

The Front Porch

You can't be (W)right every time

By Vicki Wilson

If you've been to the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio in Oak Park, you have to admit that it's a monument to architectural genius. Magnificent in its simplicity, revolutionary in its structure – there's no doubt, Wright was the master.

Except for the chairs.

That's right, the chairs. Tall, straight-backed, virtually walling in the dining room table, guides at the home and studio say Wright was attempting to create an intimate "room within a room" for diners.

Intimacy's all right. but those chairs just look downright uncomfortable. Which leads us to the question: "Did Frank ever do anything wrong?"

"He did plenty wrong," was Oak Park builder Doug Freerksen's answer. Having worked on many Wright houses, Freerksen is a qualified judge.

"All of the houses in this area were experimental. [Wright] was breaking traditions and rules, and he didn't have a tried and true replacement."

Freerksen cites a sagging cantilever in a Wright coach house. He says that aesthetically it was beautiful, but it spoiled the roof's drainage.

"It never would have passed code today," he says.

Noted architect John Thorpe, who has worked on 47 of Wright's buildings, is reluctant to criticize the master. He does concede, however, that it isn't unusual to find a "head knocker" in a stairwell.

"He liked things scaled to his own height (Wright was 5-foot-9)," Thorpe explains. This may have even been a problem in Wright's lifetime, since his own sons Lloyd and David were quite tall, according to Thorpe.

For more on Wright's wrongs, we turned to some residents of area Wright homes. Both the Abrahamson family and the Talaske family love their Oak Park homes passionately, but, when pressed, they came up with a few comments.

Debbie Abrahamson, who lives in Wright's Rollin Furbeck House (1897), admitted to a certain intimidation factor that comes with living in a masterpiece.

"We're planning to re-do our kitchen and family room," Abrahamson says, and Wright's design really didn't account for such 1990s ideas. Staying true to the original design is fine for a living room or dining room, but, even if she knew what the kitchen looked like in 1897, it certainly wouldn't be practical today.

"You can't even find a picture of the original kitchens, because no one was interested in that – it would be like taking a picture of a washing machine," she adds.

Talaske, who lives in the William E. Martin House (1903), actually first saw her home on the Wright Plus housewalk in 1981.

"I said to my mother 'I could live here.'" Nine years later, she did.

Talaske also cites the obligation to the "living work of art" as perhaps the only drawback to living in a Wright home.

"It's expensive to work on these houses because they are so detailed. If you are a purist you [don't cut corners] you re-create things in the same way," Talaske says.

And as for those chairs she's got 'em – reproductions anyway. But, they aren't perfect replicas.

"They're more comfortable with a slight angle in them," Talaske admits.