

A supplemental guide to
architectural styles found in the
Village of River Forest,
Illinois

RIVER FOREST

Project of the
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M.S. Historic Preservation Program

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ARCHITECTURE & HISTORY

INTRODUCTION

The following survey and style guide were produced by graduate students in the Spring 2008 Preservation Seminar class offered by The School of the Art Institute of Chicago's Master of Science in Historic Preservation program. The course, taught by Vince Michael and Paul Coffey, focused on the history and development of historic districts. Approached by the Village of River Forest and their Historic Preservation Commission in 2007, Michael and Coffey agreed to use the second half of the semester to conduct a rapid windshield survey of River Forest and provide an historic context for the further refinement of River Forest's historic preservation ordinance, its historic district and local landmarks.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Given the limited time frame, the goal was to provide the Commission with an historic context for the refinement of the existing Historic District and a style guide that would help River Forest homeowners understand more about the history and architecture of their homes. The windshield survey of the existing Historic District would allow the class to critique its boundaries, which were set some 30 years ago and tended to focus heavily on the "Prairie School" of architecture promulgated in the early 1900s by Frank Lloyd Wright and other architects, including River Forest's own William Drummond.

While it is essential to include this internationally important architectural movement, one objective of this survey was to broaden the architectural focus to consider other types and styles of development that give River Forest its unique character. For the last 15 years there has been increased attention to the architecture of the recent past (1945-75) on the part of local preservation commissions, preservation professionals, and architectural historians, so another objective was to look carefully at postwar houses.

All historic structures surveys need to be refreshed and redone over time due to changing conditions. The River Forest Historic District is 30 years old and does not reflect our current understanding of architectural and historical significance or the changes that have taken place in the Village. It is time that this district is professionally resurveyed, much as Oak Park has done with their contemporaneous historic district. This is a modest first draft of such a resurvey but should not be considered final.

METHODOLOGY

The 11 students in the class were split into four teams, and the Village was divided into four east-west transects. For the first two weeks, teams surveyed by car the four transects of the village, while others did research at the River Forest Public Library and Oak Park River Forest Historical Society. The teams then came together in the third and fourth weeks to refine the findings, complete the survey maps, and do remaining field work. The final two weeks of the semester were spent assembling and formatting the information.

Since a detailed building-by-building survey was not possible, the objective was not a final judgment on the merit of including various buildings or districts but a rather a draft review and a proposal for changes to the district. Individually significant buildings provided by the Village were noted, and others were added by the surveyors.

Both individually significant and contributing buildings were noted on the map as “Significant Structures.” Those within one of the two districts should be considered contributing to the quality of the district and may or may not be individually significant.

The architectural style guide is designed to be instructive to homeowners and the Commission, offering a current understanding of architectural styles over time. In addition to 19th and early 20th century architectural styles, the guide and the survey have considered contemporary architectural styles of the last 20 years. This style guide can therefore be a context for further surveys. This project is by no means a final survey but a draft review: the style guide provides context for ongoing survey work by the Village.

While historic research was done with the objective of identifying the homes of historically significant persons, this research was extremely limited. The identification of historic sites must remain for a future survey.

RESULTS

The survey of the existing Historic District resulted in suggested refinements to its boundaries, both expansions and contractions. Some of these reflected the earlier district's bias toward the Prairie School, such as the 1100 block of Park Avenue, where the boundary included two Prairie houses by Tallmadge and Watson. Even though one of those is now being demolished, the rest of the block has architectural integrity and coherence and was added to the district along with the 1100 block of Franklin. A section of Ashland north of Augusta was eliminated, while a moderate expansion of the district south of the railroad was proposed to make this area more cohesive. A similar refinement to the boundaries occurred in the section south of Quick Avenue and east of Ashland Avenue, resulted in a net expansion of the district in this sector.

To the extent possible, individually significant structures in these areas, including those from the Village's own survey, were noted on the map. These were not divided into those that would be considered contributing to the significance of a district and those that would be considered significant in their own right. That work remains to be done. The survey did include significant institutional structures such as churches and schools, but did not include monuments or public sculpture.

The class did not determine that large areas, such as the principally postwar development north of Division, nor the southeast quadrant of the village, should be added to the district. It is possible that homeowners and the Village may want to consider these areas in the future following a more comprehensive, building-by-building survey.

One example of a suggested expansion was the River Oaks Drive development in the southwestern section of the Village. A portion of this series of architecturally significant postwar ranch houses was already included in the 1970s district and the extension simply includes the rest of the small street. This is a good example of the type of "Recent Past" resource that is increasingly being considered in historic areas. Further research is needed to identify the builders and architects of River Oaks and the Commission may determine, following such research, that this is a discrete district with a different set of design guidelines.

A potential new district was identified. The blocks north of Chicago Avenue on the east side of the Village were noted to have unusually high design coherence and architectural integrity. Research showed that these areas were developed by the regionally significant Buurma Brothers from the 1920s through the 1940s. Buurma Brothers have already been noted for several significant homes in the existing district. These larger scaled developments of several street fronts were done speculatively and were very successful. Students were able to determine that certain sections, such as the 900-1000 blocks of Bonnie Brae Place and Clinton Place, were built at a certain time by Buurma, whereas other sections, such as the 900-1100 block of Lathrop, may have been only partly developed by the Buurmas. Further research into this series of developments is needed. The existing map outlines all of the areas that Buurma intended to develop between and 1920s and 1940s and highlights those sections that were definitively completed by the firm according to current research. Further research is likely to expand these highlighted areas.

FURTHER ACTION

As stated in the Goals and Objectives, this rapid survey is intended to help the Village of River Forest as it refines its Historic District and implements its landmarks ordinance. Further research is needed for the potential Buurma district and for any historical landmarks the Village may determine are significant. It is our hope that this survey and style guide inspires the residents of the community to undertake further research into the history and unique architecture of their village, and that preservation of those qualities can be integrated into the Village's future development.

