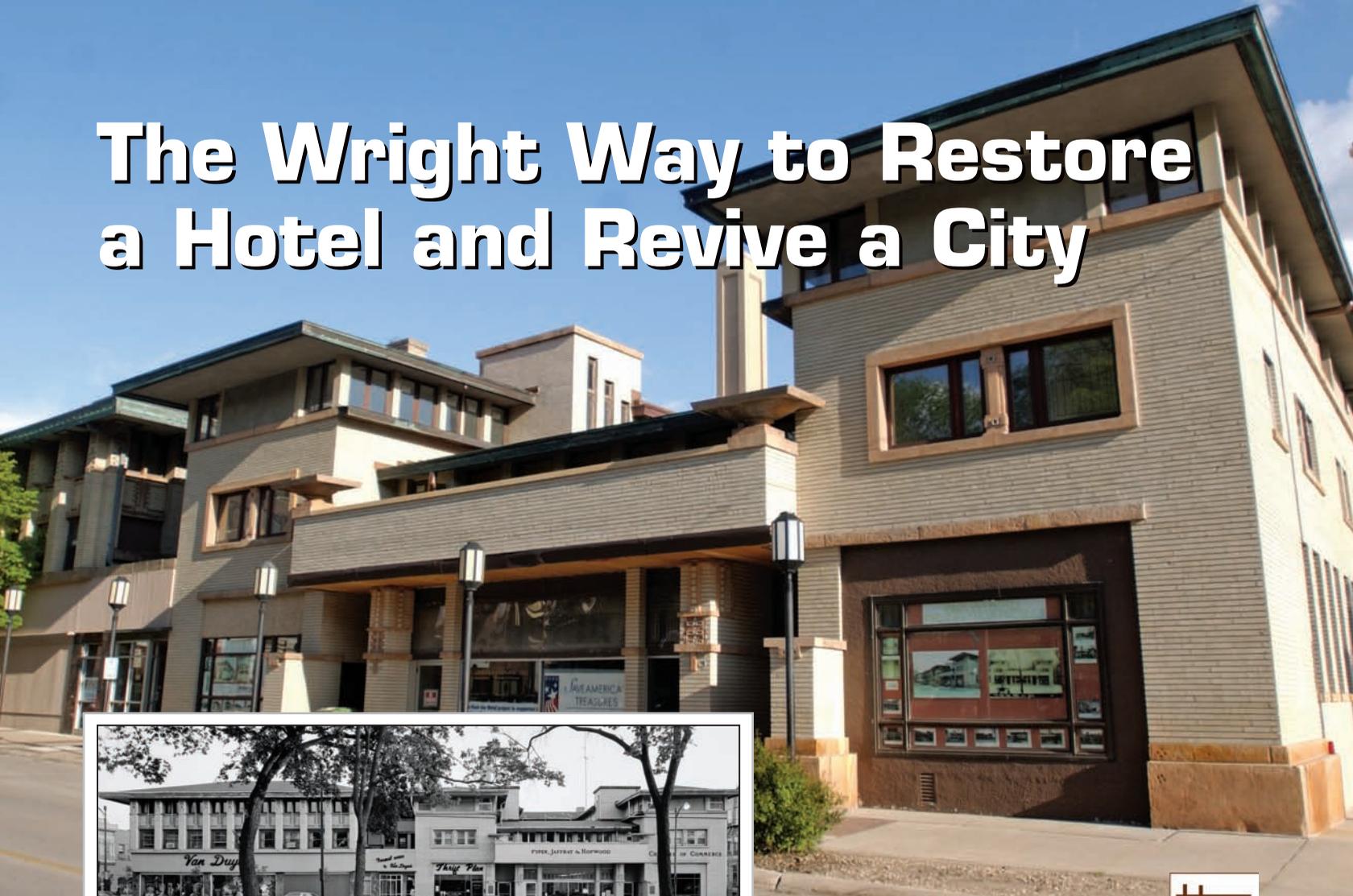


# The Wright Way to Restore a Hotel and Revive a City



What do Frank Lloyd Wright, Charles Lindbergh, John Dillinger, “The Music Man” and “The Day the Music Died” have in common?

Mason City, Iowa, population 28,000.

Of these, none had a greater impact on this Midwestern community than America’s iconic architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. He designed six hotels during his professional career, but only one still stands today: the Historic Park Inn Hotel in Mason City. Following decades of neglect and decay, it reopened in 2011 following an \$18 million renovation. Its 27 rooms have been restored to their 1910 elegance and are available at rates ranging from \$100 to \$250.

We’ll return to the story of what the Chicago Tribune called “Iowa’s unlikely capital of Prairie School architecture,” the unique hotel, and how the Mason City Chamber of

Commerce helped rescue it, but first some details about Mason City’s other connections to the famous or notorious.

- The Mason City Municipal Airport was founded in 1927 by the Mason City Chamber of Commerce and the local American Legion Post. Charles Lindbergh, who three months earlier had become the first aviator to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, attended the dedication. It was from that same airport on Feb. 3, 1959, that a four-seat Beechcraft Bonanza took off at 1 a.m. in light snow and crashed five miles away, killing Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J.P. “the Big Bopper” Richardson. This date became known as “The Day the Music Died,” thanks to Don McLean’s 1972 hit, “American Pie.”

- On March 13, 1934, the First National Bank in Mason City was robbed by a trigger-happy gang led by John Dillinger

and Baby Face Nelson. They shot up the bank, wounded a bystander and escaped with \$52,000—about \$890,000 in today’s dollars.

- Composer Meredith Willson, who wrote the music, lyrics and story for “The Music Man,” was born in Mason City in 1902. His hometown was the inspiration for the hit Broadway show that opened in 1957 and the 1962 movie, which premiered in Mason City. Willson often returned home for the annual North Iowa Band Festival, which is still going strong in its 75th year, pumping millions of dollars into the region’s economy. Willson’s life and music are still celebrated in Mason City, where his boyhood home is part of a multi-million dollar tourist destination complex including a museum, a music conservatory, banquet hall and a 1912 “River City” streetscape.

## The Wrong Long Road

Today, Mason City's hottest attraction is the Wright-designed Park Inn Hotel. Its historic value—and potential to enhance tourism—had been overlooked for decades. Opened in 1910 on a busy downtown corner as a multi-use building containing a bank, an upscale hotel, and tony law offices, the structure flourished until the 1920s, when the bank failed, the law office partnership dissolved, and the hotel was overshadowed by newer competitors. Over the years, the original design of Wright's building was desecrated as it was remodeled into retail stores, low-rent apartments, a sandwich shop and, finally, the offices of the local chamber of commerce.

By 2002, says Robin Anderson, CCE, IOM, executive director of the chamber, the Park Inn “was truly falling down—no hot water, holes in the roof and several broken windows. During meetings, you could hear the pigeons walking on the ceiling tiles above you. We just had to move. Thankfully, the board agreed.”

The Mason City Foundation purchased the Park Inn Hotel in 2000 and agreed to stabilize and renovate the deteriorating property by 2005, or it would revert back to the City of Mason City. Approximately \$1.9 million was spent on replacing the roof and other repairs, but full restoration of the property was estimated at more than \$20 million. This proved to be too big a task for the foundation, whose primary mission is devoted to the Meredith Willson attractions. So the hotel was turned back to the City of Mason City. At the time, Anderson says, city politics were marred by “a lot of community infighting.” Efforts to unite the city on a plan for downtown improvement were frustrated. At one point, the city council listed the hotel property on eBay. “Despite a community planning process, we couldn't reach any agreement on a vision,” Anderson says. “Everybody was concerned about their own project, and there were probably 10 or 12 different plans for things like a new ice rink, or a new senior citizens' center, a library, a swimming pool...and every time a project got traction, the city council wanted a study or a new plan.”



*“Mason City has developed many plans...but has had limited success in achievement. This cycle of planning without implementation has undermined the community's confidence in its ability to solve problems and left many cynical about the chances for future success.”*

—Main Street Iowa Resource Team Report, January 2006



## Vision Iowa to the Rescue

The Iowa Economic Development Authority, through its Vision Iowa program, had provided significant assistance to several Iowa communities since 2000 that led to incredible transformations, Anderson said. However, non-profit groups and local government had never been able to reach agreement on a suitable project, so Mason City had never applied for funding. With just \$9 million remaining in the Vision Iowa pot, Anderson was approached by the chairman of the Vision Iowa board, Andy Anderson (no relation), who was familiar with the worldwide significance of the hotel. He encouraged an application from Mason City before the funds were depleted.

“Typically these applications are led by cities or counties, and at that time we had no city administrator, no city planner, no city engineer, not even a police chief,” Anderson said. “We did have a city council with a lot on its plate and an acrimonious environment. The item that consumed most of the discussion at the council table at that time was what color to paint the water tower.”

To submit an application to Vision Iowa, 50% of the total project cost had to be in hand or pledged, and the clock was ticking. As the local community and economic development organization, the chamber board agreed it was within the organization's mission to push forward. Chamber officials met individually with the council

members and asked, “Would you have a problem with the chamber leading this?” Anderson says. “We had five of six council members and the mayor meet with us. They gave us suggestions about what should be included. They agreed the city didn't have the manpower or capacity to take this on at the time, but they supported it, at least initially.”

The chamber reviewed 17 community plans that had been developed within the past five years. Business leaders met with community leaders and mapped out a strategy that would enable the community to qualify for \$9 million in state grant funds. The chamber acted as the convener, umbrella organization, and watchdog for a group of non-profit entities working together on a broad vision entitled “Mason City...a community on the march,” to transform Mason City into a cultural and heritage tourism destination. In the end, the project consisted of five components:

- Park Inn Hotel/ City National Bank Restoration and Renovation: The Wright-designed building is the project's cornerstone.
- Mason City Public Library Renovation and Addition: Designed by the noted Chicago architectural firm, Holabird & Root, this building was made famous by its depiction in "The Music Man."
- Historic Architecture Interpretive Center Construction: This visitor education facility is located on the banks of Willow Creek and adjacent to the Wright-designed Stockman House Museum. It is within easy walking distance to the Rock Crest/Rock Glen historic district, the world's largest collection of Prairie Style homes unified by a common setting.
- Federal Plaza Streetscape Renovation and Infrastructure Replacement: Implementation of a comprehensive streetscape design on Federal Avenue from the Southbridge Plaza to Northbridge.
- Park Inn Hotel/Downtown Parking Expansion: Property acquisition, business relocation, demolition, and construction of a parking solution to serve Park Inn Hotel patrons and the downtown core.

Anderson recalls the first meeting: "I convened representatives from all the groups at my kitchen table and I remember saying, 'This is not a %\$#@\*^& bake sale!' I told them because we had to move so fast, it was going to be messy, and there will be times when we won't like each other very much, which was true—some members quit the chamber because we held their feet to the fire on some strict business requirements. But in the end, it was the right partnership of passion and business acumen. The value of actually prioritizing and implementing a multi-phase plan cannot be overstated for our over-planned and under-implemented community."



## Daring Move

It wasn't easy. While many contributors were generous, some folks thought Meredith Willson should be the city's brand. Others had difficulty paying homage to Frank Lloyd Wright, who wasn't the most likeable person. Many characterized him as a scoundrel who didn't pay his bills, took advantage of his talented apprentices, and left his wife and children to run off to Europe with a client's wife in the middle of the Mason City project.

In June 2008, in the midst of fundraising, the community experienced a devastating flood that ruined hundreds of homes and businesses. Negotiations between city officials and Vision Iowa were difficult and messy. Some members of the council opposed providing a guarantee to the state for the grant funding.

At one point, a disgruntled councilman called the governor's office and requested the grant be revoked. A citizens group, "Grassroots for Mason City" conducted a petition drive to pressure the council to move forward. When it came time to sign the contract with the state, the council deadlocked at 3-3 and it appeared the project was dead.

However, the Vision Iowa board members—who had journeyed to Mason City and toured the hotel and library—persevered. To pull the project from the fire once again, the Vision Iowa board chair approached the chamber and proposed that it serve as the financial guarantor for the private projects that would receive the bulk of the state funds. "The chamber's annual budget is less than \$300,000 and we had \$1 million in the bank for a future building project of our own. To serve as guarantor meant putting our entire organization on the line," Anderson said. The members of the chamber board, most of whom weren't even serving when the project began, took a courageous step forward and provided the guarantee. Anderson says that "if the hotel goes out of business, we have to pay the state the entire \$9 million. It came down to who believed that if we got this hotel renovated that Mason City would become a cultural tourism destination." ↗

## Perception Shift

According to Anderson, the chamber's involvement was much more than merely perpetuating the belief, that "if we build it, they will come." The organization played many key roles:

- Spearheading community fundraising and grant-writing efforts, including the successful award of \$9 million from the State of Iowa.
- Insisting that the non-profit groups hire a pre-approved project director to oversee day-to-day construction including change orders, finances, and tax credits.
- Insisting the hotel group hire a proven historic restoration expert as a consultant on the project.
- Utilizing resources to attract expertise to the project that delivered state and federal historic tax credits, New Markets Tax Credits, and a lead lender for the hotel financing package.
- Helping to select a hotel operator.
- Staying the course during hardships such as the 2008 flood, fundraising lulls, and dust-ups with naysayers and some members of the city council.
- Serving as "treasurer" of the community fundraising—billing and collecting multi-year pledges and grant funds for disbursement to sub-recipients.



Robin Anderson, CCE, IOM,  
executive director of the chamber.

• Serving as the private project guarantor to the State of Iowa for \$9 million in grant funds. This role continues until 2018.

"Our chamber, the non-profit organizations (Wright on the Park, Inc. and the River City Society for Historic Preservation), and city officials were key to the success of this project," Anderson says. "It made believers out of many, and restored the 'can-do' spirit of our community. You've got to have the people with the passion who want something restored, and they should get credit, but the business community should get credit for all the difficult stuff that has to be done for this kind of project. It was our business leaders out there getting the funds and grants so we could get our matching funds from the state."

Today, hotel occupancy has far surpassed initial projections, and downtown retail stores are seeing increased business. Restaurants have expanded in the immediate area, and the city recently received a federal grant to update several facades near the hotel. The Mason City chamber is now in a newly renovated downtown building that reflects the community's Prairie School legacy. Anderson says, "Now, we look out the window at the hotel designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, and can see how our community has been transformed." ☐

## I AM AN IOM BECAUSE ... "INSTITUTE IS THE DOORWAY TO THE ENTIRE CHAMBER UNIVERSE."



Gary L. Toebben, IOM, CCE  
President and CEO  
Los Angeles (CA) Area Chamber of Commerce  
1981 Graduate

I was new to the chamber world, and Institute provided me with a wealth of information and baseline knowledge that I could not have assembled on my own. Access to first-class faculty and a national network of peers saved me from making mistakes and reinventing the wheel. Because of Institute, I quickly understood the impact that strong chamber leadership can have on a community and have held that belief for 37 years.

## Learn. Grow. Connect.

For more information about Institute for Organization Management, visit [www.uschamber.com/institute](http://www.uschamber.com/institute) or call 202-463-5570.



An Affiliate of the  
**U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE**



A Program of the  
U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

