



FRANK LOYD WRIGHT

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AN INTERVIEW WITH LORRAINE ROBIE O'CONNOR

by Irma Strauss

In the spring of 1976, Robie House welcomed back the youngest and sole surviving member of the family for which the famed residence was built. In helping David Hanks with research for the exhibition and catalogue, *The Decorative Designs of Frank Lloyd Wright*, I located Mrs. Lorraine Robie O'Connor and arranged for her to explore the entire house for the first time since her family's brief two-year residence there which ended in 1912. Mrs. O'Connor explained that she had returned to visit the house as a University of Chicago graduate student in 1931. It was then occupied by the Chicago Theological Seminary, and she was permitted access only to the living and dining room area on the raised first floor because the original bedrooms, billiard room, and children's playroom then served as dormitory quarters for the seminarians.

Mrs. O'Connor was an infant when she moved into the house late in 1909 or early in 1910 with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Frederick C. Robie, and her brother, Frederick Jr., then three years old. Her parents had met at a dance when her mother, Lora Hieronymus, was a student at the University of Chicago. By that time her father had left his studies at the Purdue University School of Engineering to help in his father's growing manufacturing business in Chicago, the Excelsior Supply Company. The company made auto, motorcycle, bicycle, and sewing machine parts.¹ After their marriage in 1902, the Robies lived in an apartment in the Colonial Court building which still stands at 5310 South Cornell Avenue. Planning a large family, the couple soon began to think about building a house in the university community that they both loved. When Robie, who was mechanically inventive, tried to discuss his unusual ideas with architects and builders, each directed him to Frank Lloyd Wright as the one capable of realizing his highly imaginative building schemes. Following this advice, in 1906 Robie, aged 27, commissioned Wright, aged 39, to design, construct, and furnish an urban house.

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