

In late November, he told his friends that he had decided to forego any further chemotherapy because of the low expectation of success. His goal was to finish “Monumental Women,” the new book was about the women who shaped Wright “Building Taliessin: Frank Lloyd Wright’s Home of Love and Work.”

Wright’s beloved home and his life with Mamah Borthwick, McCrea came to the world of Wright after a distinguished career in journalism.

Outside of the Wright world, Swan has

We asked Bill to tell us about his interest in Wright and his work:

“I first became aware of the work of Frank Lloyd Wright during a trip to Taliesin with my father while I was in high school. It inspired me to write a term paper on his architecture.

Around 2005, I began taking short trips to see his southern Wisconsin structures, which really rekindled my interest from those early days. I started reading and collecting books about his work and life, which proved to be endlessly fascinating.

“I went on my first Wright and Like tour in 2008 and started volunteering as a docent in 2012. That led to helping the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy during the recent Milwaukee and Madison conferences — which also led to becoming a docent at the Laurent House in Rockford.

My wife and I have traveled to and stayed at some of Mr. Wright’s well-known buildings and stopped to photograph others along the way. I am especially interested in the Usonian houses and appreciate his solutions to problems and his understanding of more average means.

“The opportunity to help out the only statewide Wright organization in the nation is something that I’m extremely excited about. I look forward to meeting and working with the members of Wright in Wisconsin.”

We look forward to Bill’s expertise and enthusiasm as he settles in at our new office on Madison’s Capitol Square.

Taliesin Preservation Earns Historic Preservation Award
from TALIESIN PRESERVATION

Taliesin Preservation was honored to accept the 2019 Trustees Emeritus Award for Historic Site Stewardship from the National Trust for Historic Preservation in October. This national award was received at the PastForward conference in Denver by executive director Carrie Rodmader and board chair Ray Lipman.

This award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation recognizes a nonprofit organization that has demonstrated sustained and superlative achievement in historic preservation, management and programming at historic sites. Each year, an independent jury of national and international thought-leaders from many disciplines select the recipients of the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation National Preservation Award.

Taliesin Preservation is dedicated to preserving the culture of Taliesin, along with the built and natural environments that make up the 800-acre estate. Taliesin Preservation has contributed more than $10 million to preservation projects at the Wisconsin estate since 1993. Projects undertaken include reconstruction of the Romeo and Juliet Windmill and the restoration of Wright’s bedroom terrace.

Other projects also include the restoration of Tin-y-Deri, the guest wing, the loggia and loggia terrace, Wright’s studio, the Hillside Studio roof and the Welsh Hills prairie.
Unsonian Planning

Process plays a critical role in designing a modern Usonian house

As indicated in my last article, we will look, in this article, at several pragmatic considerations for building a Usonian home today, beginning with planning. There is a growing interest in the elegance and attraction of the Usonian home, but how can an 80-year-old form of architecture be made to work with contemporary lifestyles and the functions we now expect in our homes?

Wright’s Usonian homes of the 1930s through the 1950s marked a major shift from his plan types in his earlier Prairie School period, reflecting newer lifestyles, technology and expectations of the home. But this wasn’t just Wright reflecting on the current cultural state of the time; he also wanted to show how one should live in a contemporary, natural house. Likewise, from the middle of the last century to today, expectations and lifestyles have changed significantly. These factors must be considered when attempting a Usonian home today.

This begins with the program, or wish list, of spaces and functions one organizes for the home. The average Usonian home by Wright was smaller than the average new home built today.

A three-bedroom home of 1,200 to 1,500 square feet was the norm. There was typically no basement (other than a small one, perhaps for mechanical equipment) and no attic. Sometimes there was a smaller second floor. Cars were accommodated in carports. Sometimes there was a smaller second floor.

Cars were accommodated in carports.

The kitchens were generally small by design. Wright called them “workspaces,” basically a small laboratory for cooking. Bedrooms were not large and certainly fewer and simpler than today.

The clear spatial hierarchy fell upon the living room — or what might be considered today a great room with its blending with the dining area. However, views into the kitchen were usually carefully edited so that they wouldn’t be seen from the living room. The idea of fully opening up the kitchen into the living space had not yet arrived.

Even with the prototype Usonian, the Jacobs House in Madison, Wright wrote in the January 1938 edition of “Architectural Forum” that the client “must themselves see life in somewhat simplified terms.” More of the house would be given to the quality of the architectural configuration and spatial richness and less to underdefined storage spaces typical of basements and attics.

Wright’s polliwog, or L-shaped, plans were the parti pris from which so many Usonians sprang. This creates extended horizontal wings that stretch out on their lots and provide plenty of opportunity for fenestration and views. These wings are anchored in brick or stone cores, typically with some vertical emphasis breaking through the horizontal roof planes. This increases perimeter area in proportion to square footage enclosed and, thus, expense.

This is in contrast to the typical spec home built today. Plans are driven by efficiency and are very compact shapes more or less in shape to maximize square footage within the minimal volume of the shell to bring the cost down. Gables and complications are added for marketing effect, done to give the most bang for the buck. An exception to this today is in the tiny house movement and a return to simplicity and minimalism.

Another consideration is the TV screen, which has continued to grow in size and, in the living room, competes with the fireplace, which cannot compete in terms of size with today’s TVs. This is not a problem limited to the Usonian home, but it can be tricky when trying to keep the fireplace a primary focal point, diminish the TV and have abundant views outside, all while somehow working the furniture out to view the TV, fireplace and exterior views.

Because of this, some people opt to place the TV in a different area. It is sometimes possible to create a place for a large TV in a built-in cabinet when carefully positioned, however.

Even more architecturally difficult than the large screen TV is the contemporary garage. Three- or four-car garages are the norm, even on homes of only 2,000 square feet or so. This creates a dis-proportion of garage to house proper, like the tail wagging the dog.

Wright’s carports were strong architectural statements, reinforcing ideas of the cantilever and flowing horizontal planes. The large spatial void under the carport roof works compositionally well with the more solid, street-facing walls next to them. In his argument for carports, Wright said that cars are not horses that need to be stabled.

However, the cumulative effect of larger kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms and such is that the new home is larger than its predecessor. While size itself is not contrary to great Usonian design, if not carefully proportioned, the design can become clumsy, busy and lacking in flowing, integrated types of spaces we know the Usonian home represented.

One of the most successful things one can do when planning a Usonian home is to prioritize quality over quantity, to consider what is truly essential to include in the home.

Sarah Susanka popularized this approach in her “Not So Big House” series. A similar approach today is a good starting point for good Usonian design.
March 26, 7 to 8:30 p.m.  The Bauhaus, De Stijl, Mies + Frank Lloyd Wright
Presented by James M. Dennis, professor emeritus, Department of Art History, University of Wisconsin at Madison
The design of residential architecture was radically changed by a young, Madison-raised genius living in a Chicago suburb at the beginning of the 20th century. In Europe, only a handful of architects would achieve anything comparable to the works of Frank Lloyd Wright before World War I. After the war ended, the first house designs of the German-born Bauhaus, under the direction of its founder, Walter Gropius, were faltering attempts to catch up.

Through many illustrations, Dennis shows how, by the time the Bauhaus was forced to close in 1933, its associated house designs had flourished full force. Whether termed “Bauhaus,” “International,” or “Messian,” its final phase occurred in Chicago, where Mies Van Der Rohe found refuge and an entertaining friendship with Wright.

April 23, 7 to 8:30 p.m.  Art Deco Chicago and the Real International Style
Presented by Robert Bruegmann
Where Bauhaus designers only talked about changing the world through design, Chicago’s companies and designers actually made life easier and more aesthetically pleasing when they produced an entire series of design icons between the two world wars: buildings by Holabird & Root, tools and appliances from Sears, Roebuck and Co., Bell System telephones from Western Electric, bicycles and appliances from Sears, Roebuck and Co., Bell System telephones from Western Electric, bicycles and appliances from Sears, Roebuck and Co., Bell System telephones from Western Electric, bicycles and appliances from Sears, Roebuck and Co., Bell System telephones from Western Electric, bicycles and appliances from Sears, Roebuck and Co., Bell System telephones from Western Electric, bicycles and appliances from Sears, Roebuck and Co., Bell System telephones from Western Electric, bicycles and appliances from Sears, Roebuck and Co., Bell System telephones from Western Electric, bicycles and appliances from 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This postcard shows the meeting house of the First Unitarian Society of Madison. This view is of the prow-like apex of the building that faces the street to the north. Frank Lloyd Wright likened the unusual, copper-roofed auditorium structure to hands folded in prayer. The Taliesin Fellowship helped to complete the church, with Marshall Erdman acting as its general contractor.

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courtesy of PATRICK J. MAHONEY