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Madison and the World Heritage

By Charles Horton

With the inclusion in 2019 of the First Jacobs House in the Westmorland neighborhood of Madison in The 20th-Century Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright serial site, our city has become home to a property inscribed on the World Heritage List. This house is significant due to the fact that it is considered the first of the series of Usonian houses



Herbert and Katherine Jacobs First House, image from Wikimedia Commons, 7398383968

designed by Wright, which were intended to be more affordable than the homes he had generally designed up to that point for wealthy clients. In the following, I would like to briefly describe what the World Heritage is, the process by which the Jacobs I House was deemed worthy of this honor, and what effects this may have on the property and on Madison in general.

The 1972 World Heritage Convention is an international treaty administered by UNESCO that created a list of World Heritage sites to conserve and preserve natural and cultural treasures of outstanding universal value. The convention is one of the most successful international agreements, and has

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been ratified by 195 countries throughout the world. There are currently around 1,200 sites from over 160 countries on the [World Heritage List](#). The convention was adopted by the United States in 1973 and the United States was actually instrumental in having natural sites included in the convention as opposed to exclusively cultural ones, as was originally proposed. Cultural sites on the list include properties such as individual works of architecture or collections of buildings as well as archaeological sites. The United States currently has 25 World Heritage sites, 19 of which are at single locations and six of which are serial inscriptions containing geographically distinct locations. Twelve of these are natural sites, such as the Grand Canyon, and 12 of them are cultural sites, such as the Statue of Liberty, while one is a mixed natural and cultural site. Each country participating in the World Heritage Convention also maintains a list of tentative sites that may be considered for nomination in the future.

The 20th-Century Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright is one of the most recent additions to the World Heritage List in the United States, and it includes eight buildings designed by the famed architect: Unity Temple (Oak Park, Illinois), the Robie House (Chicago, Illinois), the Hollyhock House (Los Angeles, California), Fallingwater (Mill Run, Pennsylvania), Taliesin West (Scottsdale, Arizona), and the Guggenheim Museum (New York, New York), as well as Taliesin in Spring Green and the first Jacobs House right here in Madison.



Taliesin in Spring Green, WI, photo from Taliesin Preservation, taliesinpreservation.org

The history of getting this serial listing included amongst the world's most significant cultural properties goes back several decades and shows the lengthy, difficult process of earning inscription onto the World Heritage List. The idea of a Frank Lloyd Wright World Heritage site began in 1982 when it

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was first put on the tentative list of the United States, but at that time the proposal was only to include Taliesin and Taliesin West. In 1990 a proposal for inscription was prepared, but the UNESCO World Heritage Committee at that time deemed the nomination “incomplete”, essentially encouraging the inclusion a greater range of the most significant Wright-designed buildings. In the meantime, the United States’ sometimes rocky relationship with UNESCO and the World Heritage Committee came to a head in relation to some issues at Yellowstone National Park (inscribed on the list in 1978). In part as a result of this dispute, the US suspended nominations to the World Heritage List, and so while 20 US sites had been inscribed between 1978 and 1995, not a single additional site in the country was added from 1996 to 2010.

When the idea for the nomination was seriously considered again, starting in 2008 and spearheaded by the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy in Chicago, a total of ten, and then eleven buildings were to be proposed. However, the Johnson Wax Headquarters in Racine was later dropped before a renewed proposal was prepared that included the eight properties mentioned above as well as the Price Tower (Bartlesville, Oklahoma) and the Marin County Civic Center (San Rafael, California). The nomination process involves a great deal of communication and negotiation back and forth between the preparers of the nomination and the World Heritage Committee’s advisory body, ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites), which in the case of the US is facilitated by the International Affairs Office of the US Park Service. A proposal that included ten properties was submitted in 2015, but was referred with a request for revision by UNESCO. The new proposal with the final eight buildings was then submitted in 2018, and the site was approved and inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2019.

The First Jacobs House was built in 1937, after Herbert Jacobs, an employee of the *Capital Times* newspaper, and his wife, Katherine challenged Wright to design and build them an affordable home that would cost no more than \$5,000. Wright had previously shown an interest in urban planning and housing for people of more modest means in his concept for Broadacre City as well as in his design for the Willey House (1934) in Minneapolis. However, the Jacobs I House is considered the first actual example of his series of “Usonian” homes constructed over the following decades, and this is where its great significance lies. These homes were modest in size and price, and like the First Jacobs House, they usually featured local building materials, an

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L-shaped floorplan, flat roofs with wide overhangs, and radiant-floor heating. Just as with the Jacobs I House, they were also somewhat closed off to the street, with a relatively hidden front entryway and a narrow band of clerestory windows just under the eaves on the front façade. In contrast to the clear



Herbert and Katherine Jacobs house, photo from Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, franklloydwright.org

separation of the private space of the home from the public space of the street, the homes had large windows facing the rear and were quite open to the back yard, blurring the distinction between interior and exterior space.

The Jacobs family quickly outgrew the house and it was sold to new owners in 1942 and was subject to decline and neglect from its various owners until James Dennis, an art history professor at the University of Wisconsin, purchased the property in 1982. Mr. Dennis began the process of rehabilitating the poorly-maintained house with a great deal of assistance from his students, in particular the architect Bradley Lynch. It is in great part due to these conscientious efforts that the Jacobs I House was able to retain the authenticity and integrity that allowed it to be designated a National Historic Landmark in 2003 and later meet the standards to become part of the World Heritage.

Despite being an outstanding steward for this important property, Mr. Dennis was initially quite reluctant to have his home included in the World Heritage nomination, and without owner consent, it would not have been possible. He was finally won over to the idea through the efforts of individuals involved in the World Heritage nomination project, as they understood the proposal could not really be considered to encompass Wright's most significant buildings without its inclusion. Once he was convinced, another key factor was the signing of a historic preservation covenant with him. This covenant, which was signed in 2010, assures that the property will be maintained and preserved in perpetuity in accordance with the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* and any alterations need prior approval of the State Historical Society. This protection is combined

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with its status as a Madison Landmark, which allows the Landmarks Commission to deny alterations on the house and review proposed changes to neighboring properties (defined as part of the World Heritage Buffer Zone in the inscription). These protections are scrutinized closely when judging a site for inscription on the World Heritage List, as a great deal of emphasis is placed by UNESCO on ensuring the continued preservation of any sites included in the World Heritage. Due to all of these issues, according to Mr. Dennis, his is the only private, owner-occupied residence included as an individual property on the entire list.

As a part of the legal restrictions intended to safeguard the properties, a management plan and assurances for monitoring are also crucial components of the nomination process. The Jacobs I House is relatively simple from this perspective, as it is a small building with maintenance needs and potential threats that are not completely out of the ordinary, although the features and building techniques employed do vary from the standard practices of the day in certain significant ways. The Frank Lloyd Wright World Heritage Council, which was established as a part of the nomination process, is intended to coordinate the management and monitoring of the serial site and requires each individual component to provide an annual report detailing any changes to the state of conservation, management, expected projects, and factors affecting the property. Tourism pressure can be a major factor that impacts sites on the World Heritage List, since significant increases in visitor levels often accompany inscription. The Jacobs I House has a very limited ability to handle more visitors, with only a small number of tours being allowed annually. The owner has stated that he has not experienced a significant increase in tourists viewing his home since inscription, but the travel restrictions due to COVID may be a reason for this, and so this has a potential to become an issue in the future.

A small example of how inclusion in the World Heritage may have helped maintain the integrity of the Jacobs I House comes from an incident when the City of Madison was preparing to install a bus stop on the street in front of the house. The owner informed the city's preservation planner and the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy of the situation, which was quickly resolved with the city agreeing that the stop had to be moved to an alternate location so as not to adversely affect the property.

One of the more unusual aspects of the nomination document for the Frank Lloyd Wright World Heritage site is the fact that it also includes a section

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identifying buildings that could be possible extensions to the series. It is not uncommon for earlier inscribed sites to be revisited and expanded in this manner due to the fact that considerations of importance and outstanding universal value change over time, with elements not previously held in as high esteem gaining greater recognition. However, it is unusual for this consideration to be included in the original nomination documentation.

A couple of reasons why this section was included in this case may be that the feedback the proposal leaders received from the World Heritage Committee and ICOMOS may have given mixed signals as to which properties deserved to be included, and the fact that certain sites that may have been considered deserving may not have had the necessary backing of the current owners or legal framework to ensure their preservation to the standards of the World Heritage Committee. Two of the buildings that have been identified as possible extensions are in Wisconsin, the S.C. Johnson Administration Building and Research Tower in Racine and the Second Jacobs House in Middleton. Despite the identification of these as possible future extensions, at this time it seems unlikely that they will be added onto the serial site. On the one hand, an extension of a World Heritage site is an undertaking almost as significant as a new proposed nomination, and on the other hand, it may be unlikely that the owners of the properties (in particular the S.C. Johnson & Son Company) would agree to the restrictive preservation covenants required to show the proper protection necessary for inscription.

With all this being said, it is an enormous accomplishment that a property here in Madison has earned the right through its outstanding universal value to be considered a part of the World Heritage. One can hope that recognition such as this will help the people of Madison and Wisconsin to understand that historic properties of immense importance are not only something that can be found in major U.S. cities or abroad, and will provide greater appreciation of the historic fabric that exists here.

I would like to express my thanks to Carrie Rodamaker, Executive Director of Taliesin Preservation in Spring Green, Barbara Gordon, Executive Director of the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy in Chicago, James Dennis, owner of the Jacobs I House, and Phyllis Ellin, contract historian for the U.S. National Park Service's Office of International Affairs, for taking the time to talk with me and provide information that aided in the writing of this article.