

SAVE WRIGHT

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So You Bought a Wright House

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PHOTO COURTESY OF JACK REED

Period photo of the Glasner House, circa 1928.



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The Glasner House (1905) in Glencoe, Illinois, with its original facade and color palette.

A Preservation Model: The Glasner House

BY RON SCHERUBEL WITH JACK REED

Perched on the shoulder of a ravine feeding into Lake Michigan north of Chicago, the William A. Glasner House was designed and built by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1905-1906 for an executive of the First National Bank of Chicago and his wife, Cora.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ronald L. Scherubel, a native Chicagoan, capped a legal career as vice president and general counsel of the Sara Lee Corporation with service for eight years as the executive director of the Conservancy. He is currently a member of the Conservancy's board and remains actively involved in its preservation efforts as well as those of other organizations.

Keen on science as a child, Jack Reed graduated from the University of Chicago with a BS in mathematics. However, some courses remaining from Chicago's fabled Great Books-based liberal-arts program more effectively nurtured his interests in aesthetic (and ethical and social) questions. He still lives in Chicago.

"In it, when you're on the ravine side, you're two stories up, unaware of the ground sloping away beneath you. The nearest trees are a couple of arm's lengths away. I think it's the best tree house this side of southwestern Pennsylvania," says Jack Reed, current owner of the Glasner House. "Some squares in the art-glass windows change from green to yellow when the ash and maple trees outside do; the newly unpainted stucco above the horizontal board-and-batten exterior is light gray in dry weather, darker mottled when it's humid: it's in the nature of the materials Wright chose for the house to make it harmonize with the changing seasons and the weather."

While strongly influenced by his Prairie-style motifs, Wright's design of this house, responding to Cora Glasner's progressive ideas about running a household without servants in a house without a dining room, made it an early precursor of his Usonian house concept.

The Glasner house has changed ownership five times in its 105 years. The owners for the longest period, architects themselves, held the property for 43 years. They, and numerous other owners, have made changes, "some more imaginative than sympathetic," says Reed, "but they all helped save the place, let's remember that." Preservation groups have also had to help save the residence on more than one occasion. In 1997, the Glasner House was on Landmarks Illinois' Most Endangered list until a sympathetic buyer was found; and again in 2002-2003 the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy engaged in a widespread publicity campaign to find a preservation-minded new owner.



Northwest view of the Glasner House in 2004 with patio and stairway.



Removal of non-original stairway to restore original facade.

In 2003, after developers had already measured the property for the mansion they intended to build after razing the house, a friend sent Reed a Washington Post article chronicling the threat to the house and suggested that he buy and save it.

Reed had a longstanding interest in architecture and had visited and photographed numerous Wright and other modern architects' works; however, he had never thought of owning and restoring one. "But," he says, "I considered how it would be to try to save it and compared that to how it would be not even to try, and to see it go down, and that felt like the worse alternative." Fortunately for the Glasner House, he purchased it just ahead of the developers.

Wright realized where the rewards were here, and he put his house on the edge of the ravine.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JACK REED.

Living room in 2004, modified over the years to remove one set of windows, and with tie-rods across the room to keep the walls from spreading apart.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JACK REED.

Crane inserting the steel roof beam in 2008.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JACK REED.

Precision placement of the roof beam to tie into vertical members on north and south sides of the house.

Reed had to exercise his preservationist skills even during the negotiations. The seller wanted to remove and keep one of the 50-plus original art-glass windows as a souvenir, but ultimately settled for the glass-top dining table he had had made for the house.

“I intended a faithful restoration of house and site; I had no intention to live in it” says Reed. “I had a good intuition of what would be needed.” And a faithful restoration is what he has accomplished. Some people buy a historic house and attempt to restore it themselves, without professional help from historians or architects. Jack Reed never considered this perhaps less costly alternative. In his view, “People who think they’re just as smart as Wright need to think through why they bought a Wright house in the first place. Do they want to deny themselves the maximum reward?” To assure getting that “maximum reward” from the Glasner House, Reed obtained copies of the original drawings, including a contour map, from the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives. He also sought the highly expert input of historian Jean Guarino and of VincilHamp Architects, Inc., one of Chicago’s top restoration firms. In Reed’s opinion, “No one should think architects are just esthetes and designers and makers of pretty drawings; it’s part of their job to know who can build it and finish it and make it work. Neither should they think, though, that all architects are equally skilled at restoration.”

VincilHamp brought in experienced, proven specialists to engineer a structural reinforcement system; to analyze and restore surface finishes; to restore (off-site) the art-glass windows, as well as to construct a few new ones; and to provide a mixed radiant and forced-air comfort system (inaudible when running) fed from geothermal wells under the driveway.



Living room after restoration, with steel beams in place, refinished original oak floor and original color palette for walls.

The house was so delicately constructed out of two-by-fours—not even two-by-sixes—that overhead tie-rods had been installed across the living room to resist the tendency of the weight of the roof to bow out the living room wall, as well as a beam and post in the downstairs family room to support a sagging floor. Robert Silman Associates, recipient of a Wright Spirit Award for, among other things, designing the structural solution to the sagging cantilevers at Fallingwater, was engaged by VincilHamp to devise a way to slip in several tons of steel to stiffen the structure invisibly, so the additions, so long an eyesore in the living room and below it, could be removed.

Reed had a pretty good idea of what the original kitchen had looked like from drawings and photos, and because the new one, recently installed by former owners, seemed to impose a different style, he gave most of it back to its builder, and constructed a newer one much more like Wright's original. "Wright's overall floor plan seemed pretty good to us, too," explains Reed, "and as the main-floor bathroom came back to



Detail of wood banding over the fireplace in the living room.

