

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. 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. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

### 1. Name of Property

historic name Dow, Alden B., House and Studio  
other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

### 2. Location

street & number 315 Post Street  not for publication  
city, town Midland  vicinity  
state Michigan code MI county Midland code 111 zip code 48640

### 3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	_____ buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	_____	_____ sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	_____	_____ structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	_____	_____ objects
		<u>1</u>	_____ Total

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A  
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register \_\_\_\_\_

### 4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.

Signature of certifying official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

### 5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register.  See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Domestic

Commerce/Trade

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Home and architect's studio/office

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Wrightian

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete

walls unit blocks of cinder concrete

roof sheet copper

other

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

Dow's home and studio were constructed over a period of time after he studied at Taliesin with Frank Lloyd Wright. Begun in 1933, this low-lying, wing-like house was put together with not only a careful respect for nature but was constructed on the geometrical principles of Dow's Unit Blocks. Dow's biographer, Sidney Robinson, describes them:

Dow developed his Unit Blocks which he patented in 1936 as a way of constructing walls and openings in satisfying alignment and of creating textural interest. Before he went to Taliesin he had been working on a cubic block of concrete. The possible variations of a wall laid up with these cubes was limited, and it was not structurally very solid. Upon returning to Midland, Dow tried to find a form that would be free of these drawbacks. The solution, first modeled in wood, was a block whose exposed faces were one foot square but whose plan was a forty-five-degree rhombus. The variations suggested by this angled form and the offset joints from course to course were exactly what Dow was looking for. The full-size blocks were cast from cinder concrete in sixteen different shapes. Although Dow did not rely exclusively on this material for walls, it became a distinctive feature in his early work.<sup>1</sup>

In all of Dow's work using Unit Blocks, the house and studio is the only example of the blocks used with sloping sheltering roofs.

The site and landscaping, which are an integral part of the complex, are beautiful. Some of the plantings and trees were already there, such as the large red maple that was incorporated into the plan of the structure. The still pond on which the original building sits is artificial, being the result of damming several streams on his father's land in the western part of Midland. The site was carefully landscaped with pines, birches, willows and wisteria, and in the water are cattails and lilies. Most spectacular is the sunken conference room, the floor of which is some 18 inches below the surface of the water. The long low roof rises from the water to the "ell," where, in 1935-36, the studio was built. This wing ends on the north with a garage shop and heating plant and was partly sunk into the ground with a large triangular window cut into the northeast side of an elaborately folded roof.

The straight and irregular lines, white blocks and green roof, and textured and smooth surfaces are brought together in an abstract visual composition.

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The blocks are pavement, stepping stones, and walls. They are part of the building, part of the ground, and part of the water. In one configuration, they make a stalagmite form which hides the chimney. The planar surface of the pond is set against circular tanks and square pads visible just below water and the blocks above the water. ...

The plan of the studio matches its appearance; it is allowed to wander freely along the water's edge and among the trees. It is the most freely disposed of any of Dow's buildings not only in its three-dimensional effect but in the interest of "plan appeal." Dow admits that this plan was in part determined by his attempt to create a satisfying composition of abstract forms.<sup>2</sup>

The house was built and joined to the studio in 1940.

The designs of 1939 show a less playful building than the studio. Its roofs are flat or hipped forms covered by ribbed copper. Generous expanses of carpeted space are substituted for the smaller, livelier spaces in the studio. While the earliest part of the studio was built simply with wooden structural members, the house is supported on a considerable array of steel beams, columns, and joists. The entrance to the studio is on the lower level, through Dow's study, which is at the end of the long studio drafting room. The large porch off the dining room is screened from floor to cantilevered roof, which affords an unbroken vista from corner to corner.<sup>3</sup>

The finish on all the wings of the complex is beautifully maintained, as is the carefully landscaped garden that surrounds the house and pond.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Sidney Robinson, The Architecture of Alden B. Dow (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally     statewide     locally

Applicable National Register Criteria     A     B     C     D    NHL #4

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)     A     B     C     D     E     F     G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)  
Architecture  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Period of Significance  
20th Century  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Dates  
1936 studio  
1940 house  
\_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Affiliation  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Person  
\_\_\_\_\_

Architect/Builder  
Dow, Alden B.  
\_\_\_\_\_

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The architecture of Alden B. Dow received national attention from his very early career through to his late period, partly because he was closely associated with Frank Lloyd Wright, although a number of his designs are more closely allied with European modernism. Dow was clearly placed between the two movements. He did not have the struggle to establish himself financially that Sullivan and Wright had--he was free of the necessity to compromise and he had the luxury of pursuing his own aesthetic. The body of his work is of rare quality and completeness and remains highly original among the contending forces of 20th-century architecture. The house and studio are, however, his most clearly acknowledged masterpiece.

His biographer, Sidney Robinson, wrote:

He was born on April 10, 1904. From early childhood he wanted to become an architect (he remembers creating ground plans on the lawn of his father's houses with rooms outlined in fallen leaves). He began his university studies in chemical engineering but soon transferred his attention to architecture. He was graduated from the Columbia University School of Architecture in 1931, and there acquired an American Beaux Arts training based on a tradition of composition in accordance with changing technological capabilities.

After working for several months with Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin in the summer of 1933, Dow returned to Midland and became the first Taliesin Fellow to build on his own. What he built were outstanding private houses, most of them in Midland. As the son of the founder of Dow Chemical, he found a ready-made clientele for his domestic housing among its managers. The first public statement of his design philosophy was made in a talk in January 1934 while he was at work on his own studio, a striking example of the English eighteenth-century "Picturesque" tradition. When Dow stood on a low rise and looked across the pond to this building, he saw it as a "beautiful picture." It is not an epic canvas but a composition at the scale of the individual observer.<sup>1</sup>

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The various phases Dow's work went through from 1930 to 1950 reflect the influence of Wright's organic architecture, but after 1950 with larger schools, churches and office buildings, his work was simplified and less detailed. He referred to his designs as "composed order" and the spectacular wedding of structure and landscape produce "picturesqueness."

Dow's thought remained uncomplicated because he had not had to respond to pressing challenges in his daily work. His family's social and economic preeminence in the small town of Midland created a private and privileged world around him. From childhood his life had been protected by the fruits of his father's tough-minded technical and business operations, and because the tough-mindedness required to overcome adversity was unnecessary for Alden, it has always been uncongenial to him. In fact, from his father, one could say that Dow received the gift described by John Adams in 1780: "I must study politics and war, that my sons may have liberty to study ... commerce and agriculture ... in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music and architecture."

His clients' relations with Dow have always been characterized by deference on their part. An architect in such a position, it is thought, "bestows" designs much as one bestows gifts, and the recipient is grateful and appreciative. In Dow's case this deferential attitude is not always confined to family, friends, and clients. For example, when Architectural Record reviewed the fifty years of American architecture from 1891 to 1941, and discussed the George Greene house, it referred to the designer as "Mr. Dow," the only architect to whom it showed such formality.<sup>2</sup>

The particular building and site of the House and Studio is the most familiar Dow design. The green and white house and studio, its roofs overhanging a pond with rushes and lilies, is visual poetry using contrasting colors and planes that flow together like the water visible from many windows. The sunken conference room is one of the most elegant rooms in the complex. You can hear the water lapping at the window on a windy day. Dow won the Grand Prix at the Paris Exposition in 1937 for this design. The sylvan setting means beautiful views from every window. There are interesting details: the bright, clashing colors, unusual wall textures, and unusual lighting. In the living room of the house the gabled ceiling is covered with basket-woven ivory ETHOCEL, plastic ribbon made by the Dow Chemical Company and treated to be phosphorescent, glowing at night.

The arts are represented by a collection of sculptures in both a modernized classical form of the twenties and in the work of Marshall Fredericks. Beside the elevated dining hearth stand Fredericks' small bronze figures called "Saints and Sinners," a range of medieval personalities including a knight, a lady, and a devil. The crafts are represented by a collection

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of pottery distributed throughout the living room and bedrooms. Beautiful jars and vases provide the proper contrast of vivid colors and flowing forms with the rectilinear modularity of the interiors.<sup>3</sup>

Alden Dow learned about landscape as a boy helping his father develop the Dow Gardens on 30 acres in Midland. In 1925, the Japanese landscape architect, Paul Takuma Tono, worked with the Dow family in developing both the City Park and the family gardens.

Alden Dow most often uses landscape design to contrast natural forms with the hard-edged forms of buildings. The context he most often imagines for his buildings is a landscape setting, not a continuous urban environment. The contrast of structure and planting was employed in the first building Dow designed, the Midland Country Club of 1930. The great importance of the planting in "securing the intended effect with the exceedingly plain lines of the modern cream stucco building" was faithfully described in the Midland Republican. To the south of the clubhouse a grass slope linked the entrance level with the locker room level. This area, called a "cube garden," played off the irregularity of plants and grass with squared-off concrete.

In 1972 Dow returned to his father's garden [adjacent to his own] and began a major program of renovation. The once free-flowing stream, now near stagnation, was made part of a closed system driven by a pump. A rocky waterfall camouflages this artificial system, whose eight-inch pipe spills into a new rill cut through the lawn, completing the circuit with the original stream. Several new bridges of concrete and steel were added or replaced older ones. Dow also made use of a principle of spatial manipulation in landscape learned from his father: an area of lawn can be made to appear larger if it is bowl-shaped, with the corners higher than the center. Dow's earth-shaping in the garden resulted in a playful area called "Ups and Downs."<sup>4</sup>

The arrangement of nature was deliberate. A view of the house was just as important as a view from the house. It should be noted that Wright was working on the Kauffman house ("Falling Water") at about the same time Alden Dow was creating his house and studio. Both were attempts to control nature and building as one. The intent was not "natural," but aesthetic. Man in Nature was an ancient tradition and a number of theories about order and romanticism have become part of the architect's vocabulary. Alden Dow was one of the very few 20th-century architects who could demonstrate with consummate skill his own theories concerning the principles of architecture.

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Footnotes:

1. Sidney Robinson. The Architecture of Alden B. Dow (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), p. vii.
2. Ibid., p. 11.
3. Ibid., p. 134.
4. Ibid., p. 135.

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreege of property 27.2 acres

UTM References

A 

1	6	7	2	1	3	3	0	4	8	3	3	8	7	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

B 

1	6	7	2	1	8	3	0	4	8	3	3	8	8	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

C 

1	6	7	2	1	8	4	0	4	8	3	3	3	8	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

D 

1	6	7	2	1	3	4	0	4	8	3	3	3	7	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

This is the original property boundary of the house and garden.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Carolyn Pitts, Historian  
organization History Division, NPS date 2/9/89  
street & number 1100 L Street, NW telephone (202) 343-8166  
city or town Washington state DC zip code 20013



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Engel, Martin. "The Ambiguity of Frank Lloyd Wright: Fallingwater," Charette, April 1964.

Museum of Modern Art. Modern Architecture, U.S.A. New York: 1965. (Exhibition catalogue.)

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

Smith, Norris Kelly. Frank Lloyd Wright. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966.

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1. Verbal Boundary Description

Beginning at the intersection of north line of section 17, west 1/8 line, south 1153.09 feet, south 59 degrees 3 minutes west 607.34 feet, north 32 degrees 18 minutes west 156.4 feet, north 59 degrees 4.5 minutes east 33.3 feet, north 30 degrees 33 minutes west 395.91 feet, south 59 degrees 27 minutes, west 522 feet, north 46 degrees 3 minutes west 65.95 feet, north 0 degrees 20 minutes, east 112 feet, south 89 degrees 40 minutes, east 90 feet north 0 degrees 20 minutes east 85 feet, south 89 degrees 40 minutes east 75 feet, north 3 degrees 23.5 minutes east 240.48 feet, north 80 degrees 40 minutes, west 180 feet, north 0 degrees 20 minutes, east 377 feet, north 66 degrees 23 minutes, east 663.31 feet, north 30 degrees east 92.4 feet to north line of section 17, north 89 degrees 28 minutes, east 610.5 feet to beginning except street and road right-of-way and except area north of said right-of-way.