

J.J. Walser House

42 N. Central Avenue, Chicago



J.J. Walser House with former owner Anne Teague, a 2025 Chicago 7 Most Endangered. Joseph Jacob (J.J.) Walser House, 1903, Frank Lloyd Wright, 42 N. Central Avenue. Photo Credit: Eric Allix Rogers

OVERVIEW

The Joseph Jacob (J.J.) Walser House, located at 42 N. Central Avenue in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago, is a significant structure within both the west Chicago neighborhood and city at large. Today, the J.J. Walser House has accrued additional significance as one of only five extant Prairie School structures designed by Frank Lloyd Wright within the city of Chicago. It is also the only single-family house designed by the renowned architect on the city's West Side.

The house was listed as a City of Chicago Landmark first in 1981, with the designation report later revised in 1983. In 2013 the property was

Joseph Jacob (J.J.) Walser House

Address: **42 N. Central Avenue**

Architect: **Frank Lloyd Wright**

Date: **1903**

Style: **Prairie School**

Neighborhood: **Austin**



Joseph Jacob (J.J.) Walser House, 1903, Frank Lloyd Wright, 42 N. Central Avenue. Photo courtesy of the Gilman Lane Photograph Collection at Oak Park Public Library Special Collections, Art Institute of Chicago Archives, Architecture Photograph Collection, 67368

listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) for its significant design by Frank Lloyd Wright, which is exemplary of the design philosophies of the Prairie School. The J.J. Walser House is one of Wright's experiments with employing the tenets of Prairie School design to more affordable residences. The overall massing, horizontal trim, low hipped roofs with wide overhanging eaves, material palette, horizontal bands of windows, and an open floor plan are just some of the design elements that typify the Prairie School.

HISTORY

Born in 1878 in Chicago, Joseph Jacob Walser (1878-1921) was a graduate of engineering class of 1900 of University of Michigan. After graduation, he worked for his father, Jacob Joseph Walser Jr. (1848-1913), in the Goss Printing Company before becoming a real estate developer. In 1901, he married Grace Lenora Moore (1877-1970) in Ann Arbor, Michigan. In early 1903, Mr. and Mrs Walser bought the land at 42 N. Central Avenue (formerly 417 S. Central Avenue) for their new home. It is not known how Walser came to commission Frank Lloyd Wright for the design of his home. Proximity to Wright's Home and Studio in Oak Park, Illinois, is one possible explanation. The scope of the commission included "not only a modern style house but also custom-designed interior built-in furniture and specially designed leaded art glass windows." For a cost of \$4,000, the two-story single-family house was finished by the end of 1903.



Side elevation with original art glass windows, Joseph Jacob (J.J.) Walser House, 1903, Frank Lloyd Wright, 42 N. Central Avenue.

Photo credit: The House Beautiful Magazine, Volume 18, Issue 4, September 1905, pg. 25 / Preservation Chicago Collection

Just two years after its construction, the house was featured in the September 1905 issue of *House Beautiful* magazine. At the time, it was often cited as a model design for similarly modest, architect-designed residences.

The Walsers lived in the house for only seven years before it was sold in 1910. Between 1910 and 1970, the property changed hands eleven times. During this period, successive occupants altered and remodeled the house, enclosing the front wing porches, constructing a rear addition, remodeling the kitchen and bathrooms, removing some original windows and doors, and combining two rear bedrooms into one. Since 1970, when the Teague family purchased the house, only minor changes were made in nearly 50 years. After Anne Teague's death in 2019, however, the house began to deteriorate and eventually went into foreclosure through a reverse mortgage.

Though not often cited as one of Wright's grander works, the Walser House nonetheless incorporates essential details of the Prairie Style and is a testament to the style's broad applicability, its emphasis on simple forms, horizontality, and "organic" naturalism. Wright's (and his contemporaries') development of the Prairie Style through single-family residences remains among the most recognized, and arguably the most iconic, impressions of the form. The Walser House is no exception.

Through the "conversation" between interior and exterior, the J.J. Walser House exemplifies the defining principles of Prairie School architecture, with careful composition and attention to detail. Strong horizontal lines dominate the design, reinforced by the low-hipped roofs with wide overhanging eaves that also help with passive climate control. Inside, the open floor plan allows rooms to flow smoothly into one another. Noticeably, Chicago-style windows with ribbon casements flood the interior with maximum natural light. Wide porches, integrated planters, and plentiful windows further blur the boundaries between the house and its surroundings. The two-toned exterior palette of



Front and side elevation, Joseph Jacob (J.J.) Walser House, 1903, Frank Lloyd Wright, 42 N. Central Avenue. Circa 1977. Photo credit: Chicago Sun-Times collection, Chicago History Museum, ST-14001686-0004

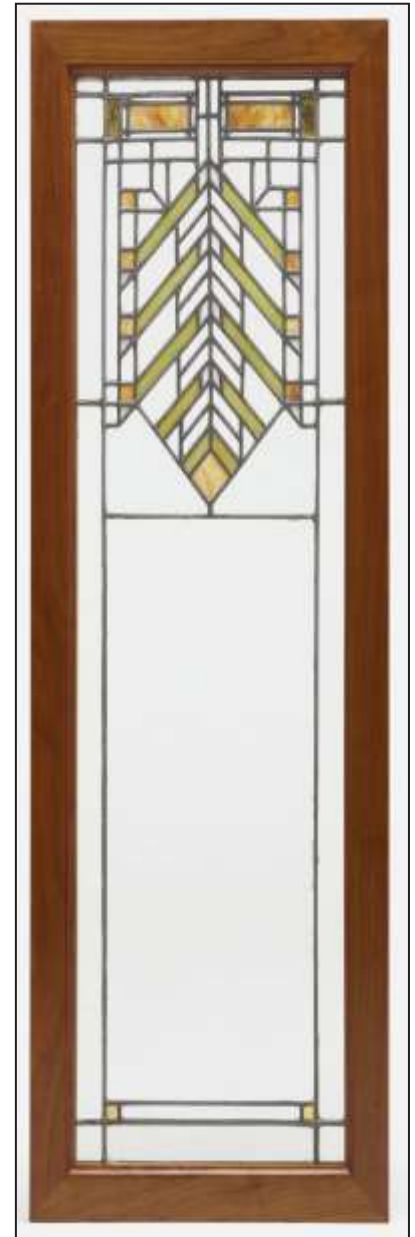
light stucco and dark wood trim, complements the natural materials inside. The Prairie School's focus on integrated, handcrafted elements is evident in the built-in furniture, including benches, bookcases, mantels, and sideboards.

THREAT

The J.J. Walser House is no stranger to the need for preservation support. Around the middle of the twentieth century, the original art glass windows were removed and sold for their considerable value, a rear addition was built, and the front porches were enclosed. Anne (d.2019) and Hurley Teague (d.1997) purchased the house in 1970, stabilized it, and continued to steward this invaluable historic asset for nearly fifty years.

After the passing of Anne Teague in 2019, the future of the house further became uncertain amid the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The house has been unoccupied and unmaintained for the past six years, and the harsh regional climate has taken an especially significant toll on the fragile historic materials throughout its exterior and interior. Despite admirable temporary enclosure efforts and the clearance of overgrown vegetation by advocacy partners, including the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, Landmarks Illinois, and Austin Coming Together, the entirety of the house requires immediate evaluation and repair.

The condition of the house is just one hurdle. The property is also undergoing foreclosure, which is complicating and slowing efforts to find a new owner and steward for the house. No repair efforts can be undertaken without the property owner's consent, and with the ownership of the property in legal limbo, the house continues to suffer from deferred maintenance.



Original art glass window from the J.J. Walser House, Chicago, designed for Frank Lloyd Wright. Image photo: Toomey & Company Auction House



*Views of principal façade on Central Avenue, Joseph Jacob (J.J.) Walser House, 1903, Frank Lloyd Wright, 42 N. Central Avenue.
Photo courtesy of the Gilman Lane Photograph Collection, Oak Park Public Library Special Collections*

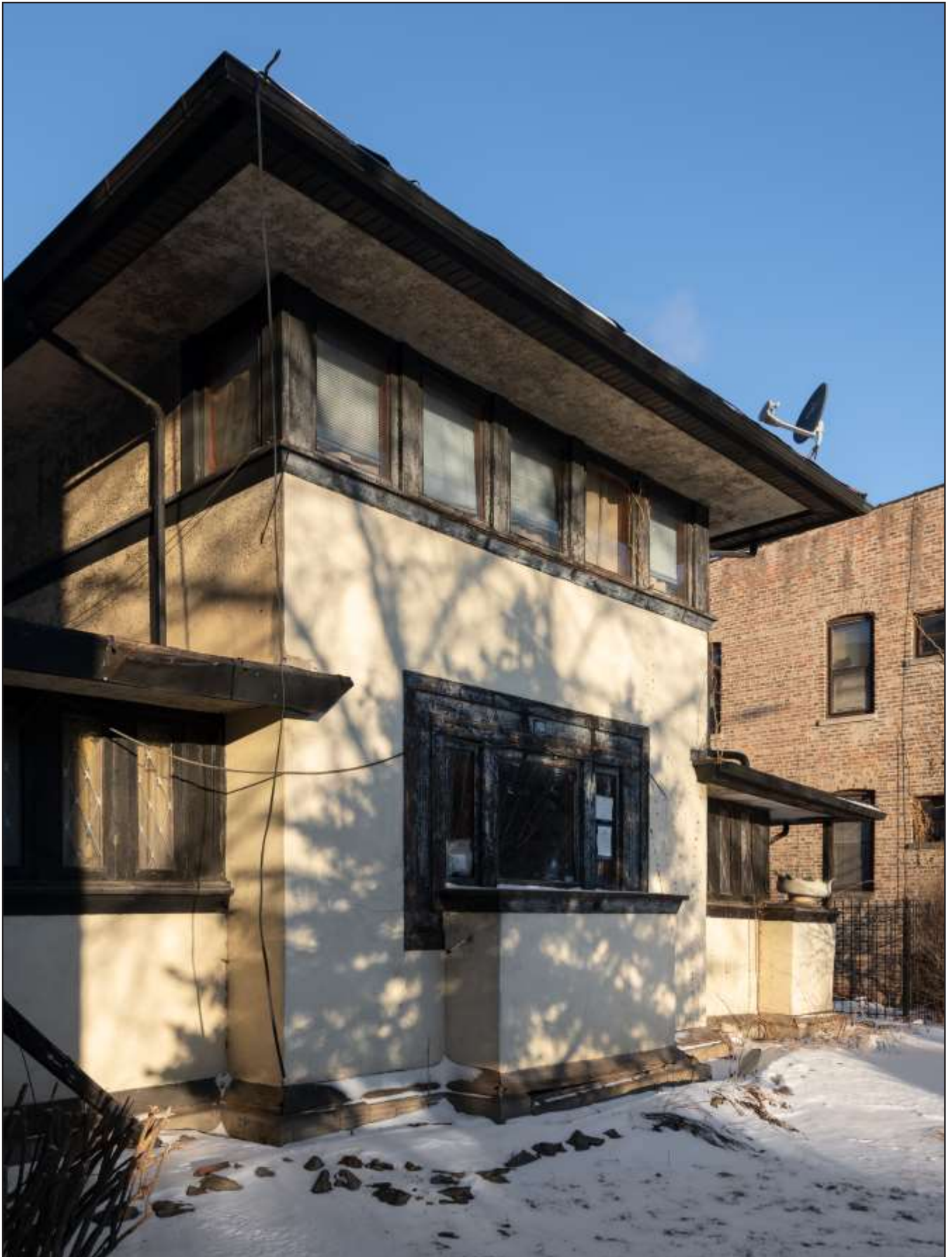
While the house is protected from intentional demolition as a City of Chicago Landmark, the severity of the existing conditions and continued rapid deterioration pose a serious threat to the future of this significant Austin home.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preservation Chicago, along with our partners in advocacy at the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, Landmarks Illinois, and Austin Coming Together, is working to closely monitor the conditions of the house and to encourage a good preservation outcome for the Walser House. Preservation partners are urging the mortgage company and the City of Chicago to take all possible steps to expedite the foreclosure process, in order to transfer the building and title to a new preservation-oriented owner.

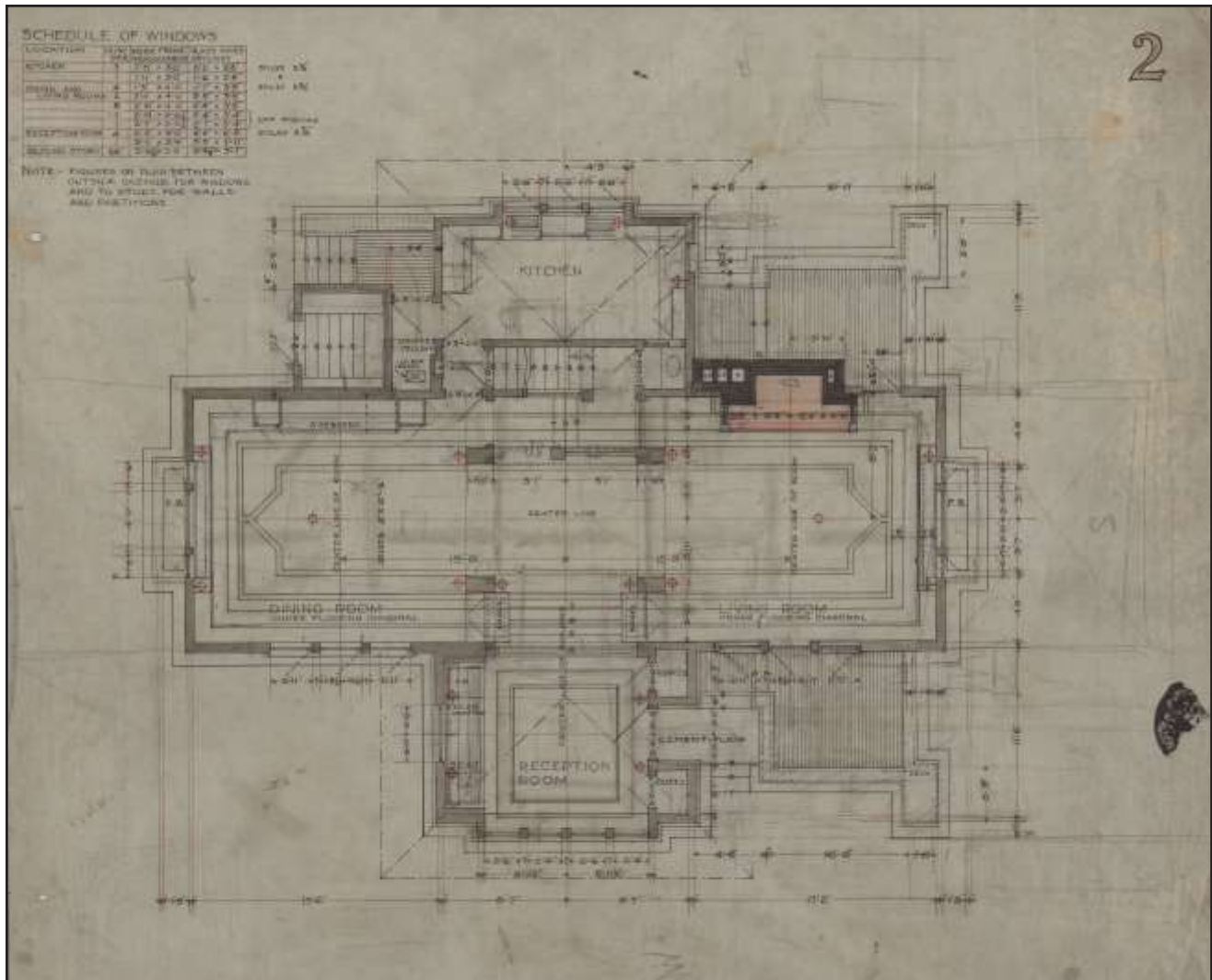
During this period of uncertainty, the Walser House needs to be carefully monitored in Building Court to ensure that all stakeholders are fully aware of the significance of this home and to prevent emergency actions that could result in demolition.

We have advocated for the property be placed under the ownership of a new, long-term steward that will stabilize, repair, and restore the structure for continued residential use or other appropriate adaptive reuse. As a Designated Chicago Landmark, the Walser House would be eligible for City of Chicago Adopt-a-Landmark funding to help underwrite the cost of a comprehensive restoration. Additionally, as a NRHP-listed property, the house is a certified historic structure. A qualified rehabilitation project undertaken by future owners could possibly apply for federal and/or state historic tax credits.



Front elevation, Joseph Jacob (J.J.) Walser House, 1903, Frank Lloyd Wright, 42 N. Central Avenue. Photo credit: Serhii Chruky / Esto

Chicago 7: J.J. Walser House



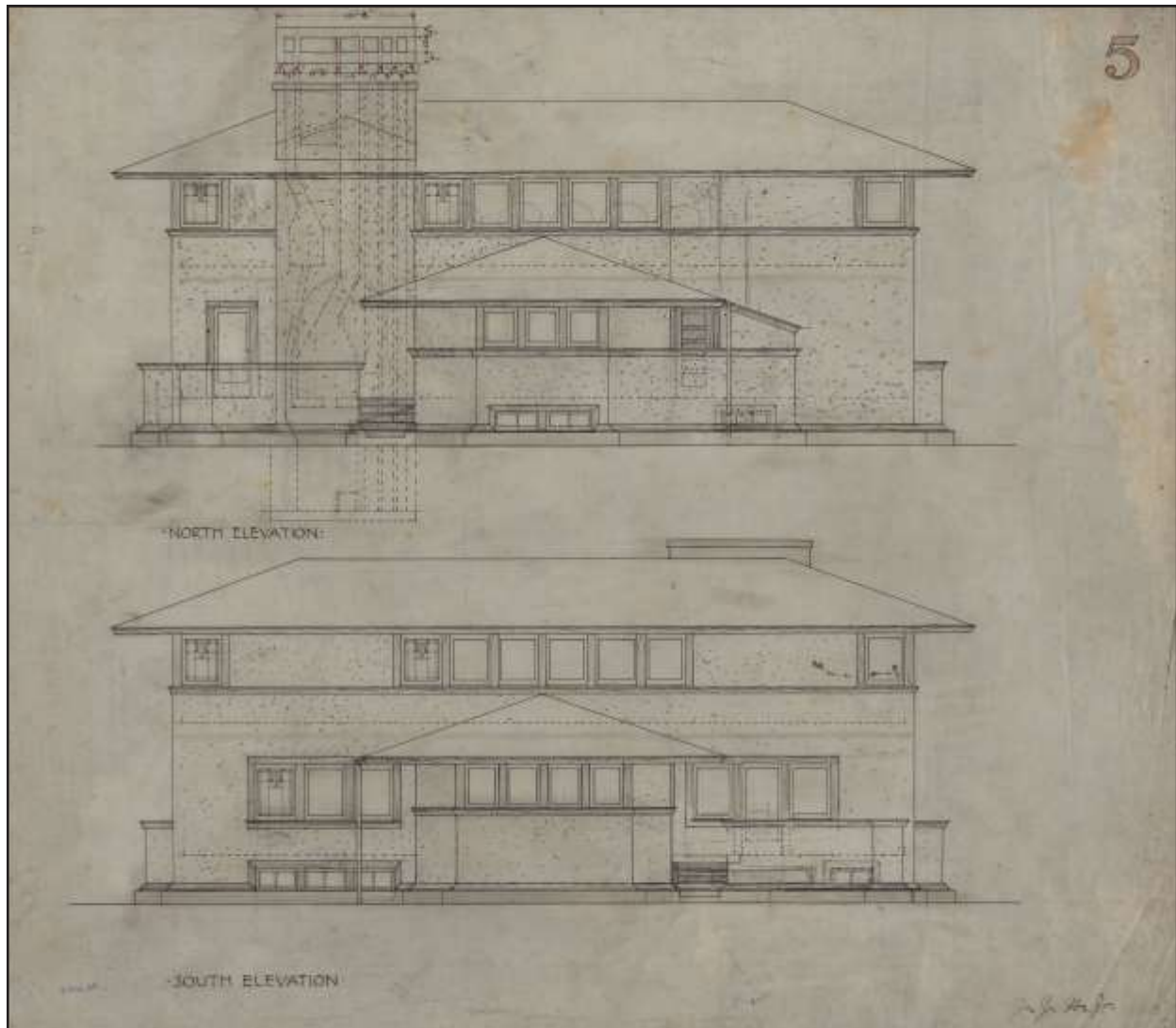
J. J. Walser, Jr. House (Chicago, Illinois), Architectural Working Drawing #2 First Floor Plan, Frank Lloyd Wright, 1903. Image credit: The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives / The Museum of Modern Art, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York, Project 0306.003



Joseph Jacob (J.J.) Walser Residence, Chicago, Illinois, 1903, Frank Lloyd Wright, 42 N. Central Avenue. Photo credit: John Vinci, John Vinci Papers, Ryerson and Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago. Digital File#200704_251120-006 and 005



Front Entry, Joseph Jacob (J.J.) Walser House, 1903, Frank Lloyd Wright, 42 N. Central Avenue. Photo credit: Serhii Chrucky / Esto



J. J. Walser, Jr. House (Chicago, Illinois), Working Drawing #5 Elevations / North / South, Frank Lloyd Wright, 1903. Image credit: The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives / The Museum of Modern Art, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York, Project 0306.006



Joseph Jacob (J.J.) Walser Residence, Chicago, Illinois, 1903, Frank Lloyd Wright, 42 N. Central Avenue. Photo credit: John Vinci, John Vinci Papers, Ryerson and Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago. Digital File#200704_251120-009 and 003



View of reception room and entry, Joseph Jacob (J.J.) Walser Residence, Chicago, Illinois, 1903, Frank Lloyd Wright, 42 N. Central Avenue. Photo credit: John Vinci, John Vinci Papers, Ryerson and Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago. Digital File#200704_251120-007



J. J. Walser, Jr. House (Chicago, Illinois), Working Drawing #4 Elevations East & West, Frank Lloyd Wright, 1903. Image credit: The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives / The Museum of Modern Art Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York, Project 0306.005



Joseph Jacob (J.J.) Walser Residence, Chicago, Illinois, 1903, Frank Lloyd Wright, 42 N. Central Avenue. Photo credit: John Vinci, John Vinci Papers, Ryerson and Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago. Digital File#200704_251120-001 and 008

Chicago 7: J.J. Walser House



Joseph Jacob (J.J.) Walser House, 1903, Frank Lloyd Wright, 42 N. Central Avenue. Photo credit: Cristen Brown



Joseph Jacob (J.J.) Walser Residence, Chicago, Illinois, 1903, Frank Lloyd Wright, 42 N. Central Avenue. Photo credit: John Vinci, John Vinci Papers, Ryerson and Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago. Digital File#200704_251120-002