

Katherine and Herbert Jacobs House, I (Usonia I), 1937

441 Toepfer Avenue

By: Margaret Raimann

The first Katherine and Herbert Jacobs House stands out in the Westmorland neighborhood as one of only a few architect-designed houses. Although designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, already by then a world-renowned architect, it materialized from his lifelong “Usonian” vision to house middle-class Americans.¹ Like Wright himself, the house is significant as a national model as well as regionally (see Andrzejewski essay); indeed, the James Wilkie House just around the corner is modeled directly after it.

The house was constructed in 1937 for Katherine and Herbert Jacobs, who enlisted Wright to construct a low-priced house by following his Usonian drawings. During the Great Depression, housing starts had slowed, and thus architects such as Wright were exploring new kinds of commissions. Wright’s lack of work during the Depression, however, was not his only motivation to build the house for the Jacobs. After moving from Milwaukee, Herb and Katherine Jacobs visited the Taliesin Fellowship in 1936. Upon meeting the couple, Wright took to them on a personal level and was willing to build the modest-cost home that the couple desired.²

The house, which covers two lots on the east side of Toepfer Avenue, employs an L-shape plan, with the living-dining-kitchen in the main block and a bedroom wing off the back. In addition to the house, Wright designed the interior furnishings, including built-ins, furniture, and lighting, much of which survives or has been restored. Due to Wright’s lack of work during the Depression, he was also instrumental in construction activities associated with the house. To keep costs low, Wright used locally sourced materials such as leftover brick from his work on the Johnson Wax Building in Racine, Wisconsin, which is located just over one hundred miles southeast of Madison.³

Herbert Jacobs’s book, *Building with Frank Lloyd Wright*, further documents the architect’s business and personal relationship with the family during and after the construction of the house. Jacobs describes working with Wright and the building of two homes for the family, both designed by the renowned architect (the second Jacobs house was planned on a farm west of Madison as early as 1942). As the Jacobs began their initial search for a home in Madison, they were not sold on the idea of a modern-style residence. As was true of most prospective homeowners at that time, the Jacobs initially preferred traditional styles. However, a friend who had apprenticed at Taliesin convinced the couple to see what Wright had to offer them. When the couple visited Wright, they became attuned to his ideals of American housing, which deviated from the national standards of the era. Instead of picture windows that emphasized the frontside appeal of the house, Wright suggested a house that “turns its back on the street.” As an alternative, Wright placed floor-to-ceiling windows, located at the rear of the house, which looked out at the backyard. The couple was intrigued by Wright’s innovative take on the suburban American family house and its emphasis on privacy, which later became a coveted feature of post-World War II single-family suburban housing. After several visits to Taliesin, the Jacobses hired Wright.⁴

Jacobs I presented a new challenge for Wright, who was accustomed to building artistically, but not necessarily cost-efficiently. Wright had, of course, experimented with

low-cost housing before, most notably in the Arthur Richards system-built homes in south Milwaukee during the 1910s.⁵ He continued this pursuit throughout the Depression with the Jacobs House, as well as with his plans for Broadacre City. (Of course, he also received prominent commissions during the 1930s, including the Edgar Kaufmann House ("Fallingwater") and the Pew House in nearby Shorewood Hills, not to mention the Johnson Wax commission.) In the Jacobs House, Wright experimented with cutting costs by using a carport (instead of a garage) and by building the house on a slab foundation, with only a small crawl space for mechanicals. The house reflected Wright's organic philosophy, given that it was spread across the lot because of the topographic variations. Wright's specific vision for greater Usonia was a utopian-like neighborhood located away from the city center. While never fully realized, Usonian homes hold national significance, with the initial (Jacobs I) being recognized as the first of hundreds of similar houses designed by Wright during the middle of the twentieth century.

The Jacobs family did not live in the house for an extended period of time. According to city directories they had moved by 1946, when Max Pohle took over the property.⁶ When Herb Jacobs developed an interest in farming, he moved his family towards the City of Middleton, located northwest of Madison; once again they hired Wright to build another house for them (Jacobs II).

Jacobs I received its designation as a Madison City Landmark in 1974, although at that time it was in need of extensive restoration. Today, Jacobs I is fully restored, a process that began after James Dennis, a Professor in the Department of Art History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, purchased the home in 1983. Dennis maintained Wright's original design with little deviation. The carport was a telling case. Since mid-century carports were not suitable for Midwestern climatic conditions, many Madisonians converted them into garages. Nevertheless, Dennis's restoration team renovated the carport to its original state, since it is a distinct design feature of Wright's homes. The concrete slab in the house was completely repoured and the roof replaced with a rubber membrane. Another major job involved the removal of a creosote preservative from the exterior Ponderosa pine boards and redwood battens, as well as the removal of red paint trim from the windows and doors. As part of the renovation Dennis also created features from the original plans that had not been completed, such as a flower box in the front of the house.⁷ In addition to its local landmark status, Jacobs I was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2003 (the same year as Wright's Unitarian Meeting House--see entry) and is now under consideration as a potential nomination to the "U.S. World Heritage Tentative List."⁸

James Wilkie House **3909 Euclid Avenue, 1938**

By: Margaret Raimann

In 1938, shortly after Frank Lloyd Wright built the first Katherine and Herbert Jacobs House, William Kaeser built a strikingly similar house just around the corner at 3909 Euclid Avenue. Although Kaeser began his professional career as Madison's first city planner in 1935, he left that position a few years later to devote himself to architecture, claiming that city development in the government took too long to materialize.⁹ Inspired by the ideals of the Wright's Usonian houses, Kaeser designed and produced a number of houses based on the models of Wright (see Andrzejewski essay).

The plan of the James Wilkie House is almost a direct copy of Wright's first usonian model home. What makes Kaeser's home in Westmorland interesting, along with the other residential dwellings he built, is his own interpretation of Wright's organic architecture practices. According to Kaeser scholar Anne Biebel, Kaeser was able to distinguish himself from Wright and his Taliesin apprentices through integration of his graduate studies with Eliel Saarinen. Kaeser learned to not completely dismiss the emerging International or modern styles, as Wright did, and instead combine them with organic styles idealized for Usonia.¹⁰

When Kaeser left his position as a city planner, he also dismissed residential development in the urban core. His primary projects early in his career were in the suburbs, especially in the Villages of Maple Bluff and Shorewood Hills, which are both located along Lake Mendota. Taking to the natural architecture and building with the topography of the area, Kaeser was able to carry out his own regionalist modernism (see Andrzejewski essay).

While Kaeser attempted to distinguish himself from Wright, it was difficult to ignore Wright's influence on the city of Madison. Upon entering the architecture field, Kaeser experimented with Wright's Usonian ideals by taking features of Usonian houses, like Jacobs I, and attempted to distinguish his structure with different materials. Both the Wilkie and Jacobs I houses are constructed in an L-shaped plan. Although Wright intended his house as a low-cost middle-class home, Kaeser's was even more about cost efficiency; his house is downscaled in size as well as materials.

Both homes also set a precedent for post-World War II suburban ideals of privacy seen elsewhere in the neighborhood (and throughout the United States). The front of each home is situated in a low position on the hill with narrow window bands placed toward the top. The backs of the homes, meanwhile, are lined with tall windows, which allow the residents to experience nature while still having their desired privacy.

¹ *Westmorland: A Great Place to Live* (Madison: Westmorland Neighborhood Association, 2011), 39-42.

² , Paul Sprague, "National Historic Landmark Nomination: Jacobs, Herbert and Katherine, First House," Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 2001, 1-21.

³ *Ibid.*; and David G. Kalc, "The Jacobs House I," in *Frank Lloyd Wright and Madison: Eight Decades of Artistic and Social Interaction* (Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art, 1992), 91-100.

⁴ Herbert Jacobs with Katherine Jacobs, *Building With Frank Lloyd Wright: An Illustrated Memoir* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1978), 3-26.

⁵ Mike Lilec, "The American System-Built Homes in Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Frank Lloyd Wright's Earliest System of Low-Cost Housing," 2005;
<http://www.wrightinmilwaukee.com/History/tabid/62/Default.aspx> (accessed 12 March 2012).

⁶ Madison City Directory, 1946.

⁷ "Usonia I: Frank Lloyd Wright," <http://www.usonia1.com/>, accessed 12 February 2012.

⁸ "U.S. Nominations to the World Heritage List; 15-Day Notice of Opportunity for Public Comment" (5 March 2012), *Federal Register: The Daily Journal of the United States Government*, Office of the Federal Register (US)

<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/search/pagedetails.action?granuleId=2012-5191&packageId=FR-2012-03-05&acCode=FR> (accessed 12 March 2012).

⁹ *Westmorland: A Great Place to Live* (Madison: Westmorland Neighborhood Association, 2011), 39.

¹⁰ Anne E. Biebel, "The Residential Architecture of William V. Kaeser," M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1985.