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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form

This form is for use in documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Type all entries.

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

Residential Architecture of Alden B. Dow in Midland, Michigan, 1933-1938

B. Associated Historic Contexts

Residential Architecture of Alden B. Dow in Midland, Michigan, 1933-1938

C. Geographical Data

Corporate limits of the city of Midland, Michigan

See continuation sheet

D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Planning and Evaluation.

Richard B. Yalvest

8-1-89

Signature of certifying official

Date

Director, Bureau of History

State or Federal agency and bureau

I, hereby, certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

Patrick Andrews

12/4/89

Signature of the Keeper of the National Register

Date

E. Statement of Historic Contexts

Discuss each historic context listed in Section B.

See continuation sheet

F. Associated Property Types

I. Name of Property Type Houses

II. Description

III. Significance

IV. Registration Requirements

See continuation sheet

See continuation sheet for additional property types

G. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing.

See continuation sheet

H. Major Bibliographical References

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional documentation:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> State historic preservation office | <input type="checkbox"/> Local government |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other State agency | <input type="checkbox"/> University |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Federal agency | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other |

Specify repository: Dow-Howell-Gilmore Architects archives, Midland, MI

I. Form Prepared By

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E. Statement of Historic Content

During his long career, Midland based architect Alden B. Dow (1905-1983) designed more than seventy residences, a dozen churches, and an additional dozen schools, civic centers, art centers, and commercial buildings. His work, though concentrated in the Midland and central Michigan region, gained international recognition. Many of Dow's projects were discussed and praised in the leading architectural journals. This multiple property nomination focuses on his residential work in Midland, those homes designed and built from 1933 to 1938.

The locational and date limitations for this nomination have been carefully chosen, in part because they made for a manageable size, but more importantly because this body of work is a coherent whole. The concluding date also fits within the 50-year National Register guidelines. While the structures, all located within the city limits of Midland, vary considerably in size, style, building material, and original cost, they do reveal a common hand at work; the architectural ideals of Alden Dow show through in each of these homes. These residences possess a unity which is evident in their conception, design, building materials, and relationship to the building site. The concluding date is 1938, although additional residences designed and constructed before 1941 will be nominated as the 50-year limit makes them eligible for consideration.

The post-war work of Alden Dow's architectural firm moved toward larger commercial buildings, although Dow continued to design residences. As the number of projects and their scale grew after the war, so too did the size of his firm. At the same time, he designed fewer small residences.

The 13 residences included in this multiple property nomination are all located in Midland, Michigan. During his long career, Dow had more than 60 of his designs constructed in Midland. As critics have recently acknowledged, no other city in America has such a high concentration of buildings by a single outstanding architect. In Alden Dow's early career (1930-1945), the bulk of his work was in this community. Dow, a native of Midland, returned here after receiving his degree in architecture from Columbia University and spending six months with Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin in 1934 with the first group of apprentices. Dow returned to Midland and did much of his early work here for a variety of reasons. Already in 1930, while a student at Columbia, he designed the Midland Country Club (built according to his plans but severely changed with a major interior and exterior remodel several years ago).

In addition, Dow sincerely believed that the clients in Midland, mostly scientists affiliated with Dow Chemical

Company, were more responsive to his view of architecture than clients in other communities. Dow openly praised these potential Midland clients in a speech to the Monday Club in 1934, right after returning from Taliesin. Dow believed, rightly so as it turned out, that the potential clients in Midland would respond readily to his conception of architecture which he termed "constructing in the nature of the material, constructing for the nature of the individual." Dow found a market for his innovative architecture, and it was in Midland that most of his early work is to be found. During these years, roughly 1933 to 1938, Alden Dow did prepare the plans for several residences and commercial buildings outside of Midland. But his most important early work and its greatest concentration is found in Midland. After the Second World War, Alden Dow continued to design residences, but increasingly the largest part of his architectural practice involved commercial projects. The scale and scope of his architecture became much larger. Still, the central elements of his architecture can be seen in this later work.

F. Associated Property Types

II. Description

The fact that virtually all of his early residential designs were in Midland demonstrates Alden Dow's commitment to the city of his birth, and the availability of clients who were willing to contract with a young architect developing a new architectural vocabulary. Alden Dow was a life-long resident of Midland. Born to Grace and Herbert Henry Dow, the founder of the Dow Chemical Company, on April 10, 1904, Alden Dow studied chemical engineering for three years at the University of Michigan before transferring into the architectural program at Columbia University. He was graduated in 1930, and returned to Midland. Until 1933 when he gained his architect's license, Dow worked as an Associate Designer with Frantz and Spence, Architects, in nearby Saginaw. While a designer with this firm Alden Dow designed his first executed project, the Midland Country Club.

Dow was still eager to sharpen his architectural skills. In May, 1933, he and his wife Vada went to Spring Green, Wisconsin, to participate in Frank Lloyd Wright's newly created program for architects. Dow and his wife were members of the first year's group. They remained only for six months, but the influence of Wright was strong and it went far in giving Dow confidence and direction in his work. But, as architectural critics noticed already in the early 1940s, Alden Dow's work, while affected by Wright, is by no means derivative.

The best summary of the early work of Alden Dow came from the respected architecture critic Talbot Hamlin. It is worth quoting the first two paragraphs of a 1942 article. As Hamlin wrote: "Whoever approaches the office of Alden Dow at Midland, Michigan, need be in no doubt as to the kind of architecture to be expected from it. Its rhythmically-lined slanting roofs, its dynamic--perhaps even exaggerated--varieties in plane, and the sharp staccato of its chimney mass, the richness of color, give evidence of the mind of an artist to whom the important things in architecture are rhythm, the play of plane against plane, and of color against color, and the relation of building to landscape, and indicate a temperament that seems to enjoy the process of invention for its own sake. Alden Dow, a graduate of the Columbia Architectural School who worked for an extended period with Frank Lloyd Wright, has not been content to accept the accepted, merely to ring new changes on current tunes. Like many members of the Chicago School (Purcell and Elmslie or Walter Griffin, for example), he has sought to create out of building materials a poetry of plane and line, of outside and in, of color and form--a poetry at times verging on the fantastic, as in his own office, but at other times, building itself out of the simplest planes of wall and glass."

"The influence of Wright is of course all pervading, especially in the earlier work, and Dow's own system of square cement block construction is a development of the system of textured block construction which Wright used so brilliantly in his Los Angeles and Hollywood work. It is perhaps to Wright also that Dow owes his vivid feeling for interlaced rhythms and his sense that each line in a building necessarily affects every other line. Most interesting is the way in which this designer attempts to integrate exterior and interior of his buildings by using some of the exterior materials within and employing in the chief rooms of the house the same rhythms of brick or block that he has used for its exterior." (italics in original)

In his early residential designs, Alden Dow used four motifs--interpretations of the prairie style, houses built on a square grid pattern, houses constructed on an elongated L floor plan, and houses built out of unit block, a building material developed by Dow and a material which went far in defining the elements of the structure. These designs are illustrated by the first four residential structures he designed for Midland based clients. The Earl Stein house (1933) is an interpretation of the prairie style with its brick construction, a copper roof, broad horizontal planes, L shape floor plan, and long covered walkway to the entrance. The F. W. Lewis house (1933), a small, inexpensive wood frame home, is built on a square grid pattern, what Dow called the "unit system." The J. A. Cavanagh house (1933), a modest wood frame and brick building, is laid out on an elongated L floor plan and has a carport. From the street, this home appears small, but the bedrooms are all in the core of the house which projects outward from the rear, thereby assuring the family privacy. The Alden Dow Studio and Home (1934-1936) was built out of unit block, rhomboid casted cinder blocks used by Dow in his interpretation of the International Style. His most innovative designs were done in unit block, a material he developed and patented. Some critics identify his Studio as one of the two most important buildings in America.

While Alden Dow used several basic motifs, his work remained unpredictable, vigorous and exciting. The buildings included in this nomination are by no means repetitive. The site plans, the materials and the design concepts provide continuity and integrity. Dow designed each structure to fit the needs and desires of his clients. Each was a variation of one of several themes. As a result, the imprint of Alden Dow on Midland is strong and unmistakable. The success of his architectural design is further indicated by the number of structures designed by other architects which imitate his residential work. With much of his post-1938 work also in Midland, the community's architecture has been strongly influenced by Alden Dow.

III. Significance

Within the context of the 1930s and 1940s, Alden Dow's work gains significance from its innovative use of design, materials, and new technologies. His buildings in Midland were recognized by contemporaries as being important and as marking a new direction in American architecture. Already as a young architect, Dow's work received praise from established critics such as Talbot Hamlin. These comments remain appropriate today, as Dow's architecture is by no means dated or locked to a specific period or place or style. His early work continues to be exciting and relevant.

The number of publications on his architecture indicate the recognition given his work by peers, critics, and scholars. In 1932, for example, shortly after he graduated from the Columbia School of Architecture, Architectural Record published a six page article on the Midland Country Club, his first executed design. By 1945 more than 40 articles on his work had appeared.

Again to quote Talbot Hamlin: "In this work there clearly speaks a personality which is individual, which is thinking imaginatively--not in terms of style but in terms essentially creative--and which is seeking aims quite different from the aims of the usual modern designer." Hamlin, after studying mostly Midland structures, maintained that "his work is never a matter of equations or fixed relationships: it is rather the production of a mind seeking to create out of building materials objects that somehow plumb the more unusual depths of human experience." Hamlin concluded that "Mr. Dow's achievement is of great importance to American architecture," and he writes "Here is a man not content with building mere comfortable and efficient shelters but a man who conceives that architecture, in order to realize its potential contribution to human living, must also create buildings which enlarge the imagination and enrich the emotional life of those who dwell in them." (italics in original)

Alden Dow's architecture has captured these elements, and it has fared well over the ensuing decades. The buildings included in this nomination are all occupied and well maintained. Several have been carefully restored in recent years. Even recent owners are excited about his work.

The success and importance of Alden Dow's work came, in part, from his clear conception of what architecture was and how it worked. Already in 1934, Dow elaborated his principles, and his work grew out of these. In a speech given to a group in Midland on January 24, 1934, Dow told his audience (and prospective clients) that the basis of architecture involves "constructing with the nature of

materials for the nature of the human being." He acknowledged that "It is from this point of view that we are consciously approaching architecture." And, he added, "what could be more sound?" These principles guided Dow through his long career. The success of his work is also demonstrated by the State of Michigan having appointed Alden Dow as its architect laureate.

IV. Registration Requirements

The 13 homes included in this nomination are those which have not been substantially altered; their basic fabric and integrity have remained intact. During this period, Dow designed only several other structures for Midland--the Midland Country Club (1931), Dow Chemical Main Office (1937), and the Central Park Bandshell and Pool. The Midland residences include the Earl Stein house (1933), the F.W. Lewis house (1934), the Joseph Cavanagh house (1934), the Alden Dow Studio and home (1934), the Sheldon Heath house (1934), the Alden Hanson house (1935), John Whitman house (1935), the Charles MacCallum house (1936), the Howard Ball house (1936), the Oscar Diehl house (1936), the George Greene house (1937), the Donald Connor house (1936), and the James Pardee house (1936). Of Alden Dow's early work in Midland, only the house for A.C. Barclay (1937) is not included as it underwent extensive remodeling of the interior and exterior, thereby changing its basic character and the features which made it an Alden Dow design. There are additional pre-war residences in Midland designed by Dow and these will be nominated for inclusion in this Multiple Property nomination as they become fifty years old.

G. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

The survey of Alden Dow's work in Midland, the basis of this Multiple Property nomination, began in 1975 as part of a major retrospective examination of Dow's career. Sponsored by the Midland Art Council of the Midland Center for the Arts, the research was done by Nancy Barker. It culminated in the "A Way of Life" exhibit and accompanying catalog. The research continued. The Alden B. Dow Creativity Center, a component of the Northwood Institute (Midland, Michigan), sponsored these efforts and the publication of a guide to his work. Entitled "The Architecture and Influence of Alden B. Dow," the brochure includes a list of each structure in Midland and a map showing its location. This on-going research project was led by the Creativity Center's Executive Director, Carol Coppage. The scope of this research has extended to include all of the work of Alden Dow.

As part of the Creativity Center's commitment to continuing this research, it awarded a summer fellowship in 1986 to Dr. Robert G. Waite, an architectural historian and preservation consultant. Dr. Waite was to complete the research in the files of Alden Dow's architectural firm, Dow-Howell-Gilmore-Associates, and to prepare the Multiple Property nomination. Dr. Waite worked closely with the personnel from the earlier survey as well as with architects from Dow-Howell-Gilmore, the firm started by Alden Dow, in developing the criteria for including a building in this Multiple Property nomination.

H. Major Bibliographical References

Hamlin, Talbot F. "The Architect and House--Alden B. Dow of Michigan," Pencil Points (May, 1942), pp. 269-286.

Hamlin, Talbot F. "La Obra del Arquitecto American Alden B. Dow," Nuestra Arquitectura 11(November, 1948), pp. 370-396.

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"Modern Architecture Makes Utility Beautiful," Midland Republican (January 25, 1934).

Robinson, Sidney. The Architecture of Alden B. Dow (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983).

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