

Bloomington's Oakland School a modernist architectural gem

The post-World War II era marked a dramatic evolution—if not revolution—in the design of school buildings.

In Bloomington, Oakland Elementary School at 1605 East Oakland Ave. is an early exemplar of this movement in school architecture. Opened in October 1951, its low-slung, glassy “ultra-modern” (for its day) look stood in stark contrast to the district’s older buildings. “School was never like this!” marveled *The Pantagraph* at the time. “The new Oakland School . . . represents a departure from the standard school and incorporates many new ideas for better teaching and learning.”

At its most uninspiring or institutional, the “standard school” model of the prewar years consisted of a two- or three-story boxy brick building saddled with a rigid floor plan. It’s hard for us today to appreciate the radical look new schools such as Oakland presented to ordinary folks in the early 1950s.

Oakland School is of further interest due to its many similarities to an architectural landmark—Crow Island School in the northern Chicago suburb of Winnetka. Built in 1940, this school was as a collaborative project between architects Lawrence Perkins of Chicago. and the father-son team of Eliel and Eero Saarinen (the latter of St. Louis Arch fame). A decade later, Perkins would play a role in the design of Oakland School, a Crow Island look-alike right here in Bloomington.

Crow Island School’s many innovations included classrooms scaled to kindergarteners and elementary students, in which windows, light switches, drinking fountains, and blackboards were placed at child level. Each “home-like” room also contained its own child-size washroom and sink for art projects and other activities. Furniture was also scaled to tiny folk, and could be moved around depending on the pedagogical circumstances, as opposed to prewar classroom setups with measured rows of installed desks. The Bloomington school followed suit on these and other Perkins-Saarinen design elements, including large built-in glass display cases at the entrance of each classroom that doubled as a window, bringing the natural light of the classrooms into the hallway.

The finished Oakland School, with its emphasis on “long, low lines and plenty of light and air,” featured a sleek, sunlit lobby that also served as a lounge; an all-purpose room used both as a gymnasium and auditorium; and two wings, one with six classrooms for first through six graders, and the other for kindergarteners.

The exteriors of both Crow Island and Oakland feature many International-style hallmarks, including a generally flat roof and windows with tiered, rectangular panes of glass. Furthermore, the dominant architectural element of both schools is a slender, rectangular brick “chimney” towering well above the school, serving to balance the building’s dominant horizontal lines. In the post-war years, new schools were being built outside the grid of older city neighborhoods and into more suburban-like settings, and

thus had breathing room for a more sprawling footprint and “green” (as opposed to concrete) playgrounds. Both Crow Island and Oakland were also designed with their natural surroundings in mind; in the case of Oakland, a relatively undeveloped 11-acre site interspersed with a fair number of trees. Classrooms in both schools included doors to the outside so teachers could better incorporate the natural world into their curriculum.

Oakland School cost Bloomington taxpayers \$212,000 (or around \$2 million in 2017 dollars, adjusted for inflation). Design and construction costs were paid from a bond issue approved by district voters in 1945. Around that same time the district retained Crow Island architect Lawrence Perkins and his partner Philip Will to survey the building needs of the district. Thus Oakland School’s final design was clearly a collaboration of sorts between Perkins and Will of Chicago and the Bloomington firm of Edgar E. Lundeen and Dean F. Hilfinger. The local architects also brought into the project visionary modernist A. Richard Williams, a professor of architecture at the University of Illinois who grew up in the Twin Cities. Williams worked with Lundeen and Hilfinger on a number of projects, including the 1957 Bloomington Federal Savings and Loan Association building (now known as the Government Center) at the corner of East and Washington streets in downtown Bloomington. In the end, it was the three downstate guys who received final credit as Oakland’s architects.

Oakland was the first of several postwar grade schools built during the long tenure (1944-1965) of Superintendent George Wells, the other two being Centennial in 1957 (now part of Bloomington Junior High) and Stevenson. To further accommodate the baby boom generation, additions were made to Sheridan and Washington schools; an entire new school was built next to the old Irving; and a new high school opened in 1959. Oakland School, obviously, is named for Oakland Avenue, beating out two other proposed names—Bishop, for longtime school board secretary Mattie Bishop, and Stableton, for J.K. Stableton, a former district superintendent.

Since its opening, Oakland School has more than doubled its footprint by adding two more classroom wings, a gymnasium, and more. Notwithstanding the many changes, the original 1951 part of the building, including the entryway, main classroom wing and all-purpose room, still maintain much of the Perkins / Saarinen / Williams modernist vision. The lobby looks much like it did in 1951, though the wood-burning fireplace is now electric. And there are other pleasant surprises, such as the continued use of the classroom display cases.

In 1956, a poll in the influential periodical *Architectural Record* listed Crow Island as the most significant school building in the past 100 years of American architecture. Among all buildings, school or otherwise, it polled twelfth. And in 1989, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Perhaps it’s now Oakland School’s turn for some well-deserved recognition.