

# History of the Burnham Block

## AN AMERICAN HOME CAMPAIGN



2700 Block of West Burnham Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin USA

### FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S AMERICAN SYSTEM-BUILT HOMES

By 1915, Frank Lloyd Wright had designed over 130 homes, primarily for wealthy clients. His early work was instrumental in launching the Prairie Style of American architecture. Prairie style homes are characterized by bold lines, modern materials, open floor plans, minimal ornamentation, and a design that seems to emerge naturally from the Midwestern prairie landscape.

Wright seamlessly integrated nature, proportion, and social reform into his designs, urging his clients: "Go to Nature, consider her ways. Let your home appear to grow easily from its site and shape it to harmonize with the surroundings." He believed his homes could play a pivotal role in enhancing society and the way we live.

The Burnham Block in Milwaukee is home to Frank Lloyd Wright's earliest effort in creating affordable housing. These early examples, part of his American System-Built Homes project, were designed to be affordable while maintaining the highest quality materials and craftsmanship. The design, a revolutionary manufacturing process, and standardization would combine to keep costs down. The goal: Provide everyone with a beautiful work of art to call home. Wright imagined American System-Built Homes in every town, village, and city, starting in the United States and extending to Mexico, Canada, and Europe.

Building on the Prairie Style, the innovative concepts Wright developed for the American System-Built Homes influenced his thinking for the rest of his life and continue to shape modern architecture today.

### ARTHUR L. RICHARDS, DEVELOPER

By 1911, Milwaukee developer Arthur L. Richards had engaged Frank Lloyd Wright to design several projects, including the Hotel Geneva in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin (1912, demolished 1970), an

unbuilt hotel project in Madison, several commercial buildings, and residences. In August 1915, Richards and Wright had entered into an agreement to develop the American System-Built Homes.

### RICHARDS/WRIGHT COLLABORATION

"You Can Own an American Home" trumpeted a full-page advertisement in the Chicago Tribune on July 5, 1917. Richards placed advertisements in many Midwestern newspapers to introduce Frank Lloyd Wright's American System-Built Homes. The ads claimed, "The American System of home building enables you to secure homes – correct and charming in design, perfect in taste and intelligent in arrangement putting at your command the services of Frank Lloyd Wright, America's foremost creative architect – without extra cost."

Chicago Tribune, July 5th, 1917

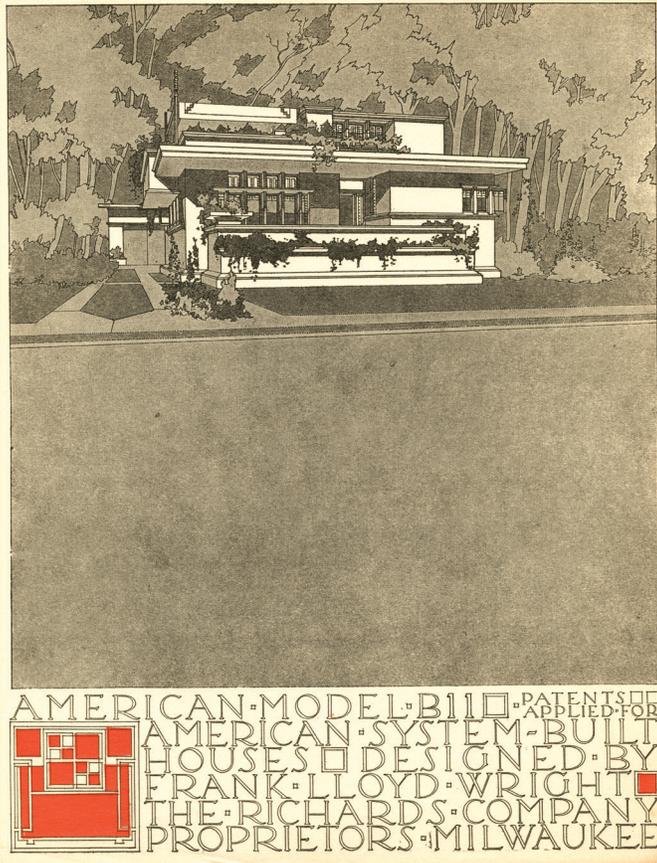
Wright did not control the American System-Built Homes enterprise. Instead, Richards engaged Wright to provide engineering and architectural services to create a revolutionary method of construction. The Richards Company provided business organization, sales, marketing, logistics, and building materials. Richards also opened sales offices, created marketing materials, and recruited dealers to sell the homes and builders to construct



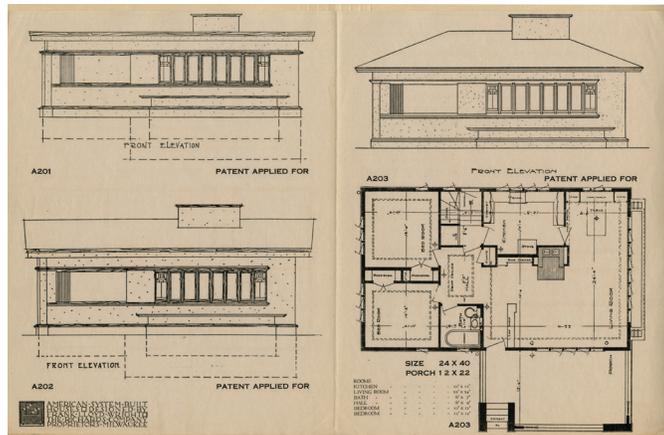
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them. Wright had an opportunity to take an ownership stake but chose instead to be paid royalties.

Wright created a series of models for the project, each having variations, including the number of rooms, floors, choice of roof type (flat, gable, and hip), kitchen configurations, built-in cabinets, sleeping porches, art glass, and furniture. He produced more than 960 working drawings and sketches of various designs for the



Customers were presented with renderings like the one above, of the various models by their builder or dealer.



Drawings like this helped the customer preview how different roof styles would look on their selected model.

system — more than any other project of his long career. The designs were standardized, and customers could choose from roughly 30 models. Prospective buyers perused marketing drawings intended to portray beauty and a sense of serenity. The marketing materials emphasized the “infinite variation” of designs and Wright’s ability to create “houses that stand on the ground, that have music and meaning in them.”

## INNOVATION

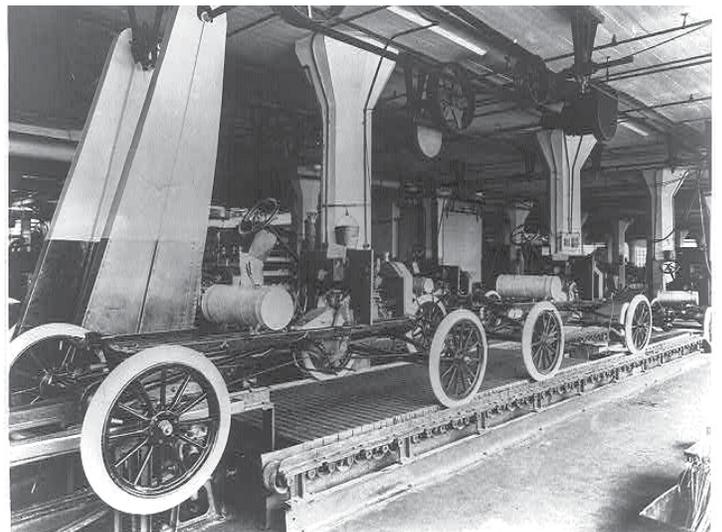
The American System-Built Homes emerged during a period of relentless innovation in American society, driven by pioneers such as Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Orville and Wilbur Wright, Gustave Stickley, Henry Ford, and many others. The American System-Built Homes were Wright’s approach to solving one of the most basic human needs: affordable shelter.

In 1917, Richards created a prospectus describing the project to investors:

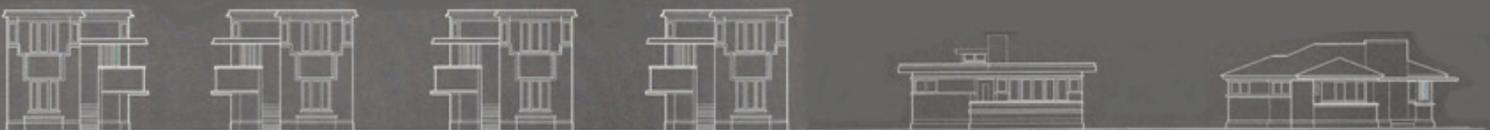
“This Plan would enable (Wright and Richards) to make national the fundamental architectural plans of Frank Lloyd Wright’s distinctly American System of Architecture, combining beauty and utility, and to develop this high order of architectural buildings, displacing the scattered and fragmentary architectural plans with which the great mass of buildings are now constructed with a scientific plan of construction...

“...a plan which develops a better and a perfectly constructed house, and which does it at a great savings and cost of construction, so that they have combined economy and beauty in architecture, strength and scientific construction in their buildings, and a material decrease in cost as compared with the old and soon to be discarded system.

“The new plan is distinguished from the present method as definitely as is the development of a great automobile factory compared with the attempt of individuals to build their separate machines in separate garages along separate lines and patterns.”



Ford Model T Runabout Assembly Line (circa 1913)



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Chadwick Family with a Model T Ford. The Burnham Block home at 1835 So Layton Blvd. is in the background (1917)

## THE BURNHAM BLOCK SITE

In 1915, Richards purchased land in the 2700 block of West Burnham Street and constructed four American System-Built duplexes and two single-family homes. The four duplexes, designated as "Two Family, Flat C," feature intriguing cantilevered second-story entries and a modest floor plan with a living room, kitchen with a breakfast nook, two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen with a breakfast nook, two bedrooms, and a large porch.

The Burnham Block site was on newly platted land at Milwaukee's edge, offering easy access to streetcar lines that allowed residents to travel throughout the city and into the countryside.

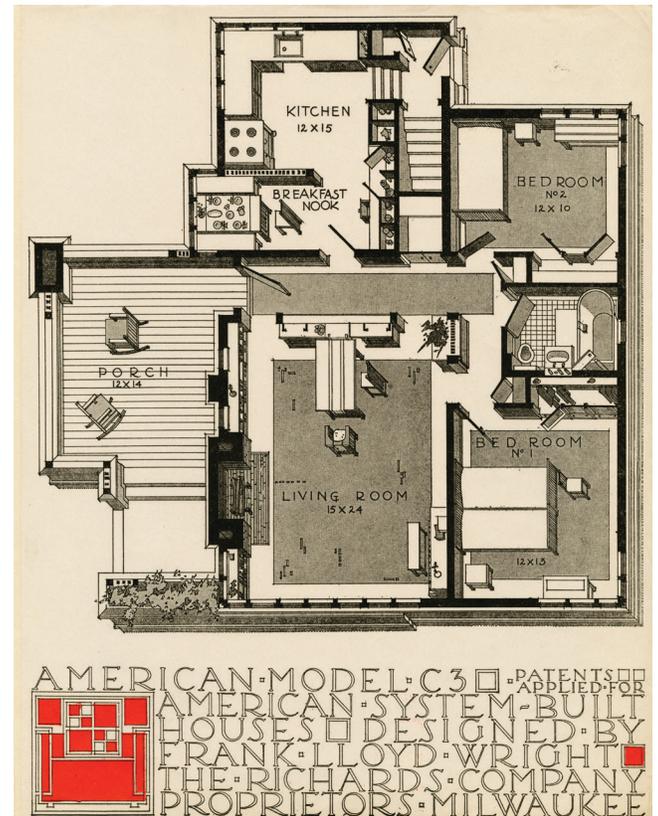
## A SYSTEM OF PRODUCTION

In a 1901 speech, "The Art and Craft of the Machine," Wright began outlining his vision for affordable housing. He asserted that as much of a home's materials as possible should be manufactured in factories rather than relying on skilled labor at the building site. Between 1915 and 1917, Wright developed a system where lumber was to be cut in a mill or factory, other building materials were sourced, and everything was packaged into a railcar for delivery to the rail siding nearest the chosen building site. A local contractor would then transport the "kit" of materials to the construction site for assembly. Unfortunately, there is no surviving ledger or record of where all the American System-Built Homes were shipped or built.

## A SYSTEM OF CONSTRUCTION

The Burnham Block homes likely owe their existence to Richards' need to prototype the plans and refine the production process. The homes feature balloon frame construction with 2-by-4 studs spaced at a nonstandard 24 inches on center. Wright greatly

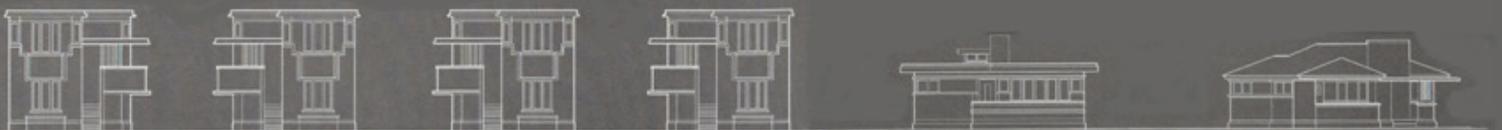
simplified window placement by leveraging this novel framing system, eliminating the need for headers, sills, and jambs. Each window unit fits neatly between the 24-inch stud spacing, allowing the "load" from the upper floors or roof to be transmitted directly to the foundation without interruption. This innovation enabled long bands of windows of varying heights. For example, the Model B1, at 805 square feet, has 33 windows, connecting the interior spaces with nature and the outdoors. Light fills the home while maintaining privacy and serenity.



Model C3 marketing drawing

## AFTER CONSTRUCTION

The collaboration between Richards and Wright ended abruptly in August 1917 when Wright initiated court proceedings to nullify their contract due to nonpayment of royalties. Unfortunately, the entry of the United States into World War I diverted building materials to the war effort. Wartime inflation and an unsettled economic future halted residential construction and the desire for homeownership. Consequently, Wright and Richards' venture into affordable housing faded away. Wright would try to resurrect the project with other developers without success.



# History of the Burnham Block

During the 100+ years after the homes were built, all were altered. Major changes include:

- The addition of pre-cast stone, a porch enclosure, and pressed metal roofing to the Model C3 at 1835 South Layton Boulevard.
- Metal siding to 2724-26 West Burnham Street duplexes.
- A porch enclosure to the Model B1 at 2714 West Burnham Street. (now removed)
- The enclosure of all sleeping porches.
- Less noticeable are interior alterations to several duplexes and new exterior stucco surfaces on all the buildings.

## PRESERVATION

Three of the six Burnham Block homes have been all or partially restored. The Model B1 at 2714 West Burnham Street (2008-09), the duplex at 2720 West Burnham Street (by others), and the duplex at 2732-34 West Burnham Street (2013-14). Restoration of the Model C3 at 1835 South Layton Boulevard is planned for 2025.

The goal of Burnham Block restoration work is to return the homes to their original appearance on July 6, 1916 - their original completion date.

Our preservation work has been twice recognized with the City of Milwaukee's "Cream of the Cream City Award". Our stewardship of the Burnham Block was also recognized with a "Wright Spirit" award from the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy.

Restoration work is guided by The Secretary of the Interior's "Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties: Restoration as a Treatment and Standards for Restoration." Our work is reviewed and approved by the National Park Service and the City of Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission. Preservation easements are held by the Wisconsin Historical Society.

## DESIGNATIONS

The homes are on the National Register of Historic Places and the Wisconsin State Register of Historic Places. In addition, the Burnham Block homes make up a City of Milwaukee Historic District. In 2019, Wright's entire body of work was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, represented by eight particular buildings.

## INSPIRATION

The Burnham Block homes mark the beginning of Wright's lifelong progression in designing affordable, mass-produced homes, culminating in the Erdman Prefabs of the late 1950s. His homes invite us to rethink what a house is and how we live in them. Wright's simple premise is that architecture surrounds us constantly and touches us daily. His designs encourage us to rearrange our lives to live better and be more connected to nature and family. The docents at the Burnham Block site are humbled that visitors travel to Milwaukee from all over the world to experience Wright's vision for affordable housing for everyone.

Frank Lloyd Wright's Burnham Block is a cultural institution with a forward-focused mission to educate and inspire home buyers, the building community, educators, and policymakers to advance the way we build affordable shelter.



Nathan Hale High School STEM students visit the Burnham Block each year for inspiration. Shown here presenting their American System-Built Homes projects

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