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Designed for business: The new Josephs Jewelry store in the West Glen shopping area maximizes the use of daylight according to a sun pattern charted on a computer.

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Reality: Row of windows, not plants

Customers at Josephs Jewelry sometimes mistake the row of small windows along the showroom's south wall for pictures. It is a deception that would have made Frank Lloyd Wright smile.

Elbert: Wright's Prairie style finds favor in the city

Sometimes it's called schlock, but when done right it's distinctive and environmentally friendly.

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The Prairie School style of architecture, pioneered by Frank Lloyd Wright a century ago, is making a comeback, spurred by advances in technology and advocates of sustainable environments.

"There definitely has been a revival," said Blair Kamin, architecture critic for the Chicago Tribune. A 1998 PBS television documentary on Wright by Ken Burns helped rekindle interest in the architect and his style, Kamin said.

Today, elements of Prairie-style architecture, including low-pitched roofs with wide overhangs and horizontal windows, are evident in several office buildings along Westown Parkway in West Des Moines, as well as on the edges of downtown Des Moines.

A lot of what is done now "is kind of a veneer of Prairie style," said Kamin. "Developers appropriate details of the style to help make their buildings more distinctive and sell space."

Sometimes, it winds up looking more like Prairie schlock than style, but it is still more visually interesting than the cookie-cutter look of many commercial developments, Kamin said.

In addition to the schlock, there are buildings such as the new Josephs Jewelry store in the West Glen shopping center that incorporate a fuller version of Wright's style.

Josephs' 18,500-square-foot retail store flows across a sloping lot and maximizes the use of daylight as the sun passes over the elongated building, just as Wright would have done, said Des Moines architect Daryl Metzger, who designed the building.

The partner in Smith Metzger Architects used a computer program of sunlight patterns to help determine the precise location and orientation for the building.

"Almost everything I've done has been accused of being Prairie School," said Metzger, a fan of Wright's

Wright, who died in 1959, was the inspiration for the 18,500-square-foot jewelry store in the West Glen shopping area on Mills Civic Parkway, just west of Interstate 35.

Des Moines architect Daryl Metzger designed the new store in accordance with principles developed by Wright and other Prairie School architects of the early 1900s.

One of those principles is to create designs that flow with the lay of the rolling prairie. Another involves the use of art glass and screens to blur the distinction between outside and inside.

The jewelry store is nestled into a sloping site in such a way that much of the showroom's south wall is, in effect, a retaining wall for an adjacent garden.

A half-dozen windows on the wall are arranged at a height above eye level that provides a near ground-level view of shrubs and flowers in the garden.

Hence the impression from the showroom that you are viewing a series of pictures of plants, not a row of windows.

Toby Joseph, co-owner of the jewelry store, is a Frank Lloyd Wright fan and is fond of several of the store's Prairie style features, which include overhanging roofs, a one-story porch and a limestone tower that penetrates the flat roof.

The limestone used to create the tower, and to frame a nearby waterfall, has special meaning, Joseph said, because it

human-scale designs.

One goal of Wright and other Prairie-style architects was to create buildings that were in harmony with nature, that would use, not abuse, their surroundings.

Wright "tried to blur the barrier between outside and inside," said critic Kamin.

Before he died in 1959 at age 92, Wright designed several office buildings, but the Prairie style now identified with him was more of a residential than a commercial building style.

That's partly because the style by definition is small scale.

"Prairie style tends to be low, hugging the ground," said Eliot Nusbaum, architecture editor at Traditional Home magazine.

"It was one of the original suburban home styles" during the early 1900s "because it has a larger footprint than a cottage (and) . . . it was more modern" than the Victorian styles popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Nusbaum said.

Prairie style is still used for homes, but the materials associated with it - limestone and large timbers — are expensive, which is one reason you don't see a lot of true examples of Prairie style homes being built.

Location dictates style

Des Moines architect Brian Shiffler has designed two local homes that incorporate Prairie style elements. One was for builder Jack Taylor on 52nd Street in Des Moines. The other is a 6,000-square-foot home under construction on Foster Drive for Stan Thurston, president of Lifecare Services, a developer and operator of retirement homes.

The sloping site on Foster Drive overlooks the Raccoon River valley, and the location dictated the style, Thurston said. "We wanted something that was understated so that the trees and property could speak for itself."

The design includes cantilevered roofs, a hallmark of Prairie style.

"In Wright's day, they didn't have air conditioning and double-glazed windows," Metzger said, and that's one of the reasons Wright built roofs with large overhangs.

At the time, Wright was pushing technology to extremes. His low-pitched, even flat, roofs were designed in part to help buildings blend with backgrounds, but they also served another important purpose.

came from Stone City, which is near his wife's hometown, Anamosa.

"The broad overhangs allow you to open up your windows in the rain and provides shelter from the sun. It is a good environmental style for the prairie," Shiffler said. "They produce a warm light. They filter out the direct light. They filter out the heat of the noonday sun."

ZOOM



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Outdoor features: The outside of a structure has the same attention as the inside. A waterfall area was incorporated outside the main entrance to the new Josephs Jewelry store, where Toby Joseph stands.

Help from technology

Architects today have the option of pushing Wright's designs even further, because of technology that's evolved in the past half-century, said Cal Lewis, chairman of the architecture department at Iowa State University.

Computer-assisted design is one advantage, but there also are new, stronger building materials and tools, such as solar cells, that weren't available 100 years ago, Lewis said.

Another hallmark of Wright designs was durability, which attracts the attention of environmentalists.

Design issues such as "orienting the house properly, having overhangs to protect the glass and allow ventilation, and using materials from the site or region are big-picture sustainability issues," said ISU's Lewis.

The original Prairie School movement was cut short by the Great Depression and then overtaken by the modernist movement, which emphasized the sleek look of glass and steel in skyscrapers.

Now, with more people paying attention to the environment and others fearful of terrorist attacks, it's nice to know there's renewed interest in designing buildings that hug the land and reflect heartland values.

Occasionally, you'll find some that look like Prairie style on steroids. But as Kamin said, "That's not the worst thing in the world."