

**ROBERT AND CHARLES WILSON HOUSES, DESCHUTES RIVER
WARM SPRINGS VICINITY, JEFFERSON COUNTY, OREGON**

E. Walton Potter
Oregon SHPO, June 23, 1997

Developmental history based on information
provided by Bill Rhodes

Property Description

Location and site characteristics

The Contemporary houses designed by Pietro Belluschi and built for Robert and Charles Wilson in 1947 occupy a holding of 27.5 acres on the east bank of the Deschutes River, a little over two miles east of Warm Springs. The property is located outside the easterly boundary of the Warm Springs Reservation, a quarter of a mile downstream from the Warm Springs Bridge, in Section 30, Township 9 South, Range 13 East of the Willamette Meridian. The site is reached by private dirt road of restricted access forking to the north from U. S. Highway 26 at the east end of the Warm Springs Bridge.

The Wilson brothers operated the Warm Springs Lumber Mill established by their father, Ray, in 1943 after a contract was won to cut timber on the Warm Springs Reservation. The mill stands upstream on the opposite bank, below the outlet of Shitike Creek, and inside the Reservation boundary.

Following their return from military duty at the end of the Second World War, the Wilson brothers acquired property adjacent to the Reservation and developed the residential building group in open meadow on a point of land created by the river bend. The landscape is dominated by the stepped-back walls of the Deschutes canyon. Directly above the benchland, to the east, is the old grade of the Oregon Trunk Railroad.

Component features

The Robert Wilson House is the largest of the developed features of the property. It was Robert Wilson, son of the founder of the Warm Springs Lumber Mill, who commissioned noted Oregon architect Pietro Belluschi to design houses for his family and that of his brother, Charles. The houses were built in 1947, more or less contemporaneously with Belluschi's celebrated glass and aluminum-sheathed multi-storied Equitable Building in downtown Portland. The house which the mill operator sought for himself was a part time residence and summer retreat for his family, who lived in Portland, where the children were in school. The Robert Wilson House occupies the lowermost point of the benchland, to the northeast, where it is set off by rows of mature poplars. The California landscape architect Thomas Church is said to have been consulted on the project. The builder and contractor have been identified as J. S. Parr and Henry Nelson.

Standing upslope from the primary feature, just below a rise in the terrain, is a poolhouse. Together with sections of solid fencing, it forms a courtyard for an uncovered pool. The poolhouse was a dormitory for the children and their guests.

On the crown of the property, to the southwest, is the house of Charles Wilson. It is similar in plan and character to the primary building, but with distinguishing details.

The property, consisting of three separate tax lots [Jefferson County Assessor Map Reference Nos. 91330-100, -101, and -102], was acquired in fee simple by the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation in 1990. The buildings have been vacant since the property was conveyed and are in need of repair, but are otherwise intact. The Charles Wilson House has the most evident water damage from leaks in the roof.

Stylistic character

The two houses are single-story, horizontal, flat-roofed buildings of wood frame construction on concrete slabs. On the east elevations, which face the access road, car port canopies extend to solid masonry bulkheads. In their compact, functional plans, floor-to-ceiling window sections, and intersecting planes of ashlar chimney wall and shaft, they recall the efficiency of Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian houses, the principles of which were introduced in the 1930s and absorbed into mainstream American architecture by the Post War era.

In their straightforward, clean-lined rectilinearity, the houses also have kinship with the International style. The flat overhangs of their roofs are faced with continuous bands of plain mill stock. The International style was the outgrowth of a European movement to simplify design to essential elements, omitting surface ornament altogether. Buildings were composed as balanced, but not necessarily symmetrical rectilinear volumes. The leading exponents were Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in Germany, and Le Corbusier in France. By the 1930s, the style was well established in larger American cities by the work of Richard Neutra (Los Angeles), Raymond Hood (New York), and Howe and Lescaze (Philadelphia), and others. In American International houses, horizontality was emphasized by flat roofs and liberal use of cantilevered overhangs and ribbon windows.

It is in the use of grey-blue, color-stained vernacular board and batten exteriors, combined with native stone, including orange-tan Prineville tuff, and in the splendid accommodation of the simple, low buildings to their site that the houses reflect the qualities of northern Pacific Coast regionalism with which the architect

is so strongly identified as an early exponent. The contemporary regional style emphasized forms and colors that harmonized with the landscape, and it promoted transparency for interplay between the landscape and the building interior. In the Wilson Houses, these effects are achieved in C-shaped plans with principal entryways opening from a central landscaped patio adjacent to the car port. The service areas on the south and private sleeping rooms on the north bracket the longitudinal glass-walled living-dining areas that connect the whole.

The open plan core of either interior is dominated by an ashlar chimney wall and embraces entry and dining areas that are demarcated only by the subtlest means, such as storage counters or a built-in seating peninsula. The locally-milled pine finish work is simple, well-crafted and economical in tune with the purpose and setting of the houses. The houses incorporate up-to-date heating technology of the period in the form of heating coils in the concrete floors. The floors are overlaid with cork tiles. Cross ventilation for seasonal high temperatures of the central Oregon plateau is provided by modular louvered panels at the top or bottom of fixed plate glass windows. Although the houses were designed by the architect for simplicity and economy, they were at the same time characteristically sophisticated with respect to site planning and layout. Each building claims a separate, distinct setting, and within each, transparent space is arranged to take optimum advantage of focal points in the canyon landscape.

In summary, Belluschi's designs for the houses coherently combine both Wrightian and International style influences and bear the stamp of West Coast regionalism as well. A term found in popular style guides that conveys these varied currents of modern architecture is "Contemporary." According to the stylistic categories used by the National Register, the houses would be classified as Modern Movement; Contemporary or, alternatively, American International style.

National Register Eligibility

Applicable criteria

The houses of Robert and Charles Wilson appear to meet National Register Criterion C as good, intact representative examples of Contemporary West Coast architecture from the hand of a master. While they may not be pivotal works in the body of residential work in the modern regional idiom by Pietro Belluschi, they claim a special distinction in terms of the distribution of that body of work. The Wilson houses are thought to represent one of a very few Belluschi-designed projects east of the Cascade Range. The only other talked-about Belluschi residential work in central Oregon is said to be located in Dufur Valley, in

neighboring Wasco County. A bank building in eastern Oregon [at LaGrande?] is attributed to the architect.

Criterion A, relating to historical themes, appears not to be applicable in this case since the property that best exemplifies lumber manufacture as a base industry at Warm Springs is the Warm Springs Lumber Mill of 1943, which is still operating.

Scope of eligible area

If the Wilson houses were to be proposed for registration, an appropriate area must be defined as the historical and functional setting of the building group. Some choice could be exercised as to whether the entire fee simple holding would be registered or whether the registered area would be confined to the benchland of just under 10 acres which makes up the immediate setting of the buildings. In any case, a justification for boundary selection would be stated in accordance with the requirements.

National Register of Historic Places

Definition

The National Register of Historic Places is the nation's official list of districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects significant in American history, architecture, archaeology, and culture. It is maintained in Washington, D.C. by the National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior. Under authority of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the States work in partnership with the Federal government to expand the list according to specific criteria for evaluation.

Criteria for registration

Properties which are likely to meet the criteria for evaluation are at least 50 years old and are located on their original sites. They are well-preserved and distinctive examples of an architectural or engineering type or style. They are associated with persons, events, or broad movements or real consequence in local, State or national history. In the case of archaeological sites, they have the potential to yield significant information in American history or prehistory that is not available in the documentary record.

Benefits of Registration

Regulatory consequences

Listing in the National Register of Historic Places honors the property by recognizing its importance to the community, the State or the nation. Private owners of National Register properties have no obligation to admit the public to their properties or restore them unless they have voluntarily agreed to as a condition of receiving Federal, State, or local economic benefits.

Listing a property in the National Register does not prevent the owner from selling the property or adapting it to a compatible new use. In making changes to a listed property, owners are advised to follow the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

Once a property is listed, it can be removed from the National Register only under specific circumstances, which are that the decision regarding eligibility was made in error or based on incorrect information; a procedural error was made in the nomination process; or the qualities which made the property eligible for listing in the National Register cease to exist.

Under provisions (Section 106) of the National Historic Preservation Act and Federal regulations (36 CFR 800), if a National Register or Register-eligible property is to be affected by a Federally-sponsored project, the sponsoring agency must allow the State and Federal governments an opportunity to comment on the likely effects of the project. Activity of the Confederated Tribes on fee land, land that is not held in trust by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, probably would be interpreted and non-Federal undertaking unless the undertaking is funded in any part by a Federal agency. If development work involving a Register-eligible off-Reservation property is funded by a Federal agency, the project would be subject to review and comment by the State Historic Preservation Office.

Under the mandated Oregon statewide land use planning program, properties listed in the National Register are subject to protective zoning pursuant to Statewide Planning Goal 5, Oregon Laws, 1995, ch. 693, s 21, and Oregon Administrative Rules 660-23-200. This means that due process shall be followed by the planning jurisdiction in resolving land use conflicts that involve National Register (Goal 5) properties.

Economic opportunities

Owners of National Register properties (excepting those receiving Federal investment tax credits) may apply for development assistance from the Federal Historic Preservation Fund. The State of Oregon awards a modest amount of money to sub-grantees annually for a variety of preservation projects, including pre-development work (architectural assessments and project planning). Grants are awarded competitively on a 50/50 match-fund basis. When a sub-grantee has been awarded a grant, a covenant sets forth the conditions of the grant. After the project work is completed in accord with the covenant and inspected, the State bills the Fund for the grantee's matching share as a reimbursement. The grant cycle begins shortly toward the end of the year, when the State's apportionment for the Federal fiscal year is announced. Applications usually are due about March 1. Under State priorities, projects of non-profit organizations and local governments have the highest priority for funding.

Under provisions of the Economic Recovery Tax Act, owners of listed properties may qualify for certain benefits, including a 20 percent investment tax credit for the certified rehabilitation of income-producing property, such as commercial, industrial, or rental residential buildings. On land held in fee, the incentive to rehabilitate buildings according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation could apply to a leasee, or concessioner.

In Oregon, under Oregon Revised Statutes 358.474 *et seq.*, owners of Register-listed properties may apply for a property tax benefit, a "freeze" of the assessed value of the property for a 15-year period. As conditions of the property tax benefit, the owner must produce an approved plan according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and open the property to the public once a year for the period of benefit.

Seeking grants in the private sector is an option. Listing in the National Register usually places a property higher in the scale of priorities for funding from private foundations other Federal sources such as the Federal Highway Administration, Farmer's Home Administration, Department of Housing and Urban Development, and U. S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development funds. Any Federally-assisted project involving the listed property, however, must comply with the regulations for review and comment by the State Historic Preservation Office. If the project is planned in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation Projects, the avenue to approval remains open.

Future maintenance of the houses could be provided for under a special endowment created by Tribal, corporation, and private gifts. After the principal reaches sufficient level, interest earnings could be applied to the stated purposes.

Registration Process

Step by step procedures - who decides?

When a technically-complete nomination form is received by the State Historic Preservation Office, it is placed on the calendar for evaluation by the State review board during one of three public meetings each year. The review board, which presently includes the Tribal Preservation Officer of the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation, decides whether the property proposed for nomination meets criteria of the National Register and makes its recommendations to the State Historic Preservation Officer. If approved by the board, the property is nominated by the State Historic Preservation Officer, and the application is sent to Washington, D. C. The Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places decides whether to accept the nomination and list the property.

Completing a National Register nomination application is not difficult, but it requires time and at least modest expense. If the property includes a complex of buildings, there will be more features to describe. If the area proposed for nomination does not correspond to recorded lot lines, a boundary for the area will have to be described by metes and bounds. Exhibits required to round out the application include site maps and photographs, both black and white prints and color slides. The application, including exhibits, is submitted in duplicate.

The narrative portion of the application is divided into two sections: a thorough and systematic description of the property and a discussion of why it is significant. The key to preparing a successful nomination is staying focused on the applicable criteria and demonstrating how the property meets those criteria. The object is to make a record of properties that are significant in Oregon history or prehistory as a first step toward encouraging their preservation.

Specialized guidance and step-by-step written instructions are available from the State Historic Preservation Office. For those who wish to seek professional assistance, a list of consultants is available also. Some applicants have obtained the complimentary assistance of graduate student trainees in preparing nominations with excellent results.

Schedule for review of applications

The due date for receipt of applications to be reviewed in mid-May by the State review board is March 1. The due date for receipt of applications scheduled for review in mid-October is August 1; and December 1 is the due date for applications that will be reviewed during the board's mid-February meeting.

Professional Assistance

Condition assessment, recommended treatment, and National Register documentation

Selecting an appropriate management strategy for the property will depend upon a realistic assessment, both of the importance of the houses in the body of work by Pietro Belluschi and of the condition of each building. From the condition assessment, a recommended rehabilitation treatment schedule would be developed.

The Wilson houses clearly have sufficient quality and character to merit a sensitive adaptive use if they are retained. In whatever capacity they serve, the houses are best presented as what they are: modest, efficient, handsomely crafted and well-sited houses that are not showplaces except for the fact of their felicitous setting in the Deschutes River canyon.

The houses have a subtle, rather than sensational charm which will be the controlling factor in determining their commercial viability. For the present, the houses are unlikely to have mass appeal, but they could be a commercial asset if their authentic character is marketed appropriately. For example, a sensitive entrepreneurial use that is close enough to the original function that it could have minimal impact on the site and buildings might be a well-supervised, secluded fishing lodge, a satellite operation of Kahneeta Resort.

The accompanying State Historic Preservation Office Consultants List includes the names of several whose background in Oregon architectural history qualifies them to make an assessment of the significance Wilson houses and prepare documentation to standards of the National Register. To the names listed should be added Libby Farr, architectural historian, 2408 SW Sherwood Drive, Portland OR 97201-1614, telephone: 503/223-0874. Ms. Farr has specialized in the study of Belluschi's career. The Consultants List also includes individuals and firms who are expert in conducting condition assessments and developing treatment strategies. Marketing studies are in another realm, but the State Historic Preservation can provide upon request the names of a few firms who have conducted marketing studies for State-owned historical properties managed by the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department.