



## Buying a Frank Lloyd Wright Property

An important part of our mission is to help promote the sale of Frank Lloyd Wright-designed houses to buyers who not only appreciate their unique architecture, but also who are willing and able to serve as long-term custodians, maintaining these houses until they pass to a new generation of like-minded stewards.

This guide is intended to help you identify what to look for when considering a Wright-designed property. Your search may be focused strictly on the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, or his work may be one option in a wider exploration of real estate possibilities. Either way, a better understanding of the unique qualities of Wright's houses will help you in your search and decision-making.

The goal of the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy is to help ensure that all Wright-designed buildings are held by appreciative owners who will keep them intact and maintain them properly.

We encourage you to join the Conservancy and to draw upon its resources in your quest to find a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home. For membership information please contact:

Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy  
53 W. Jackson Blvd., Suite 720  
Chicago, IL 60604  
312.663.5500  
[savewright.org/membership](http://savewright.org/membership)  
[preservation@savewright.org](mailto:preservation@savewright.org)



## About the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy

The mission of the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy is to facilitate the preservation of the nearly 400 remaining buildings designed by America's most celebrated architect. Since its formation in 1989, the Conservancy has grown worldwide to include thousands of members and supporters. Membership is open to anyone interested in Wright, including architects, scholars, preservationists, architects, real estate professionals, design enthusiasts, and importantly, those who live and work in Wright's buildings.

While the Conservancy does not own any Wright buildings, we work to protect them all.

We focus on:

- **education**, via publications, conferences, and tours
- **advocacy**, including behind-the-scenes discussions and public campaigns; and
- **preservation**, through technical and professional support provided to building owners

Dedicated and knowledgeable board members and volunteers, including experts in architecture, preservation, and real estate work closely with our full-time staff to tackle critical, timely and often unique situations. With this group's range of specialized skills and networks, the Conservancy is able to respond promptly and creatively to the challenges and opportunities facing Wright buildings and their owners.

## Building Conservancy Resources

The Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy has a number of resources that can help in the search for a Wright-designed house, assist in evaluation before sale and provide technical support after purchase.

**Wright on the Market:** The only nationwide service listing Wright-designed houses for sale. Sellers provide information that is posted on the dedicated Wright on the Market page on the Conservancy's website.

**Real Estate Professionals Network:** It's wise to work with a real estate professional who is knowledgeable and experienced with historic houses, particularly Wright-designed houses. The Conservancy works with a network of real estate professionals across the country with this relevant experience.



## FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT BUILDING CONSERVANCY

**Technical Assistance:** The Conservancy works with architects and other design professionals who may be able to help identify resources for evaluating a property when considering a purchase.

### What to Look for in a Frank Lloyd Wright House

Frank Lloyd Wright's career spanned more than 70 years, from the late 1880s until his death in 1959. The nearly 400 remaining Wright-designed houses range in size from less than 1,000 square feet to more than 10,000 square feet.

Wright's work displays ceaseless inventiveness. Hallmarks include varied spatial arrangements, a creative use of materials, and innovative structural and heating systems. Throughout his career, Wright developed methods of design and construction that became typical within his own work. Getting familiar with these methods can give you the edge when evaluating a Wright house available for sale.



**Early Work:** Wright's early work dates generally from the 1890s and displays a surprising diversity of style and form. Many may not immediately "look like Wright," reflecting typical styles of the day such as Colonial Revival, Queen Anne or the Shingle Style. A closer look will often show unusual geometries and details that are clues to Wright's experimentation during these years.

While he experimented with design concepts from the beginning of his career, Wright's early houses were generally built using methods typical of their day, so the advantages and challenges of these houses tend to be similar to other houses of the period.







## FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT BUILDING CONSERVANCY

**Prairie Period:** Spanning roughly 1900 to 1916, this period been called by some Wright's first "Golden Age." The now classic Prairie-style house is low-slung, usually without a basement or attic, with a central fireplace marked by a broad chimney rising slightly above a low-sloped roof.

This period includes some of Wright's best-known residential work, including the Willits House, the Coonley House and the Robie House. Typical construction methods of the time were used, often in very atypical ways. Steel sometimes augments wood framing (usually covered in stucco) or masonry structure to create broad cantilevers and other striking effects.



**Intermediate Period:** From the mid-1910s to the early 1930s Wright produced relatively few buildings, yet these continued to exhibit his originality and inventiveness. Early in this period, Wright developed his American System-Built houses. These wood-frame, stucco-covered houses were built from pre-cut materials that standardized construction and reduced costs. In style and form, the ASBs are related to the Prairie houses.

In the early 1920s, Wright produced much of his American work in the Los Angeles area, including the early textile block houses. These houses are constructed of concrete blocks fabricated on site. The walls are made of two layers of blocks tied together with steel rods. Using this technique, Wright created some of his most distinctive houses, whose unusual construction technique has generated maintenance challenges since they were built.



**Usonian:** With the Usonian house, Wright developed a specific residential construction type that he used regularly from the 1930s on. Typical components include a concrete floor slab with hot-water radiant heating pipes in the slab, masonry and wood walls, and flat roofs, often of varying levels.



Usonian houses are truly “organic” in that each component of the house is related to others. This can often require careful attention during renovation and restoration, since every decision has ramifications in multiple areas. This organic quality is also an important part of the creation of a complete environment of a Wright-designed home.

## **Role of a Real Estate Broker**

When buying a property, you may find advantages if you work with a broker experienced in buying and selling architecturally significant properties. Ideally, your broker should be knowledgeable about the work of Frank Lloyd Wright.

You might ask a prospective broker about his or her experience, including:

- Is the broker familiar with lenders who understand historically or architecturally unique houses, particularly those by Wright? Note that lenders and appraisers who do not appreciate how a Wright property attracts an international pool of buyers may wrongly assess a property using local comparables, whose sale prices may be significantly lower than the price that a Wright property can command.
- Is the broker familiar with preservation easements and other forms of property protections—and does the broker understand the positive benefits that such protections can provide a property? Having a broker who works with lenders that understand protective regulations may encourage the lender to offer a more favorable interest rate.
- Is the broker familiar with regulations such as those regarding short-term rental, like Airbnb? Local zoning regulations and property association rules may affect your options for the use of the property.

## **After Purchase**

Buying a new home is exciting, especially when the home is of the caliber of a Wright-designed house. Owners of Wright houses not only enjoy the unusual assets inherent in their property’s design, they also join a community of others with similar interests and motivations. Typically, owners are glad to share experiences of living in a Wright house and their insights about restoration and maintenance.

The Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy helps formalize that support in various ways, including our member magazine *Save Wright*, web-accessible restoration case study information and assistance with technical inquiries. The Conservancy’s tours and annual conference, held in different cities each year, provide opportunities for networking with other building owners, restoration experts and others in the Wright community.



## FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT BUILDING CONSERVANCY

Like any older, unique property, a Wright-designed house requires maintenance over time and you may decide that some restoration or fixture updating is necessary. You may want to consider creating a maintenance plan for your house and establish a budget for upkeep and improvements. As you plan work on your house, refer to the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy's preservation guidelines. These provide best practices for preserving a Wright-designed building and for conserving Wright-designed artifacts, such as furniture and art glass.

Homeowner's insurance is essential in protecting any house. A Wright-designed house must be insured for its full replacement value. The replacement value of an architecturally significant house must take into account the house's unique design and artistry involved in its construction. Just as it helps to work with a real estate broker experienced with architecturally or historically significant properties, it's in your interest to work with an insurance agent who understands the issues involved in the repair or reconstruction of this type of property.

### Property Protection

Many Wright-designed buildings are protected by legal devices such as preservation easements, preservation covenants or local landmark designation. Though such protections may appear to limit options, their goal is not to turn that structure into a museum. Most easement holders or local historic preservation commissions make an effort to work in partnership with building owners, allowing a building to meet the owner's needs while protecting the integrity of a structure and its long-term value as a work of fine design.

#### Useful Definitions

**Preservation Easement:** Owner of a qualifying building of historic architectural value donates partial property rights to a charity. An easement typically prohibits alteration of the significant features of a building or its site. Thus the historic appearance of the building is protected while the owner retains the right to ownership and occupancy. The Conservancy holds easements on a number of Wright-designed properties. Feel free to contact us for more information at [preservation@savewright.org](mailto:preservation@savewright.org).

**Preservation Covenant:** Certain rights to the building are retained by the seller (such as the right to authorize changes to a façade) through an agreement with the buyer. This is an attractive option when the seller is a preservation organization. There are no tax implications, and its suitability varies from state to state.

**Deeded Gifts:** Some Wright properties may contain specific elements of design significance that have been donated to a nonprofit organization in order to protect those elements



## FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT BUILDING CONSERVANCY

from being removed from its original design context. These elements, such as art glass windows, light fixtures or furniture, remain in their original location and are maintained by the owner of the building.

**Local Landmark Designation:** Specifics of local landmark designation vary from place to place, but there are two main types:

- Honorary landmark designations carry no powers of oversight, but are meant to recognize the historic or artistic quality of a site and encourage its preservation indirectly.
- Landmark designations that carry powers of oversight. In this case, when a building permit for a landmark site is applied for, a certificate of appropriateness confirming that an alteration does not affect the historic quality of a site, is typically required from the local historic preservation commission.

After purchasing a Wright-designed building, you may consider adding some sort of preservation protection. The Conservancy provides consultation on various strategies for the long-term protection of Wright properties. Enactment of protections may be subject to various local and federal laws. Each owner's unique situation must be considered, and a personal tax advisor consulted before instituting any of these protections.