

JOSEPH A. CAVANAGH HOUSE

1. Joseph A. Cavanagh
2. 415 West Main Street, Midland, Michigan 48640
3. Classification. category--building, ownership--private, public acquisition--n/a, status--occupied, accessible--yes: restricted, present use--private residence
4. Raymond Boyer, 415 West Main Street, Midland, Michigan 48640
5. Midland County Courthouse, 301 West Main Street, Midland, Michigan 48640
6. "The Architecture and Influence of Alden B. Dow"

7. Description. condition--good, altered; original site

Alden Dow placed this modest one story residence well back from the street on a small lot which slopes away from Main Street. A wood frame and brick structure, the Cavanagh house is a one-story home laid out in an L shaped plan. The narrow element with its prominent brick chimney faces the street. A carport, built as an integral element of the house extends out from the front corner of the house. This area also contains the public spaces--the living room and kitchen. The bedrooms and an enclosed porch are at the rear of the house affording them considerable privacy.

Alden Dow began work on the design for this modest home in the summer of 1933 while still with Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin in Spring Green, Wisconsin. The house was designed for Joseph A. Cavanagh, a former mayor of Midland (1917-1920), who worked as an accountant for Dow Chemical Company.

Construction began in early 1934 with Spence Brothers, contractors based in Saginaw, having submitted the low bid of \$10,081.30. The contract was signed on February 7, 1934. Work began on February 12th, and the house was to be "substantially completed" by August 1, 1934. By the late spring, the exterior had been completed and early in June the carpenters began to complete the interior finish work. The house was occupied by the early October, 1934. The final item was the installation of the driveway and the concrete steps leading to the garden, both completed in November. The final cost amounted to \$12,005.96.

The Cavanagh house is laid out on the property in an attractive and practical fashion. Entrance to the site is gained by a driveway which runs diagonally from the street to the front of the house and into the carport. Passengers can be let out just outside of the carport at the front entrance. The entry is defined by the brick wall of the kitchen and the massive brick chimney. The broad eaves of the carport roof meet the house at the chimney, right over the entrance, thereby providing a sheltered space and a recessed doorway.

The carport is an integral element of Dow's plans. Its peak roof sits at the same plane as the roof of the main house. And its wall facing the street is built of the same brick as the chimney and the rest of the house. Above this wall and cut into the peak of the roof is a bird's mouth decorated with diagonal sheathing. This detail provides a sculptural element and an angular counterbalance to the

boldly rectangular and powerful chimney. The rear of the carport, shaded with a recessed brick wall, has a doorway into the kitchen. Groceries could be taken directly from the parked car into the kitchen without going through the main entry or going out into the weather.

While the solid brick wall of the carport and the chimney present a somewhat stark and forboding image, the extended belt of four windows, beginning at the chimney and reaching around the west side of the house, are inviting. At the sametime, the location of the windows in relationship to the site, behind the driveway and shrubbery, assures privacy. The rear of the house with its long enclosed porch whose dozen windows extend around the side of the structure, is more open than the front. Adjacent to the porch are two bedrooms and the bathroom.

The rear and more private area of the residence is set two steps above the living/dining area. Access to this zone is gained through a narrow corridor which contrasts sharply with the spaciousness of the living/dining/kitchen areas. Dow used not only the layout of the house but also architectural details and spacial relationships to mark off the different zones. Such contrasts heightened the effect of space throughout the house.

Dow also uses space and materials to break down the traditional barrier between the exterior and interior areas of the house. The plaster ceiling of the living/dining area soars upward as does the pitched roof. At the junction of

the roof and the east wall a broad wood shelf marks the intersection of these two planes. The shelf abuts the brick chimney providing in one small area an exciting contrast of shapes, materials, textures, and colors. An open passageway through this space leads into the dining area. From the open and spacious feeling of the living room with its vaulted ceiling, Dow narrows the space quickly and dramatically before moving into the open but separate space of the dining area.

The central feature of the living room is the massive brick chimney and hearth. It provides an attractive and warm focal point for family activities or entertainment. And it is a powerful architectural statement. While broadly rectangular, the fireplace projects outward with a triangular extension at one corner. The wood mantelpiece is reflected in two smaller built-in shelves below it and adjoining the fireplace opening. Here again, the contrast of lines, shapes, textures and materials is invigorating and satisfying. The same brick used in the exterior walls is carried over to the interior spaces.

At the rear of the house, the enclosed porch offers the family a private retreat, away from the public areas of the house and facing onto the wooded backyard. The bedrooms, also located at the back of the house open onto a rear corridor and they have windows looking out onto a landscaped area away from the street.

In May, 1940, a window at the rear of the house was

altered and in June, 1941, a new case and mirror were installed in one of the bedrooms. Each of these changes were done in accordance with plans from Alden B. Dow Architects. At a later date (ca. 1960s), an additional carport was added to the west end of the house.

B. Significance. period--1900-, areas of significance--architecture, specific dates--February 12, 1934 - November 25, 1934, builder--Spence Brothers (Saginaw), architect--Alden B. Dow

The Joseph Cavanagh house is architecturally significant because it marks the beginning of Dow's own personal interpretation of the prairie style. Here Dow uses the overall form and principles gained from his experience with Wright in a decidedly personal and individual manner. The house is a clear statement of Alden Dow's view of architecture in its exterior and interior details.

While the Joseph Cavanagh house is a modest, two bedroom structure, the layout with its inherent privacy, and the interplay of materials, angles, textures, and colors offers an exhilarating experience. In a small area Dow demonstrated his ability to project a sense of spaciousness. Alden Dow also breaks down the traditional barrier between interior and exterior spaces with his use of building materials and design elements. The siting of the house on the property, the location of the carport (a feature used early by Dow), and the use of windows reveal the architect's understanding of the needs of the homeowner and his desire to provide an

exciting and yet practical dwelling. Dow is making a strong statement on what architecture should be and how it should work. The physical environment of the house must stimulate and sooth the occupants. It also must work effectively. Contemporary critics recognized this ability and they applauded Dow's work.

9. Sidney Robinson, The Architecture of Alden B. Dow "Houses in Midland, Michigan. Alden B. Dow, Architect," Architectural Forum (September, 1936), pp. 196-197. "Joseph Cavanagh File," DHGAA. "Joseph Cavanagh Drawings," DHGAA.