



CITY OF NORMAN, OK STAFF REPORT

MEETING DATE: 09/09/2024

REQUESTER: Anais Starr

PRESENTER: Anais Starr, Historic Preservation Officer, Planner II

ITEM TITLE: CONSIDERATION OF APPROVAL, REJECTION, AMENDMENT, AND/OR POSTPONEMENT OF A RECOMMENDATION OF THE PRAIRIE HOUSE NOMINATION TO THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES (NRHP) LOCATED AT 550 48TH AVENUE NE, NORMAN, OKLAHOMA.

Property Location: Prairie House
550 48th Avenue NE

Owner: Prairie House Trust

Applicant: Prairie House Society

Request: Consideration of approval, rejection, amendment, and/or postponement of a recommendation of the Prairie House nomination to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) located at 550 48th Avenue NE, Norman, Oklahoma.

National Register Process

The National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) nomination was submitted by the Prairie House Trust with assistance from the Oklahoma State Historic Preservation Office. The State Historic Preservation Office staff has reviewed the nomination and will place it on the October 17, 2024 State Historic Preservation Commission Meeting agenda for consideration.

The National Park Service is charged with administering the NRHP Program. The Park Service through coordination with the Oklahoma State Historic Preservation Office, requires all nominations to the National Register of Historic Places be reviewed by the Certified Local Government (CLG) Historic District Commission. The Commission is tasked with listening to any comments from the property owner or public regarding the nomination and then making a recommendation for the listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

History

The Prairie House is located in east Norman approximately a half mile north of the intersection of Alameda and 48th Avenue Northeast. The Prairie House, frequently called the Prairie Chicken House by locals, was designed by University of Oklahoma Architecture Professor Herb Greene.

With the assistance of several of his students and a local carpenter the structure was completed in 1961.

Herb Greene was a student at Syracuse University when he transferred to the University of Oklahoma in 1948 to study under Bruce Goff. Goff who was the chair of the University of Oklahoma Architecture program from 1948 to 1955 became an international renowned architect known for his iconic organic designs. Bruce Goff and his disciples, including Herb Greene, became known as the American School at the University of Oklahoma. Herb Greene went on to become a faculty member at the University Of Oklahoma College Of Architecture from 1957 to 1964 continuing to create and influence the modern organic architecture movement. Goff's influence on Greene architecture can be seen in the organic elements found in the Prairie House.

In designing Prairie House, Greene sought to create a structure capitalizing on the sweeping prairie that surrounded it at that time. As stated in the submitted National Register nomination, Greene wanted to design and build "a poetic house" on the prairie. The Prairie House's distinctive architectural elements found throughout the structure's design expresses the unique physical and cultural aspects of its location in Norman. It also reflects the architecture movement developing during the 1950s and 1960s at the University of Oklahoma.

The Prairie House would be Herb Greene's primary residence until 1964 when he took a faculty position at the University of Kentucky. Greene eventually sold the Prairie House in 1968. There were various owners that followed. In 2021 the Prairie House Trust purchased the property with intent to protect, maintain, and restore this significant local, state, and national piece of architecture.

Architecture

The Prairie House has four distinctive elevations. Viewing the structure from the north side of the house, the elevation is a solid vertical wall that terminates on the west end with downward wing walls reminiscent of a prairie chicken wings (picture #0003). The east end of the north elevation terminates in a blunt vertical plane (picture #0007). The winged metal canopy spreads out from the south elevation with a metal support structure extending up to the roof ridge.

The east elevation is half-barrel shaped with a large window filling the second floor elevation. The iconic downward pointing wing walls are located between the second and first floor windows (picture #0009). On the opposite side of the house, the west elevation of the structure is A-frame shaped with windows extending the full-width of the first and second floor elevations (picture #0005).

The organic shapes of the elevation along with the wood sheathing typify the American School style that was emerging from the University of Oklahoma (OU) during the 1950s and 1960s. This architecture style was known for its emphasis on creativity and experimentation as seen in the Prairie House.

Historic/Cultural Significance

Herb Greene played an important part in the development of the American School design developed during the 1950s and 1960s at the University of Oklahoma. The Prairie House is one of only three structures that still remain in Norman designed by Greene during this time period. The Prairie House exemplifies the unique organic architecture designs developing during the American School era at the University of Oklahoma.

Listing the Prairie House in the National Register will highlight this important development period in Norman, Oklahoma while permanently documenting this significant structure.

Action Required: Motion for recommendation for the nomination of the Prairie House to the National Register of Historic Places.