

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**National Register of Historic Places Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

**1. Name of Property**Historic name: Prairie HouseOther names/site number: Herb Greene House, Prairie ChickenName of related multiple property listing: N/A

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

**2. Location**Street & number: 550 48<sup>th</sup> AVE NECity or town: Norman State: OK County: ClevelandNot For Publication: ☐Vicinity: ☐**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this \_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

\_\_\_ **national**      \_\_\_ **statewide**      \_\_\_ **local**  
Applicable National Register Criteria:

  A          B          C          D  

<div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 60%;"><b>Signature of certifying official/Title:</b></div> <div style="width: 35%;"><b>Date</b></div> </div> <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; height: 20px; margin-top: 5px;"></div> </div> <div> <b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b> </div>	
<p>In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.</p> <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; margin-top: 20px;"></div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 60%;"><b>Signature of commenting official:</b></div> <div style="width: 35%;"><b>Date</b></div> </div> <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; height: 20px; margin-top: 5px;"></div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; margin-top: 10px;"> <div style="width: 45%;"><b>Title :</b></div> <div style="width: 50%;"><b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b></div> </div>	

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#### 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ☐ entered in the National Register  
☐ determined eligible for the National Register  
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register  
☐ removed from the National Register  
☐ other (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

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Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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#### 5. Classification

##### Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

Private:

☒

Public – Local

☐

Public – State

☐

Public – Federal

☐

##### Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

Building(s)

☒

District

☐

Site

☐

Structure

☐

Object

☐

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**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing

1

Noncontributing

buildings

sites

0

structures

0

objects

1

6

Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling

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**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

VACANT

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## 7. Description

### Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

OTHER/ORGANIC

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**Materials:** (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: CEDAR SIDING AND SHINGLES

### Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

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#### Summary Paragraph

On the outskirts of Norman, Oklahoma stands an icon of the Organic Style. The 1.5 story, 1,763 square foot "Prairie House," designed by Herb Greene was completed in 1961. Curved in plan and tapered in section, a balloon framed armature supports other more sculptural wood-framed elements, including a vault, furring around windows and decorative "tusks." All this is clad with roll roofing and sheathed with an artistically composed weather layer of wood shingles and boards. A corrugated metal canopy sweeps up the south side of the building and terminates in a pyramidal shape above the main roof. Aside from its sculptural interest, this corrugated metal assembly is at once a carport, entrance marker and a major component in the house's natural ventilation strategy. The house's windows are treated architecturally as voids in the wall, all the better for opening to views of what was a vast prairie setting in 1961. Largely still a rural setting; the surrounding area is composed of open prairie with rural residences dotting the environs. After the Greenes sold the property in 1968, a screen of cedar trees was added to the perimeter of the property. However, it is still possible to appreciate the structure as a sculptural object on a prairie within its own 3.62 acre site. Modifications made to the structure through the years have been minor, with no serious compromise to the original design intent. And although the exterior

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siding of the house has deteriorated significantly, it retains a high level of historic integrity. The interior is missing its first floor finish of cork tile and shag carpet that once covered the stair and second floor - otherwise, the interior is remarkably intact, and retains a majority of its original features. Interior features include an extant concrete and granite paver floor at the Entry, where a dramatic open stair with its distinctive rail of rebar, connects the floors and roof levels. Perhaps most notable is the commitment to cedar boards and shingles as the sole finish materials for walls, ceilings and built-ins throughout the house – all these have survived in good condition and remain with a high level of historic integrity.

The Prairie House was purchased by the Prairie House Trust in December 2021. The Prairie House Preservation Society (PHPS) is a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization, founded in January of 2022, with a primary mission to restore the property.

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## Narrative Description

### **Site and Setting [Photos #0001 and #0002]**

The Prairie House is part of what was once the prairie northeast of Norman. Running north-south, 48<sup>th</sup> Avenue is characterized as a rural two lane road with little traffic, few cross streets, and little development. Instead, it is lined with large swaths of prairie and dotted here and there with a rural house or ranch. When the Prairie House was new, there was no physical or visual barrier between the property and the road or surroundings, the apparent site extending in all directions.

The 3.62-acre lot, once indistinguishable from the adjoining Oklahoma plains, is now framed along the property lines with a dense screen of evergreen trees. Conversely, while the sculptural house once was visible from 48<sup>th</sup> Avenue and beyond, it is now only visible through an agricultural-style gate of steel pipe. Still, within those cedar tree borders, an authentic representation of the prairie is extant. The gravel drive that comprises the entrance to the site is a straight shot along the south edge of the property, sidling up to, and terminating at the front edge of the house's canopy. The main character of the site is given by the diverse array of naturally occurring native prairie plants. Located along the north edge of the driveway, between the road and the house is original propane tank whose character-defining wood shroud is no longer extant. Other notable site features, though non-historic, include two ponds, a shipping container on a concrete pad, and a stack of old telephone poles.

The house itself, set back about 150 feet from the road, is situated long ways, from east to west, with the entry facing south. When viewed from along the south end of the site, the house still presents itself against a long backdrop of grassland, and conversely, from the north and west edges of the site, the house can be viewed with significant grassland in the foreground. While the vast prairie of the 1960s is somewhat diminished with the planting of cedar trees and the spread of housing, this is still a rural part of central Oklahoma, and the spirit of the prairie is still there.

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### **Resources**

The house itself is the sole Contributing Resource proposed for this application.

Because the original, still extant propane tank has lost its character-defining wood shroud, it cannot be considered a contributing resource. However, restoration plans include building a replica shroud, as adequate documentation exists to do so. Other non-contributing resources currently on-site include two ponds, a stack of telephone poles, a shipping container on a concrete slab, and a fire pit.

### **Exterior Description**

In plan, the Prairie House is designed in the shape of a pointed ellipse, resembling a leaf or fish – in terms of geometry, a “vesica piscis.” Tapered in section, the main balloon-framed wood structure is adorned with tusk-like protuberances and a wing-like metal canopy that shelters the main entrance. The cladding of cedar shingles and rough-sawn boards is mounted over structural wood sheathing, with a weather resistant barrier of black mineral coated roll roofing in between. This wood cladding, dynamically composed over the exterior faces of the building, presents like ruffled feathers or the shaggy pelt of a bison. This biomorphic collage of a house takes its place naturally, organically, upon the landscape.

The wing-like canopy serves as the carport and main entrance to the house, and is constructed of corrugated aluminum and held aloft by a zig-zag shaped steel support structure. This assembly is perched upon a steeply sloped concrete plinth with large granite “paver” insets. [The same floor treatment continues on into the interior Entry space.] As an interesting sidenote, the granite came from the Roosevelt Granite Co. quarry in Snyder, which was operated by the Joyce family, and located on the property where Greene designed the Joyce House residence (1960).

With a total square footage of 1,763 square feet, the two story house is accessible solely from the main entrance, located on the south-facing elevation. The non-original raised panel wood door is flanked by historic side lites and transoms above; the low head height of the canopy provides contrast to the feeling of expansiveness on the interior side of the door.

Windows are oriented for observing sunrise and sunset, and the large west-facing “Eye” window features a panel of deep red textured glass. Windows throughout the house are cleverly stopped in place using concealed aluminum channels and wood strips such that from the inside, the windows have zero frame profile – consequently, they approach the appearance of a literal hole between the interior and exterior. This is one of a few “trick” details in the house that are potentially traceable back to Greene’s early experiences with Goff and John Lautner.

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The roof is flat, not visible from the ground, except for a non-original, thin metal edge at the perimeter. Although the recent, non-historic, synthetic white roof membrane has likely prevented untold damage to the original interior, its metal edge has altered the way the top edge of the Prairie House meets the sky. Also visible on the roof is a custom conical rain hood for the plumbing vent, and a metal pyramidal form of corrugated metal that functions to allow roof and natural ventilation access.

### **South Elevation [Photo #0003]**

In the foreground of the south elevation is the wing-like canopy, composed primarily of corrugated aluminum. This canopy protects a steep, ramped plinth, also in the foreground. Swooping up the main surface of the elevation, the corrugated aluminum panels continue above the roof plane, terminating in a pyramidal shaped form. The form, materiality and purpose of the corrugated metal assembly become clearer when one enters the house.

The ramped plinth itself; with granite slabs set in concrete, resembles Carlos Scarpa's arranged terrazzo at enormous scale, and is not unlike Wright's "desert masonry" at Taliesin West in construction technique.

Centered under the canopy and on the main surface of the elevation is a raised panel entry door, which replaces the original flush door evident in the historic photographs [Historic Figure #5]. Also missing is the original screen door, important to the natural ventilation system designed for the house. It was likely custom built for the house as it had a downward pointing trapezoidal opening and appears to be made of the same wood as the house's cladding [Historic Figure #6]. Though the framing is deteriorating, the deep set glass side lites flanking the entry door are still extant; but the large transom lite above the door and side lites is replaced with an acrylic panel, and the original glazing channels and hardware [known to exist from historic photos and architectural drawings] are missing.

The main surface of the south elevation is otherwise devoid of fenestration, yet this is where the most expressive iteration of the "feathered" cedar siding occurs. On the upper westernmost portion of the elevation, the side of a tapered barrel vault form can be seen. Historic Figure #4 illustrates this "vault" element under construction. The vault is clad in cedar shingles and protrudes westward from the second level. This will be discussed in more detail as seen from the west elevation. Springing from the vault is a "tusk" pointing downward and clad in rough-sawn cedar boards. Across the main surface of the exterior wall, the feathered cedar siding is composed in four distinct fan-shaped arrangements, with exposed areas of black roll roofing creating the negative space in between. A break in form at the floor line is emphasized by a rugged shadow line where the bottom edge of the wall boards terminate, overlapping the skirting boards, which continue towards the ground at a more extreme angle. The purpose of the skirting is to enclose the crawl space under the house, so while the pitch of the skirting increases the sculptural aspect of the overall form; it does not negatively impact any functional considerations. At the top edge of the main roof, galvanized metal roof trim, about 2" in profile has been added in conjunction with a roof replacement just prior to acquisition by the Prairie House Trust. As originally constructed, the top ends of the cedar boards simply terminated against the sky.

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At the top right edge of the elevation, there is a small protuberance that is clad in shingles. It is likely there for purely sculptural reasons, indeed, a construction photo [Historic Figure #5] shows the south elevation without the protuberance in place, and there is nothing apparent in the photo that would have required furring out.

**East Elevation [Photo #0005, Continuing Counter-clockwise]**

The foremost edge of the east elevation reads as a narrow, vertical triangle. Here is where the tapered form of the building section can be best recognized. And because of the house's unusual plan shape, partial views of the curved south and north elevations are seen obliquely. Appearing somewhat like an opening in a tipi, a full height, triangular area of fenestration serves morning sunshine to the kitchen/dining area on the main level, and the study above at the second level. Included in this fenestrated area are corrugated aluminum flaps to admit natural circulation.

The shingle-clad protuberance discussed in the south elevation narrative can be seen here on the east elevation, at the top left edge of the triangular opening.

The side of the wing-like canopy, its zig-zag supports and ramped plinth can be seen to the south and beyond, figuring heavily into the composition from this vantage point. Also from this vantage, the handling of the upswept canopy edge continuation can be better appreciated as a layer that is pulled away from the main surface of the south wall, not simply overlaid. The ancillary space in between the metal and the primary wall is infilled on the east side with glass. The bottom of the ancillary space, though not visible in elevation is closed off with a glass soffit.

Along the left edge of the triangular fenestration opening the wood wall extends slightly eastward, forming a shallow wing-wall, shading the glass somewhat from the late morning sun. At the sharp leading edge of the wing-wall, copper flashing has been used to complete the weather barrier layer beneath the wood siding. Just nominally visible, the flashing is not really part of the exterior palette of materials – but its presence demonstrates that the technical details of the project were seriously considered.

**North Elevation [Photo #0007, Continuing Counter-clockwise; see also Photo #0008]**

Just east of elevation center are two windows, serving bedrooms. These windows are paired together and treated like portals in their exterior presentation. [The portals are better seen in photo #0008.] They are afforded the portal-like depth from a bulge in the main surface of the wall. The bulge appears to be furred out over the surface of the structural framing - not evident on the interior of the building – it's only purpose seems to be creating visual depth in the wall around the fenestration. Once again, the ventilation flaps are present under the vision glass. The easternmost flap is missing its corrugated aluminum skin. The outer wing walls formed by the portal openings are finished in shingles and capped with vertical boards between the windows. The more or less vertical boards that form the finish of the primary wall surface above the portal extend somewhat past the soffit above the windows. From the inside, this helps strengthen the illusion that the window is a literal opening to the outdoors.



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The “cascading rivulet of more-or less horizontal boards” discussed on the east elevation appears here again, on the east edge of the elevation, and directly adjacent to its right is a medium sized, fan shaped array of boards. Starting at about ¼ the way across the width of the elevation, there are a couple of courses of shorter, more or less vertical boards along the top of the house. These begin a gradual transition to the more lively shingled form of the west-facing Vault, and the second tusk, now also visible. [Also reference Photo #0008.]

The boards on this side are otherwise quite orderly by comparison with the rest of the house.

**West Elevation [Photo #0009, Going Counter-clockwise]**

The west side is one of the more stunning views of the house. Completing the enclosure on the west end of the vault is a large, arched window called the “eye.” The vault, with its eye, is straddled by the two decorative tusks while the expressive form of the carport in the background extends out to the south.

The eye, with its large expanse of vision glass, affords a view from the living room on the second floor. From the exterior elevation vantage point, on the right side of the eye, there is a triangular pane of deep red textured glass joined to the vision glass with an aluminum mullion. Though not currently functioning, the red pane was once operable for natural ventilation. The eye is hooded by the vault, shading the glass from the early afternoon sun. The front edge of the hood tapers to a thin edge and is clad in a coursed array of shingles. Below the eye, is a tapered horizontal projection that, together with the vault hood, completes a rim around the eye. Extending from the lower corners of this rim are the two tusks, in the form of downward pointing cones, clad in a combination of shingles and boards. As can be seen more readily in Photos 0008 and 0010, the tusks blend together with the vault, which in turn, blends into the main armature of the house. Historic Figure #4 provides good insight into how this transition was accomplished.

Centered below the eye, the first floor window seen on this elevation serves the master bedroom. Because the vault extends westward beyond the limits of the first floor, the shingle-finished soffit beneath it shades this bedroom window, which is also flanked by angled wing walls, finished in shingles. The soffit and the wing walls together form a deep portal that shades the glass. The wing walls also taper in plan to the left and right of the window opening, blending them into the main armature of the house. Below the bedroom window, the original ventilation flap remains, though its corrugated aluminum sheathing is missing.

Beyond, and to the south, the metal entrance canopy can be seen again.

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Naturally, the windows, especially when viewed from the interior, are the best place to appreciate that the architect has finished the surfaces in the same materials, inside and out. This together with the zero sightline edge details increase the sensation that the interior and exterior spaces flow together. And by pairing the west glazing with the space to end the day with family, the architect shows great sensitivity in the connection between family and nature<sup>1</sup>.

### **Landscaping [Photos #0011 – 0015]**

Originally, the house was landscaped “only by grass and native wild flowers.”<sup>2</sup> Mary Greene later planted some trees after settling into the house, as she felt the need for more privacy<sup>3</sup>. Subsequently, other trees have volunteered or have been intentionally planted, certainly the opaque curtain of cedars at the perimeter of the property were not part of the original state of the site. Neither of the ponds on the site is original to the project and consequently listed as non-contributing resources. The small pond west of the house has actually caused damage to the ramped canopy plinth and recommendations from the Historic Structures Report recommend removing at least the small pond.

The origin of the telephone pole stack is unknown, but is not original to the project. The shipping container at the east edge of the lot, near the large pond, is also a later addition to the site and is currently being used for storage. Neither original is the concrete slab the shipping container sits upon. The Fire Pit known, though it has been skillfully crafted of uniformly sized igneous rocks, is listed here as non-contributing because it is not known to have been present during the house’s period of significance.

### **Interior Description [Photos #0016-0024]**

From the Entry, all the main areas of the house can be directly accessed – upon entering the house, to the right is the kitchen and adjoining dining area. From there it is possible to continue on through all three bedrooms, arranged in a suite, or returning to the Entry, the Master Bedroom or the pair of children’s bedrooms can be accessed directly. Situated betwixt the bedrooms is the sole bathroom in the house, arranged in the “Jack and Jill” style, it is accessible from the Master Bedroom and from the children’s bedrooms. The children’s bedrooms feature a three-way operable wall that allows privacy, but can be opened to enlarge a shared activity area for the children.

Returning to the Entry, the curved stair with its rebar railing dramatically sweeps up to the second level where the Living Room and Study are located. While these two functions are housed in a single, arc shaped plan, the belly of the curve and built-in storage closets serve to loosely define the areas from one another. While the Study features a thin, triangular east-facing window and a storage space for art supplies, the living area features a large, arched “eye”

<sup>1</sup>Greene, Herb, *Mind and Image: An Essay on Art and Architecture* (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1976)

<sup>2</sup> Ruggles, Connie. “Life in a Greene House.” *Sooner Magazine*. September 1, 1961

<sup>3</sup> Conversation with Herb Greene

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window, from which the surrounding landscape can be admired from a raised platform. Though missing its padded upholstery, it is large enough for four to five people to gather comfortably. At the lower left area of the window is a triangular section of textured red glass. Continuing back to the railing that overlooks the entry, one can continue up a very narrow stair that extends to the roof.

This dramatic stair provides access for opening or closing the roof door, which functions as the exhaust flap for the house's seminal passive cooling system. Naturally, a screen door is included for insect control.

The house's ventilation system is essentially a solar chimney, the vertical metal sweeping up the south wall of the house is allowed to transmit enough of the sun's heat to engage the "stack effect" setting up a convective air path, rising up to exit the screen door on the roof while pulling cooler air in through the ventilation flaps which are found below most of the house's windows.

### **Alterations**

Examining the Prairie House and its surroundings reveals deviations from the original construction plans and subsequent modifications and rehabilitation efforts by new owners. Changes encompass interior materials, detailing, roof replacement, and exterior landscaping, reflecting evolving tastes and needs. Despite various alterations, none have caused irreversible damage or significant endangerment to the house. Noteworthy modifications include changes in flooring, counter materials, a fireplace addition, glass substitution with Plexiglas, and replacing the original roof. The most conspicuous alteration involves the prairie itself, transformed by introducing trees, rocks, and water features, affecting the site's water flow.

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## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☐ A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

### Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- ☐ A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- ☐ B. Removed from its original location
- ☐ C. A birthplace or grave
- ☐ D. A cemetery
- ☐ E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- ☐ F. A commemorative property
- ☐ G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Architecture

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**Period of Significance**

1961 – 1968

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**Significant Dates**

1961

**Significant Person**

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

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**Cultural Affiliation**

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**Architect/Builder**

Herb Greene

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**Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph** (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Prairie House is eligible for the National Register under Criterion C: Architecture. It is significant at a state level because it is an iconic embodiment of Organic architecture within the context of the Modern Movement, a testament to Greene's innovative design philosophy. Greene's influence, especially as it is embodied in the Prairie House can be seen also on both a national and international level as evidenced in the work of related Organic or "American School" architects such as Mickey Muenig and Bart Prince - and with respect to the Hungarian "Living Architecture" movement in which the work of Green and Goff is frequently referenced.<sup>4</sup> Greene only designed six buildings in Oklahoma and each is distinctive and significant in their own right.

The period from 1961 to 1968 encompasses the time when Greene owned the house and was thus in control of its condition and maintaining the design vision for the property. Subsequent owners made unsympathetic alterations to the house's interior; altered its setting by digging ponds and planting a thick border of trees at the perimeter and allowed it to fall into disrepair.

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**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

**Background**

Norman, Oklahoma is the third most populous city in the state, with a population of 128,026 as of the 2020 census. Established during the Land Run of 1889, Norman was named after Abner Norman, the initial land surveyor, and was incorporated in 1891. By 1902, Norman had developed a downtown district with essential businesses, and its population grew to 3,700 by 1913, aided by the extension of the Oklahoma Railway Company's streetcar line.

Pre-statehood, early city leaders took aim to attract the territory's first institute of higher learning, leaving it to other communities to slug it out over the state capital location. It paid off - the University of Oklahoma, founded in 1890, remains a central institution in Norman, the largest driver of the city's economy. With an enrollment of over 32,000 students, the University of Oklahoma is the state's largest university, imparting a significant higher education presence to the city of Norman.

Roughly coinciding with the construction of the Prairie House, the completion of Interstate 35 in 1959 began to change the complexion of development in Norman, spurring its growth as a bedroom community for Oklahoma City. The population surged from 33,412 in 1960 to 52,117

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<sup>4</sup> Broi, Vincenzo, "Imre Makovecz: A Natural Architect," *Trieste Contemporanea*, September 1998  
<https://www.triestecontemporanea.it/BroiE.htm> Accessed June 7, 2024

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by the end of the decade. Continued expansion in the 21st century saw the population rise to 128,026 in 2020.

### **Context and Early History**

Meanwhile, Herb Greene was finishing up his studies at OU, studying under and working for the inimitable Bruce Goff, who chaired the Architecture program from 1948-55. Greene also works over his 1950 and 1951 summer breaks for John Lautner in Los Angeles, and graduated from OU in 1953. Afterwards, he works for Houston architect Joseph Krakower, before returning to Norman in 1957 to join the faculty at OU. Though Goff is now gone, the “American School” era of free thought and creativity continues. Among Greene’s goals for his professorship, he wanted “to contribute to the imaginative side of the University of Oklahoma department of architecture” and to pursue his love of painting and collage. During his appointment, he designed and built his first significant project in Oklahoma:

The Prairie House (1960-1961), on the outskirts of Norman, was built with the help of a local carpenter and Greene’s students at OU. Greene’s residence, which also housed his painting/design studio, drew widespread acclaim after Julius Shulman, “The recorder of American Modernism,” published photographs of the home in the 1961 issue of Life magazine. Some consider the Prairie House one of the most coherent embodiments of the Organic architecture exemplified by Bruce Goff and his followers.

Greene’s art and architecture follow Goff’s perspective that Organic design synthesizes all visual and performing arts and should accommodate “people, place, time, materials and spirit.” In his practice and pedagogy, Greene posed non-conformist inquiries into what architecture can be. When he embarked on the Prairie House design, he intended to “build something that would be poetic at the time. A poetic house out on the prairie.” The Prairie House design manifested a new spatial imaginary unthinkable in 1960. Greene was successful in his endeavor to build a house that is also a poem, and, in the process, he developed a unique approach to design in which architectural form is capable of expressing feeling, cultural memory, regional history, symbol, and a relationship to the surrounding environment.

### **Relevant People**

Herb Greene, designer of the Prairie House was an architecture student at Syracuse University when he read about the program at the University of Oklahoma [OU] under the leadership of Bruce Goff. Soon thereafter, Greene left Syracuse and moved to Norman, Oklahoma. There he studied under and worked for Goff on some of his masterpieces, including the Bavinger House, NRIS Ref# 01001354. While studying at OU, Greene spent the summers of 1950 and 1951 in Los Angeles working for Wright protégé John Lautner. And after graduating in 1953, Greene began practice in Houston, first at an office, then launching out on his own. In 1957 he returned to the Norman campus as a faculty member and remained until 1964. Though Goff was no longer at the College of Architecture, the “American School” era of free thought and creativity continued under Greene and other like-minded individuals.

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Greene retained ownership of the house when he and his family moved to Kentucky where he began an appointment at the University of Kentucky College of Architecture. They rented out the house, at one point to a fraternity. But in 1968, the Greenes sold the house, marking the end of its period of significance.

During Greene's appointment at OU, he designed and built the Prairie House with the help of a local carpenter and his students<sup>5</sup>. The project is an early example of a true design-build program. This "American School" notion, in which the designers have direct hands-on involvement with the construction, made it possible to pull off such an unusual project without exhaustive drawings. The house was not inexpensive - it was constructed for about \$25,000<sup>6</sup> at a time when the median cost of a house in Oklahoma was \$7,900<sup>7</sup>.

While famed architectural photographer Julius Shulman was in Norman photographing Goff's Bavinger House, he heard about Greene's creation and went to see it. Shulman ended up staying with the Greenes for three days, sleeping on the window lounge upholstered platform in the Living Room and photographing the house. Shulman showed the photos to his contact at Life magazine, and the house was published there in 1961.

### **Architectural Significance**

The home and Greene's legacy as an educator, architect, writer and artist, is not only significant to OU and the history of Organic design, but also to architectural pedagogy on an international scale. The Prairie House was profiled in the exhibition catalog and installation, "Renegades: Bruce Goff and the American School of Architecture," at the Fred Jones Jr, Museum of Art and the coinciding OU history of architecture curriculum. The unique structure and visionary design philosophy of the home serves as a source of inspiration across disciplines and remains significantly relevant to material culture discourse and design research/studio programs.

Norman became the center of an Organic design movement at the University of Oklahoma (OU) during the 40-60s. This period of Organic modernism, now referred to as the American School, encompasses the design pedagogy and architecture of Bruce Goff, Herb Greene and other midcentury alumni from the OU School of Architecture. The Prairie House and related archival materials, now in the University's collection, inspire an appreciation and desire to protect local heritage by showcasing the rich history embedded in the built environment of Oklahoma. A deep understanding of regional modern architecture encompasses an awareness of Norman's social history: from the Native American histories of the land, the settlement and founding of the City of Norman during the Land Run of 1889, the complicated history of Norman as a sundown town, and finally to the deterioration and loss of American School sites within Oklahoma. The destruction of American School masterworks like Goff's Bavinger House, 1955, underscores the importance of preserving the Prairie House.

<sup>5</sup> "Skeleton of Christmas Future." The Norman Transcript. Norman. July 10, 1960. (Newspapers.com)

<sup>6</sup> "New Homes Wacky and Staid." Life Magazine. November 24, 1961

<sup>7</sup> United States Census <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/tables/time-series/coh-values/values-unadj.txt> Accessed June 7, 2024



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Greene built the house in the spirit of educational collaboration, giving his own OU students the experience of working on the original construction of the Prairie House. Greene's art and architecture follows in the footsteps of Goff's perspective that Organic design synthesizes all of the visual and performing arts and should accommodate "people, place, time, materials and spirit". Under the leadership of Bruce Goff (1904-82), Herb Greene (b. 1929), Mendel Glickman (1895-1967), OU faculty developed a curriculum that emphasized individual creativity, organic forms, and experimentation. At the current age of 94, Greene is the only living member of the University of Oklahoma American School faculty and the Prairie House is one of only three buildings still standing in Norman from this significant era in Oklahoma history.

The Prairie House is an early example, as is Goff's Bavinger House, of a design-build program, intended to enrich local community through direct hands-on involvement of architecture students and faculty. The Prairie House is a testament to Goff and Greene's pedagogy—an experimental, resourceful and contextual approach to architecture that draws from interdisciplinary influences ranging from the visual arts, music, dance, literature, regional history/culture, and philosophical traditions. It is an architectural work that has come to represent an overlooked history of the Modern era.

### **Conclusion**

The Prairie House, situated four miles east of downtown Norman, is sited within the cross timbers ecosystem which extends through central Oklahoma. While the vast prairie of the 1960s is somewhat diminished with the planting of cedar trees and spread of farm properties, this is still a very rural part of central Oklahoma, and the spirit of the prairie is still there. The design pays homage to the distinct characteristics of the site by promoting regional reflection and ecological awareness.

Greene's architectural vision, rooted in Goff's Organic design principles, sought to synthesize various arts and respond to the elements of "people, place, time, materials, and spirit." His non-conformist approach to architecture posed thought-provoking inquiries, leading him to conceive the Prairie House as a poetic creation on the vast prairie landscape, a spatial manifestation unimaginable in the 1960s. Successful in his endeavor, Greene crafted not just a dwelling but a poetic masterpiece, developing an innovative design approach where architectural form becomes a conduit for expressing emotion, cultural memory, regional history, symbolism, and a profound connection to the surrounding environment.

Eligible for listing on the National Register under Criterion C, Architecture, the Prairie House embodies a historical lineage of the American School of Architecture which emerged from the University of Oklahoma in the 1950s and 60s. The cultural importance of the home to Norman, OK, and abroad, inspires a current day fascination with Greene. His ties to Bruce Goff, Frank Lloyd Wright and John Lautner situate the house as an iconic example of Organic Modernism, which has sparked curiosity and imaginations internationally since the 1960s. The site's rarity

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within the Organic design movement perpetuates a continued interest for the general public, modern architecture circles, and across the arts and humanities fields of discipline.

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**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☒ University
- ☒ Other Name of repository: Prairie School Preservation Society archive

**Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):** \_\_\_\_\_

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## 10. Geographical Data

**Acres of Property** 3.62 [Cleveland County Assessor]

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

### Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: \_\_\_\_\_  
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- |                         |                      |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Latitude: -97.371057 | Longitude: 35.224758 |
| 2. Latitude:            | Longitude:           |
| 3. Latitude:            | Longitude:           |
| 4. Latitude:            | Longitude:           |

**Or**

### UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

☐ NAD 1927    or    ☐ NAD 1983

- |          |           |           |
|----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. Zone: | Easting:  | Northing: |
| 2. Zone: | Easting:  | Northing: |
| 3. Zone: | Easting:  | Northing: |
| 4. Zone: | Easting : | Northing: |

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**Verbal Boundary Description** (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

26-9-2W 3.616 AC PRT SE/4 BEG NE/C S350' W450' N350' E450' POB

**Boundary Justification** (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundaries include all the land historically associated with the Prairie House.

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**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title: Michael Hoffner, AIA, Architect; on behalf of  
organization: Prairie House Preservation Society  
street & number: 235 Edgemere CT  
city or town: Oklahoma City state: OK zip code: 73118  
e-mail: [michael@hoffnerdesignstudio.com](mailto:michael@hoffnerdesignstudio.com)  
telephone: 405 625 2131  
date: June 10, 2024

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**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A USGS map or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

**Photographs**

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Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

### Photo Log

Name of Property: Prairie House

City or Vicinity: Norman

County: Cleveland County

State: Oklahoma

Photographer: Michael Hoffner, AIA

Date Photographed: May 28, 2024

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

Number	Subject	Direction
0001	Context view along 48 <sup>th</sup> , peeking into site	Northwest
0002	View at driveway, approaching house	West
0003	South facing elevation.	North
0004	South facing elevation [Left], east facing elevation [Right].	Northwest
0005	East facing elevation.	West
0006	East facing elevation [Left] and north facing elevation [Right].	Southwest
0007	North facing elevation.	South
0008	North facing elevation [Left], west facing elevation [Right]	Southeast
0009	West facing elevation.	East



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Name of Property		County and State
0010	West facing elevation [Left], south facing elevation [Right]	Northeast
0011	Location of non-extant historic wood shroud at extant historic propane tank.	North
0012	Non-historic Small Pond	Northeast
0013	Non-historic Large Pond	Northeast
0014	Power pole stack	Northwest
0015	Shipping container on concrete slab.	Northeast
0016	Interior View from Entry Looking up the Stair	West
0017	Interior View from Second Level Looking up Roof Stair	East
0018	Interior View from Second Floor Looking at Solar Chimney	South
0019	Interior View from Roof Stair Looking at Roof Screen Door	East
0020	Interior View from Second Level Looking at Living Room	West
0021	Kitchen Looking from Family Room	South
0022	Kitchen Looking from Family Room	South
0023	Bedroom Looking at Closet	East
0024	Between Bedrooms Looking at 3-Way Folding Doors	South

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for nominations to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

Tier 1 – 60-100 hours  
Tier 2 – 120 hours  
Tier 3 – 230 hours  
Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.