

# City of Detroit

## CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

Final Report

### PROPOSED TURKEL-BENBOW HOUSE HISTORIC DISTRICT

The proposed historic district under study by the Historic Designation Advisory Board is a property containing a single residence located at 2760 West Seven Mile Road. The house was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for Mrs. Dorothy Turkel, and was built in 1956.

**BOUNDARIES:** The boundaries of the proposed historic district are as follows:

1. *The western boundary of lot 303 of the Palmer Woods Subdivision, extended southward to the centerline of West Seven Mile Road.*
2. *The centerline of West Seven Mile Road.*
3. *The eastern boundary of Lot 304 of the Palmer Woods Subdivision, extended southward to the centerline of West Seven Mile Road.*
4. *The northern and northeastern boundaries of lots 303 and 304 of the Palmer Woods Subdivision.*

**HISTORY:** Throughout his career, the internationally-acclaimed architect Frank Lloyd Wright was best known and most influential in his design of private residences. From early work in the Chicago area (hardly recognizable as Wright's work to the uninitiated) to the houses of his last years, he retained his interest in settings for living which would function as a reflection of the life-style of the times and of the occupants. His residential work tended toward larger and more expensive houses, if only because clients interested in his theories of design tended to be from the more sophisticated elements of society, who tended to have more money to spend. Wright, himself, however, was no respecter of income level, and always desired to provide housing for all.

In the 1920's, Wright designed a series of houses which made use of specially cast concrete block as the basic building element. Wright did not subscribe to the modern theory that buildings should be undecorated; he did believe, however, that the materials of which a building was constructed should provide the decoration. Concrete blocks cast to his patterns offered an opportunity to secure decorative pattern within the building material because the repetition of blocks created pattern and the blocks could be cast with other than flat surfaces.

In 1936, Wright designed the Jacobs House in Madison, Wisconsin, the first of a series he called "Usonian" houses. The origin of this term is unclear, but seems to relate to the reformed American way of life that Wright worked for and hoped for in the last part of his life. One theory is that the word derives from "U.S.A." or "U.S.O.N.A.", an acronym for United States of North America, which had at one time been proposed to avoid

confusion should the Union of South Africa be also referred to as the U.S.A. The Jacobs House was small and built for a family of modest means; Wright was so anxious to keep the publicized cost of the building down that he went so far as to devote part of his fee to the purchase of screens. The principles he saw as important for the Usonian house were a high degree of prefabrication of materials off-site in order to keep on-site labor down; a simplified plan, both to reflect simplified living styles and to keep costs down as well, and the avoidance of high-cost finishing work, such as plastering and painting. The Jacobs house was "L" shaped, a plan Wright himself compared to a polliwog. While Usonian houses were built on a number of plans through the following years, the polliwog or "L" shaped plan remained an important type throughout the Usonian years.

Usonian houses were also standardized on a grid, usually made up of two by four foot rectangles, on which the plans were based. The 2' X 4" dimensions were chosen to correspond to the commonly available sizes of such materials as lumber and plywood. Wright had played with and learned from a block system in his childhood, and much of his planning technique seems to have grown from that experience -- hence the grids.

The Usonian houses also introduced new techniques. In the Jacobs house, a horizontal board and batten system, prefabricated off-site, was used for large expanses of wall. No less revolutionary was the elimination of the basement, and its replacement by a thin concrete pad laid over a bed of gravel. In this floor membrane, which also acted as foundation, a series of pipes were laid to provide heating, thus eliminating both radiators and hot-air ducts. Wright claimed that this heating system allowed for more comfort at lower temperatures, since the system heated not only the air within the house, but the masonry of the floor and wall masses, thus eliminating the chilling effect of cold walls and floors. The system was successful, but later owners faced with leaking heating pipes embedded below a monolithic concrete slab have had reason to despair. Wright believed in minimal energy use to intervene in the climate within a house -- he did not believe in air conditioning at all. This also led to design features such as overhanging eaves, to shade the house from the sun.

In the early 1950's, Wright combined features of the Usonian house with some of the techniques developed in the block houses of the 1920's to create the "Usonian Automatic." Based on the design principles of the Usonian House, but built of concrete block, this type of house was intended by Wright to provide an opportunity for people to build their own houses. By eliminating the unions, masons, plasterers and carpenters, he hoped to create a system for low cost houses. "I did it for the G.I.'s," he said at a meeting of the Detroit chapter of the American Institute of Architects. "The G.I. can go in his back road...he's got sand there...get himself some steel rods and cement, make the blocks, and put the blocks together... I have done that thing.... you can build your own house!"

The structural system of the Usonian Automatic involved the use of precast concrete blocks in various conformations, all of which had hollow edges. When the blocks were assembled, steel reinforcing rod was laid in the horizontal and vertical cavities created where the blocks joined. The

cavities were then filled with cement, joining block, steel rod, and poured cement into a single mass. The floor pad and floor heating of the Usonian, as well as many of the plan features of the type, were used in combination with this structural system to create an important sub-group within Wright's output.

Not many G.I.'s, in fact, seem to have taken advantage of Wright's do-it-yourself plan. First, Wright was perceived as an avant-garde architect, perhaps a bit crazy, and widespread public reluctance to accept his work surely prevented any widespread movement toward do-it-yourself Wright houses. Furthermore, the system was by no means foolproof. The slightest error in molding the blocks could lead to an accumulation of such errors. That, in turn, could put the assembled blocks out of phase with the grid of the plan, and lead to chaos in assembling the building. Most Usonian Automatic houses were built by contractors.

In 1956, Mrs. Dorothy S. Turkel commissioned Wright to design a residence for property she had recently purchased on West Seven Mile in the Palmer Woods Subdivision. The "Usonian Automatic" type was selected, and a building permit issued on April 23, 1956 to Rayco Construction Company of Detroit for the construction of the two story reinforced concrete block residence. Although Wright had intended the "Usonian Automatic" to be a low-cost building system, the estimated construction cost given on the permit was \$65,000, no small sum for a residence in 1956.

In 1957, a building permit was issued for the addition of a storage area and carport to the house. Given the length of time necessary to build the house, this permit may, in fact, reflect a change in the original plans rather than an addition. Further information on this point is being sought.

The ownership of the house remained with Mrs. Turkel until 1978, when the house was sold to Ms. Loretta Benbow, who now resides there.

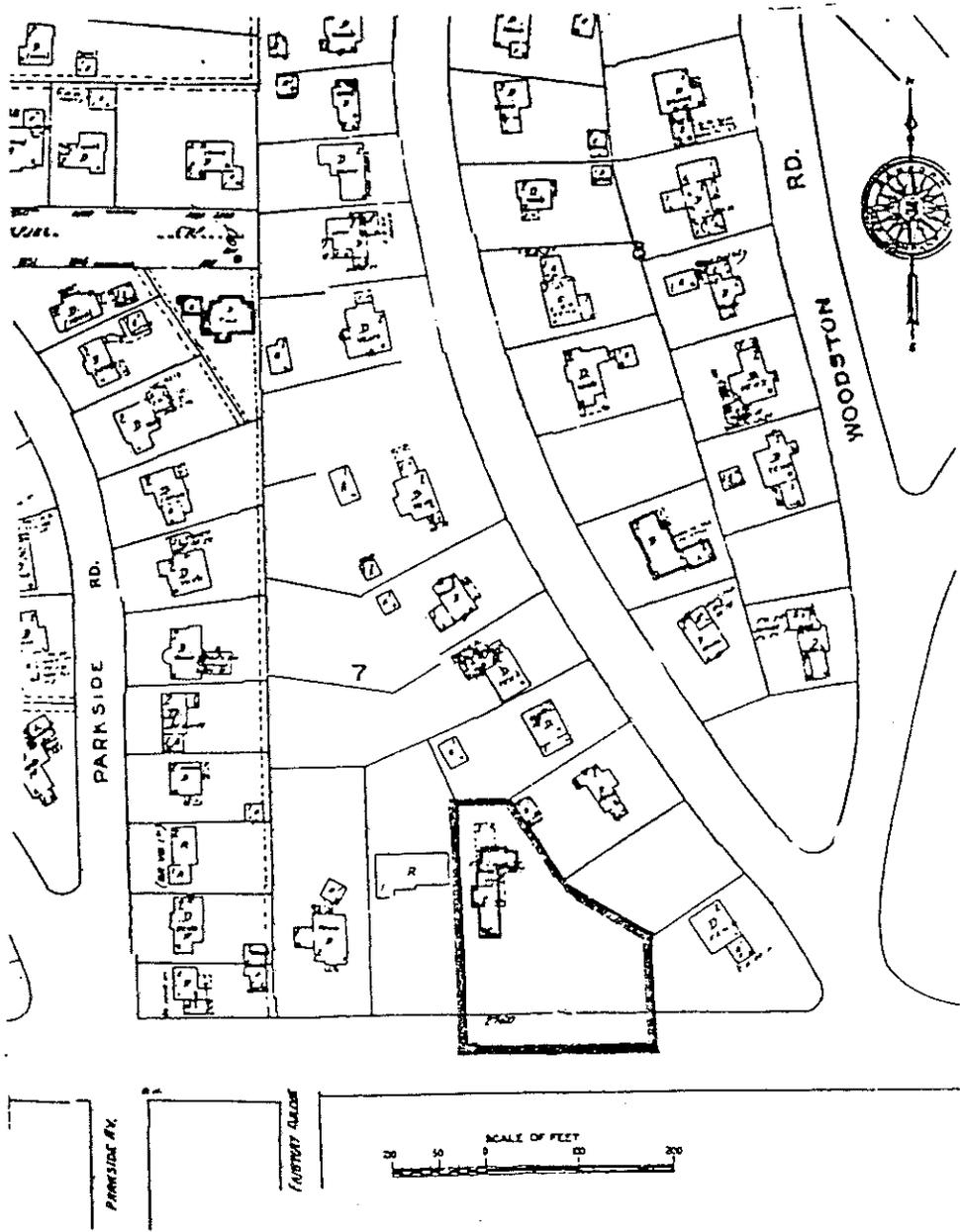
*PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:* The house is sited in the northwest corner of the irregularly shaped lot, with little or no yard to the north and west. Wright's Usonian houses often are "L" shaped in plan, as this one is, and the open side of the "L" thus faces the large open area southeast of the house. At the southern end, a large two story living room terminates the longer arm of the "L". The house is a natural grey color of the concrete used to cast the modular elements; much of the detail is created through the repetition of forms natural to the use of cast elements. For example, the large windows of the tall living room are made up of multiple hollow squares assembled and then glazed. The flat roof combined with the long "L" shaped plan, combined with overhanging cornice elements, and other design features, create an emphatically horizontal composition.

The house also shares the typical concrete pad foundation of the Usonian types, as well as the underfloor heating system, which, in this case, is reportedly experiencing problems.

The site of the Turkel-Benbow house is not one of those with an irregular natural features that so often appear in Wright's residential works. In addition, during his later years Wright was not very favorable to large cities. As a result, the Turkel-Benbow house is an interesting example of Wright's response to a location and site of a type relatively rare in his later years.

The house and its grounds are carefully designed to relate to one another, and to close out the street and surrounding properties. On both the first and second floors, the relationship with the outside is developed along hallways running front to back along the east side of the house. These hallways, or galleries, connect on the first floor with the living room, and on the second with a balcony space which forms part of the living room. On both levels, doors open at regular intervals, with built-in cabinets between the doors. On the first floor, these doors lead to the terrace, while on the second they provide access to a balcony cantilevered over the terrace. On the first floor, the kitchen, laundry, and other service space are kept to the west and rear; on the second floor the bedrooms and baths are also generally on the side away from the terrace and balconies. Only in the wing to the northeast do actual rooms face the open lawn; a family room on the first floor and a bedroom on the second. In this way, the galleries provide the interconnecting space between service and bedroom spaces, and the living spaces, which are open and designed to interconnect with the outside spaces.

The plantings of the property contribute to the effect of the natural surroundings belonging to the house only, and not to the general area in which the property is located. Screen plantings along the sidewalk both close in the property from within and screen it from the outside. A large wooded area on the eastern portion of the property contributes to a rural feeling, and, again, screens the property from the east.



The Turkel-Benbow Proposed Historic District  
 (Boundaries of district outline in black)