

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

THE PRICE TOWER

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: The Price Tower
Other Name/Site Number: Price Tower Arts Center (Common)
Tower for the H.C. Price Company (Project Title)

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 510 Dewey Avenue Not for publication: N/A
City/Town: Bartlesville Vicinity:
State: Oklahoma County: Washington Code: 147 Zip Code: 74003

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property
Private: X
Public-Local:
Public-State:
Public-Federal:
Category of Property
Building(s): X
District:
Site:
Structure:
Object:

Number of Resources within Property
Contributing
1
Noncontributing
1 buildings
sites
structures
objects
1 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

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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.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

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
- Determined eligible for the National Register
- Determined not eligible for the National Register
- Removed from the National Register
- Other (explain):

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: Commerce/Trade
Domestic

Sub: business
Sub: multiple dwelling

Current: Recreation and Culture
Domestic
Commerce/Trade

Sub: museum
Sub: hotel
Sub: restaurant

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Modern Movement/Wrightian

MATERIALS:

Foundation: Concrete
Walls: Concrete, Metal (copper)
Roof: Concrete
Other: Glass, copper, aluminum

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance¹**Introduction**

Built as a headquarters and rented commercial space and apartments for the H. C. Price Company, the Price Tower is nationally significant as one of two completed designs for high-rise buildings during Frank Lloyd Wright's long career, and the only one that might be appropriately termed a "skyscraper." Constructed between 1953 and 1956, it was a striking addition to the urban landscape of Bartlesville, which boomed because of oil beginning in 1897. The nature of the commission and its solitary location within Bartlesville's townscape situates the Price Tower within a dominant twentieth-century business trend that used tall buildings in the shaping of American corporate identity, yet also responded to Wright's own ideas about urban density and planning. As a building type introduced and largely developed in the United States and having a location on Midwestern prairie, Wright is reported to have described the Price Tower as "an assertion of the American sense of itself."² It was one of a group of sixteen Wright buildings singled-out in 1959 by the American Institute of Architects and the National Trust for Historic Preservation as his most important "to the nation...which ought to be preserved in their original form."³ The Price Tower retains a high degree of physical integrity. It has seen few exterior changes since its 1956 completion. The building's lobby and upper three floors—those housing the Price Company corporate apartment and Harold Sr.'s office suite—are in the process of being restored and changes to other interior spaces for present hotel and gallery uses have been, on the whole, sensitive in nature.

Site and Location

Frank Lloyd Wright's tower for the H. C. Price Company was designed in 1952 and built during the years 1953-1956 in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, located in Washington County in the northeast corner of the state. Commissioned by the Price family—Harold C. Price, Sr. (1888–1962), Mary Lou Patteson Price (1900–1978), Harold C. Price, Jr. (b. 1927), and Joseph D. Price (b. 1929)—who formed the building committee for the

¹ In October 2005, Price Tower Arts Center commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Price Tower with a nationally-traveling exhibition and scholarly catalogue. It is the resulting catalogue, and the many sources that contributed to its publication, that have informed much of the documentary material for this nomination. In many cases, the text was based on or reproduced in paragraph form—for these instances, the reader is advised that the footnote will appear in the text not at the end of a sentence, but rather following the entire paragraph. Heartfelt acknowledgements must be extended to the editor and authors of *Prairie Skyscraper: Frank Lloyd Wright's Price Tower* for their efforts in helping to convey the history of the Price Tower. Abbreviations used in the footnotes include those for Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation (FLWF) and Price Tower Arts Center (PTAC) when referring to objects and documents in their collections.

² This quote is thought to be from Frank Lloyd Wright's opening day remarks. It appears without a source in the National Register of Historic Places nomination for the Price Tower. See Kent Ruth, Deputy of the Oklahoma Historical Society, "Price Tower," National Register of Historic Places Nomination, National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior, 1974. Copy located in Price Tower Arts Center Archives, Bartlesville, Oklahoma.

³ See Aline Saarinen, "Preserving Wright's Architecture," *New York Times*, April 19, 1959: X-17, "Watch on Wright's Landmarks," *Architectural Record* 126 (September 1959): 9, and Anne E. Biebel et al., "First Unitarian Society Meeting House," National Historic Landmarks Nomination (U. S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2004), 17-18, fn. 27. The list included: W. H. Winslow House, River Forest, IL; Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio, Oak Park, IL (NHL, 1976); Ward Willitts House, Highland Park, IL; Frederick C. Robie House, Chicago, IL (NHL, 1963); Aline Barnsdall "Hollyhock" House, Los Angeles, CA; Taliesin, Spring Green, WI (NHL, 1976); "Fallingwater," Bear Run, PA (NHL, 1976); S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc., Administration Building, Racine, WI (NHL, 1976); Taliesin West, Phoenix, AZ (NHL, 1982); Unitarian Meeting House, Madison, WI (NHL, 2004); S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc., Research Tower, Racine, WI (NHL, 1976); V. C. Morris Shop, San Francisco, CA; H. C. Price Tower, Bartlesville, OK; Beth Sholom Synagogue, Elkins Park, PA; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY; and Paul R. Hanna House, Palo Alto, CA (NHL, 1989). Sometime between 1959 and 1964, Unity Temple in Oak Park, Illinois (NHL, 1970) was added to the list, making a total of seventeen buildings. See R. R. Cuscaden, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Drawings, Preserved," *Prairie School Review* 1 (1964): 18.

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project, the Price Tower was envisioned to serve as a corporate headquarters for their oil pipeline company in addition to offering leased spaces for smaller firms and luxury apartments for individuals or small families. It is situated on city block 47, measuring 90,000 square feet, bordered by Dewey Avenue (on the west), Sixth Street (presently known as Silas Street, on the south), Osage Avenue (on the east), and Fifth Street (on the north).⁴

The Price Tower and its two-story base sit on lots 4 and 5, which together measure 150' x 140', giving the tower structure (approximately 45'-0" per side) an expanse of open area at its base. A 10,000 square-foot noncontributing building, built ca. 1956 as a car dealership and grocery store, is located on lot 7 and currently serves as a storage annex for the Price Tower Arts Center. Public and private parking spaces for the Center take up the remainder of the block and include lots 1, 2, 3, and 6 with a north-south alleyway used for through traffic. This nomination covers in scope only the historically significant property designed by Wright on lots 4 and 5. Later additions or contemporary buildings by others do not contribute to the national importance of the Price Tower.

Historic Exterior Appearance

The Price Tower is Frank Lloyd Wright's only realized design to incorporate commercial, retail, and residential spaces in a high-rise building.⁵ Innovative in many regards, it reveals a wholly different way of imagining a skyscraper and embodies two powerful architectural ideas. The first idea was the cantilever tower: a new type of structure in which the cantilever principle replaces the conventional skeletal frame. Wright crystallized this idea in his 1929 design for the St. Marks-in-the-Bouwerie Towers in New York City. Thereafter he tried and failed repeatedly to get such a tower built, until 1952, when Harold Price became enthralled by the same vision. More than twenty years after conceiving St. Mark's, Wright retrieved the blueprints and with a few adjustments, produced the Price design.⁶

Construction of the Price Tower began on November 10, 1953, and the building was dedicated during a public celebration and open house on February 9, 1956. Tower height is 221 feet to the top of its copper spire, and comprises nineteen stories. It is a cantilever design, with all floors and walls projecting from four vertical shafts of reinforced concrete.⁷ None of the exterior walls are structural, but are merely screens resting on the cantilevered floors. The embossed copper panels were attached to the exterior fascia by embedding them into the poured concrete with the raising of each story. Twenty-inch-wide embossed copper louvers, pre-oxidized for the blue-green patina, shade the gold-tinted windows; they are arranged horizontally to mark the three

⁴ Joseph M. Siry, "Wright's Price Tower: Context, Clients, and Construction," in Anthony Alofsin, ed., *Prairie Skyscraper: Frank Lloyd Wright's Price Tower* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 54. The Price Company headquarters had always been envisioned to be in the city's center. The original lot, at the northwest corner of Dewey Avenue and Fifth Street, was one block north of the final location. In a letter to Wright dated 19 August 1952, Harold Price, Sr. wrote, "We consider [the new] location better than the first one because we are surrounded only by low buildings, whereas in the other case we were surrounded by four-story buildings and one church, and in the midst of the heaviest traffic in town. This plot of land will lend itself better to landscaping." (Harold C. Price, Sr. to Frank Lloyd Wright, August 19, 1952, FLWF Archives).

⁵ Anthony Alofsin, "Pinwheel on the Prairie: An Overview of the Price Tower," in Anthony Alofsin, ed., *Prairie Skyscraper: Frank Lloyd Wright's Price Tower* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 27-29, for a brief history of Wright and the tall office building. The term "skyscraper" here is taken from Wright's essay, "Toward All I Raise High the Perpendicular Hand..." that was distributed on the Price Tower's opening day. A reaction to the modernist steel and glass box-shaped architecture of the time, he described the Price Tower as part of a "new use of this type of building," dubbing it a "vertical-street" and an "upended street" – a building that "stands in its own park." PTAC Archives.

⁶ Hilary Ballon, "From New York to Bartlesville: The Pilgrimage of Wright's Skyscraper," in Anthony Alofsin, ed., *Prairie Skyscraper: Frank Lloyd Wright's Price Tower* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 100.

⁷ The construction was supervised by Haskell Culwell, Culwell Construction Company, Oklahoma City, who also assisted Wright in the building of "Hillside," the home of Harold and Carolyn Price (Bartlesville, 1953); "Grandmas House," for Harold and Mary Lou Price (Paradise Valley, Arizona, 1954); and Beth Sholom Synagogue (Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, 1954).

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quadrants of the building designated for offices and vertically for the quadrant intended for residences. The tower was planned on a 30-60-90° polygonal grid, based on the joining of two equilateral triangles.

At the base of the tower is a two-story podium of similar materials first occupied by the Public Service Company of Oklahoma as well as a caretaker residing in a small apartment consisting of a living room, kitchen, sleeping area, and bathroom. The Public Service Company's portion included offices, bill payment center, and a demonstration area featuring a small stage and second-floor projection booth. For approximately two decades, a physical, but not functional connection between the building's two parts existed only on the second floor; a narrow, covered drive-through entrance to the Public Service Company's offices divided the first floor. Vertical slit windows ran along both elevations of the passage, lighting the interior of the ground floor and visually defining the lower wing from its taller neighbor. The north wall of the Public Services wing featured an embossed copper-banded diamond-shaped window and a large polygonal copper-framed skylight centered over the second-floor balcony, which created a dramatic, naturally-lit interior.

All of the exterior doors and window trim of the Price Tower complex were specified in unpainted aluminum and exterior lighting fixtures, of various dimensions, were of patinated copper with polygonal or triangular white glass shades. Painted stucco in a buff color coated the building's poured concrete exterior. The sidewalk paths and driveway entrances are composed of scored pigmented concrete in Wright's signature "Cherokee Red".⁸ The two carports are of reinforced concrete, finished in similar materials as used elsewhere, and supported by tapering patinated copper supports. The larger of the two carports, on the building's north side, was intended for visitors of the tower's commercial tenants, while a smaller version on the south side was intended for private use by the tower's residential tenants. The latter was suitably situated near the tower's separate entrance and elevator lobby dedicated to renters of the two-story apartments, ensuring privacy from the commercial tenants and their visitors.

The Price Tower Arts Center holds in its collection a series of 297 black and white photographs and fifteen color transparencies taken by the younger of the Prices' sons, Joseph D. Price, as well as 135 reels of eight-millimeter and sixteen-millimeter movie footage compiled by Joe Price and Juan Hutchinson.⁹ This documentation chronicles the day-by-day erection of the Price Tower, including detailed images of the work crews, preparation of building materials, installation of the embossed copper panels on the building's poured concrete walls, the interiors of the Price Company offices, and the raising of a tree to the nineteenth floor's terrace. These images, some of which are attached to this nomination, fully record the historic appearance of the Price Tower and illustrate the scale and impact it had on neighboring buildings and businesses.

Present Exterior Appearance

The Price Tower has seen little exterior change since its 1956 completion, and the National Register of Historic Places nomination dated May 14, 1974 makes no mention of structural or aesthetic modifications (the nomination was approved on September 13 of that same year). The H. C. Price Company kept its offices in the tower for twenty-five years until 1981, when it moved its headquarters to Dallas, Texas. The building, which retained the "Price Tower" name, was sold to the Phillips Petroleum Company for use as additional office space until 2001, when it was donated to Price Tower Arts Center, the current owner.

Modifications and additions to the building's exterior are few, although difficult to trace. During the years it

⁸ The Cherokee red color continues into the interior and serves as the pigmented concrete flooring color throughout the building.

⁹ Price Tower Arts Center is currently in the process of transferring the reel footage to digital format in an attempt to preserve it from the effects of time and use.

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was owned by Phillips Petroleum, a small one-story concrete shed was added to the building's east elevation. Currently, the maintenance department of Price Tower Arts Center stores painting supplies in this shed. The most significant structural alteration to the building was the closing of the drive-through passage between the tower and the former Public Service Company of Oklahoma offices, sometime during renovations in 1978-79; it is now known as the "Taliesin Room."

Wright apprentices William Wesley Peters, who had been married to Wright's stepdaughter before her 1946 death, and John DeKoven Hill, both of Taliesin Associated Architects, headed the project while simultaneously working on the design and construction of the Bartlesville Community Center across the street. It was their direct involvement that kept the renovations of the drive-through passage and adjacent interior spaces sympathetic to Wright's original vision. These areas now serve as the main lobby and welcoming center for the Price Tower Arts Center, and although exterior glass walls were installed to enclose the passageway, they reflect Wright's tenet of visually integrating indoor and outdoor spaces. The enclosure also abuts the former entrance to the caretaker's apartment which has been reconfigured to serve as a catering facility for Price Tower Arts Center events.

The gold-tinted windows specified by Wright have also been modified. A metallic reflective film had been applied to the tower windows' exterior surfaces before Price Tower Arts Center's occupancy, perhaps as a means of diminishing the all too frequent glare and summer sun on the Oklahoma prairie. This greatly altered the original coloration and intent of Wright's design and the film was removed from the glass curtain wall of the southeast quadrant in 2003. The same year, a museum-grade ultraviolet ray-blocking film was applied to the exterior surfaces of the windows on the upper three floors as a preventative measure to sun damage to those historically significant interiors and the decorative arts objects therein.

The patinated copper fins and louvers on the exterior of the tower have seen minor repair since their installation, namely patching made with a similar material. The pivoting vertical fins along the perimeter of the sixteenth-floor outdoor dining terraces, installed as sun and wind protection, are still in good working order. The tower's copper spire and its enclosed lighting elements continue to provide a dramatic nighttime gesture.

Historic Interior Appearance

The interior concrete shafts allow for the division of the Price Tower into four quadrants, originally enabling the building to offer tenants both living and working space. The entire structure is laid out on a 30-60-90° system that creates parallelogram units, or modules, to which all walls and partitions conform. As completed, the tower had a gross footage of 57,315 square feet and net rental footage of 42,000 square feet. Each upper floor contained about 1,900 square feet, including 1,150 square feet of rentable office space, while each two-story apartment had 982 square feet.¹⁰

The lower floors of the Price Tower's wing were leased to the Public Services Company of Oklahoma while the two-story entrance lobby of the tower served to orient commercial visitors and housed a small cigarette and newspaper stand. An east-west mezzanine gallery spans the south elevation of the upper lobby interior, forming a second-floor elevator lobby. Floors three through ten were leased, with the small offices renting for \$135 per month and the larger offices renting for \$165 each per month. Seven two-story apartments were stacked one atop the other and ran from the third to the sixteenth floors; these rented for \$285 per month.¹¹

¹⁰ Siry, "Wright's Price Tower: Context, Clients, and Construction," 66. This information is also listed in a letter from Harold C. Price, Sr., to Frank Lloyd Wright, August 30, 1956, wherein Price itemizes the cost of the Price Tower in relation to the rentable square footage. PTAC Archives.

¹¹ Joanne Gordon, "The Skyscraper That Shocks Oklahoma Town." *Kansas City Star*, March 11, 1956. Gordon's account of visitors "gasping" at the prices perhaps explains the tower's low tenancy rate.

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The H. C. Price Company itself occupied all of the offices above the eleventh floor, with floors eleven through fifteen for its sixty employees and a commissary with a buffet and kitchen all surrounded by open terraces on the sixteenth floor. These and the roofs over the covered carports formed small planting areas filled with greenery, and served as raised extensions of the prairie landscape for those working on upper floors. The seventeenth floor had a small office in the center of the tower, and provided a point of entry to the living and dining level of the Price Company corporate apartment. The eighteenth floor included a conference room for the Price Company and a secondary entrance to the apartment's bedroom level. The nineteenth floor, with no full quadrant areas, contained a small elevator lobby and space for the executive secretary and Harold Price, Sr.'s private office. A small terrace to the north and a large roof garden on the south adjoined this office.¹²

Entrance and Lobby

The ceiling and the lights of the entrance lobby remain the first place that visitors encounter a distinctive disposition of planes (based on a triangular or "flattened pyramid" forms) that are repeated throughout the building. Here, the patinated copper frames of the lighting fixtures are offset by white opaque glass. Additionally, the "Cherokee" red floor added a touch of the vernacular to this soaring space, the modernity of which was defined by pale walls, double-height ceiling, natural and electric light, and geometric form. The mezzanine gallery, reminiscent of those in Arts and Crafts interiors, added medieval overtones as did the hassock-style seating and "fluted" walls, reminiscent of medieval choir stalls and linen-fold paneling, respectively. The sparseness of the "fluting," the hexagonal form, and cantilever structure of the seats were among the more obvious markers of modernity in Wright's rich mix of modern and pre-modern imagery.¹³

The space has a vertical emphasis; the eyes are lifted upward to the "star-studded" ceiling of simple triangular lights paralleled by the lofty sentiment expressed in a gold painted wall inscription. Harold Price wanted a mural in the lobby. Wright did not, although he often incorporated them into buildings, albeit mainly residential ones. The text on the west wall probably represents a compromise between client and architect. Wright loosely adapted Walt Whitman to suit his own purposes, stating:

Toward all I raise high the perpendicular hand
I make the signal, to remain after me in sight forever
For all the haunts and homes of men

Where the city of the faithfulest [*sic*] friends stands [*sic*]
Where thrift is in its place and prudence is in its place
Where behavior is the finest of the fine arts
Where outside authority enters always after the
 precedence of inside authority
Where the city that has produced the greatest man stands
 there the greatest city stands

The text not only reinforced an updated, modernized Arts and Crafts ambiance evident throughout the building, but also introduced and memorialized the 89 year-old architect—"I make the signal to remain after me in sight forever."¹⁴

¹² William Wesley Peters, interview with Sue Lacey, February 27, 1990, PTAC Archives.

¹³ Pat Kirkham and Scott W. Perkins, "Interiors, Furniture, and Furnishings," in Anthony Alofsin, ed., *Prairie Skyscraper: Frank Lloyd Wright's Price Tower* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 81.

¹⁴ Peters interview with Sue Lacey, February 27, 1990, PTAC Archives.

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The entrance lobby functionally contained a news and cigar stand and a directory board for locating tenants on the upper floors. One of the four hexagonal elevators tucked away at the rear of the lobby was reserved for residents, the others were for commercial traffic. Wright did not believe in wasting space on elevators, stairwells, or lobbies, and each elevator was only approximately ten square feet. He did believe in designing them specifically for the building they were to service, however, because of their unusual shape these had to be specially manufactured.¹⁵

Offices

Two extant Wright drawings for a “typical office” show desks with elongated hexagonal tops set at a 30° to the exterior wall.¹⁶ The drawing depicts copper end panels on the desks, but this visual link to the exterior and other interior features was dropped from the final design that retained the hexagonal shaped top—the angles of which are echoed in the shallow triangular fronts of the drawers and their triangular brass pulls. The desktop form also reappeared on the built-in dining tables for the apartments that, in later years, were converted back to desks for Price Company employees.

A 1956 photograph by Joe Price illustrates part of an office in the Price Company with similar hexagonal topped desks trimmed in 5/8”, half-round aluminum molding, also decorating the full-height wood and glass partitions and wall-mounted bookcases and establishing a visual link to the aluminum stenographer’s and casual chairs used by the employees. Also shown is a small sitting area, with upholstered settee and triangular mahogany occasional table.¹⁷

A drawing of Harold Price’s penthouse office on the nineteenth floor emphasized its verticality and abundance of windows and illustrated its access to the terrace.¹⁸ The mural had not yet been placed in its location, and the viewpoint taken from within the floor-to-ceiling height fireplace suggests that the fireplace had not been fully designed, or that Wright did not consider it as important as the view out of doors. As realized, there is a distinct air of comfortableness in this retreat *cum* workspace. Natural colors were amplified by the warm copper color, including a wood-burning fireplace that exuded literal and metaphorical warmth. The fireplace referenced domesticity, as did the copper pendant light, the shade of which was in the style that had graced Wright’s interiors half a century earlier. Adding to the domestic ambiance of the area between the fireplace and Price’s workspace was a low banquette, one edge of which slid under the double-sided “partners desk,” offering the company president the chance to catnap during working hours.¹⁹

The view from one side of the desk was to the terrace, upon which stood a “pretty good-sized tree.”²⁰ Much larger than the tiny terraces in the apartments, this was the only office in the building to have private outdoor space and the only terrace spacious enough to sit out on and enjoy the view beyond the sixteenth-floor commissary. In the other direction were extensive views of the Oklahoma countryside. The light that spilled into this room marked it as “modern” as did the sky, aluminum chairs, and the abstract wall mural. A 1956 photographic transparency shows the office carpeted, with four aluminum “casual” chairs upholstered in red fabric.²¹ Price’s aluminum “executive” chair, complete with commercial reclining mechanism added at Price’s

¹⁵ Kirkham and Perkins, “Interiors, Furniture, and Furnishings,”82. They required special opening mechanisms and were custom made by the Otis Elevator Company.

¹⁶ FLWF 5215.187A and 5215.009.

¹⁷ See PTAC 2003.16.293. Price Tower Arts Center retains the full collection of Joe Price’s black and white and color images, including day-to-day construction and completed interior photographs and transparencies.

¹⁸ FLWF 5215.008.

¹⁹ Kirkham and Perkins, “Interiors, Furniture, and Furnishings,”82.

²⁰ Peters to Lacey, February 27, 1990. PTAC Archives.

²¹ PTAC 2004.15.13.

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request, was upholstered in the same fabric. The geometric forms of the wall mural, the “first abstract art in Bartlesville,” are consistent with Wright’s earlier mural designs though this collage is of layers of painted glass triangles arranged on a mirror glass plate.²² It was designed by Wright and his apprentice Eugene Masselink (1910–1962), and is often said to have been inspired by the oil pipelines owned by the Price Company.²³

Price’s assistant occupied a compact and highly efficient workspace just outside his office featuring the same mahogany and copper as in Price’s office. Above the desk, a clerestory window of gold-tinted glass linked the exterior and interior color schemes. The combination of U-shape desk and swivel chair allowed easy access of materials, something a later assistant likened to the ease of working in a small, but well-planned kitchen.²⁴ The right-hand return of the desk terminated in a storage door belonging to the mahogany housing, complete with copper edging, that integrated the standard metal filing cabinets, painted “Cherokee” red to match the floor, into the overall design of an office that exuded efficiency, quality, and attention to detail.

Besides the Price Company offices, Wright designed built-in furniture for many offices as well as the layouts for other types of businesses, including a gynecologist, a surgeon, and a dentist. This specialized outfitting demonstrated the flexibility of the grid to various room arrangements and equipment needs and a willingness to accommodate tenant needs. Bess Montgomery and Mabel Fry, who ran the lobby newsstand, for example, requested an additional display cabinet and magazine rack, which Wright designed in order to retain as much unity of effect as possible.

Wright designed all the built-in furniture at the Price Tower as well as some freestanding pieces for the offices, apartments, and the commissary. The Philippine mahogany furniture fused geometric forms with conventional furniture types (desk, table, book case) often to quite dramatic effect as did the more idiosyncratic metal furniture. Copper, rarely the main material for furniture in modern times, was used by Wright in patinated form for indoor/outdoor furniture designed for the commissary. In contrast to this ancient material, he specified aluminum, a relatively new material, for upholstered chairs with hexagonal seats and backs, vertical “spines,” and faceted bases.²⁵

Through his use of aluminum, Wright was able to stamp the interiors as boldly “modern,” but in the end it proved nearly impossible to find a manufacturer for his designs. He complained to Harold Price that the aluminum chairs had caused him more headaches than the entire building.²⁶ The Blue Stem Foundry in nearby Dewey, Oklahoma, eventually made the chairs using a relatively simple sand casting technique. Despite extensive buffing, the surfaces remained somewhat rough, and the frames subsequently painted a “bright

²² Harold C. Price, Jr., interview with Sue Lacey, February 24, 1990. PTAC Archives. Once the materials were on site, it was installed within two months.

²³ Kirkham and Perkins, “Interiors, Furniture, and Furnishings,” 84. There are differing opinions about the authorship of the mural. Some claim Masselink as sole designer but when Wright informed Harold Price Sr. of Masselink’s fee for the project (he also installed it), there was no suggestion that he (Wright) was anything but lead designer. He wrote, “Gene’s fee on the decoration I designed for your office is \$2,600.00” (Frank Lloyd Wright to Harold C. Price, Sr., August 13, 1956). PTAC Archives.

²⁴ *The Cage and the Tree* directed by Candida Harper (1976) as part of *The American Architectural Experience* series made for television (Educational Broadcasting Corporation in conjunction with New York University and WNET).

²⁵ John Calvin Womack, *A Report on Floors 17, 18, and 19, Price Tower, Bartlesville, Oklahoma, Frank Lloyd Wright Architect* (National Endowment for the Arts Grant Report #03420006019), 39. Metal furniture based on primary forms was not new to Wright; he had used it in the Larkin Building and the S. C. Johnson & Son Administration Building where he also provided office seating to meet the needs of different users. Hexagonal-backed chairs, in wood rather than metal, were designed for the Imperial Hotel, Tokyo, 1916-1922. Wright’s early design for the Price Tower “typical apartment” included wood seat furniture but he decided upon aluminum for the dining chairs as well as those used in the offices (See Kirkham and Perkins, “Interiors, Furniture, and Furnishings,” 79-80).

²⁶ Frank Lloyd Wright to Harold C. Price, Sr., December 28, 1955. PTAC Archives.

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aluminum color” to cover the imperfections.²⁷ The chair upholstery was installed by Bell’s Auto Upholstery, Bartlesville, using fabrics from Wright’s 1955 textile collection for F. Schumacher and Company, New York, one of the leading textile companies of the period.

Apartments

All of the apartments had identical layouts and were fitted with the same equipment and amenities, including a tiny triangular terrace from which one could gaze at the outlying landscape. There was access to both levels by elevator but the formal entrance was on the lower floor. A narrow entry hall led to an expansive space with double-height living area, large windows, and outward tapering ceiling that gradually added a few inches to the room height while supporting the dramatic cantilever of the ceiling overhang. On one side of the tiny foyer was the half wall that formed the back of a bookcase *cum* banquette; on the other, a screen of tubular aluminum rods allowed light into the steep, narrow stairwell and served as a handrail. The double-height living area offered a sense of spaciousness while the area underneath the overhang provided a feeling of enclosure, as did the upstairs bedroom space when closed off by the mahogany folding shutters. The upper level was designed with two bedrooms (one very small; one larger), a bathroom, and storage closets. Soon after the building opened, the Prices converted the upper floor of their seventeenth and eighteenth floor *pied-a-terre* into one large bedroom.

Two drawings depict the interior of a typical two-level apartment.²⁸ In the drawings, the furniture in the living level was placed against the walls rather than more centrally as in Joe Price’s photographs from the mid-1950s.²⁹ The design of the gas fireplace is only partially sketched in but the lower portion resembles the “spine” of the aluminum dining and casual chairs—a feature dropped before they were executed. The built-in sofa, desk, and shelving are almost identical to those remaining in the building. Wright was famous for his emphasis on the hearth as a focal point of the home—a place of literal and spiritual warmth.³⁰ The Price Tower fireplaces are Wright’s only known examples in metal, his preferred materials being stone and brick. The tall and narrow copper-padded fireplaces in the living areas are among his smallest, but are in proportion to the rooms. They stretch from floor to ceiling (neatly concealing the gas piping) and the patinated copper panels match those on the balcony overhang. One of the *bête noirs* of modern architects and designers was the flickering imitation coal or log-effect fire and Wright was so determined not to have any such thing compromising the purity of his space that in addition to the actual fireplace he also designed a special gas burner.³¹

The color scheme was similar to the one used for the office interiors. Walls were painted a light color, floors pigmented red, and the main furniture was made from mahogany. The patinated copper panels on the face of the mezzanine and fireplace made a visual link with the exterior sun louvers, but were also bold visual statements in and of themselves. Indeed, the copper “mural” on every balcony overhang was as impressive as the fine art mural commissioned by the Prices for a wall in their apartment. Also designed by Masselink and Wright (but inscribed only by Wright) and highlighted in metallic paint, it featured a semi-circular “Blue Moon” mirror shelf, geometric shapes, and colors similar to those in the room.

The aluminum dining chairs, aluminum office chairs paired with writing desks in the living room and bedroom, and aluminum edging on the horizontal surfaces areas (book shelving, elongated hexagonal dining table, and desk) contrasted with the copper and added a decidedly modern note. Intermixed with the aluminum chairs and

²⁷ Wright made reference to the finish on FLWF 5215.210.

²⁸ Drawings FLWF 5215.185 and FLWF 5215.186.

²⁹ PTAC 2003.16.294 and 2003.16.295.

³⁰ See William A. Storrer, *The Frank Lloyd Wright Companion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 4, 210-211, 236-238, 250-251, and 457 as examples.

³¹ For the design of the gas mechanism, see Peters, interview. PTAC Archives.

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built-in wood pieces designed by Wright, were items from a range of mass-produced furniture designed by him in 1955 for the Heritage-Henredon Furniture Company. The upholstered chairs show that Wright, like many other furniture designers in the 1950s, attempted to bring greater comfort and luxury to contemporary seating.

The small, but well-planned kitchen was designed in the Taylorist tradition of time and motion studies applied to food preparation that had been influential since the 1920s and 1930s. It can accommodate two people but was designed for one person to use comfortably and efficiently. Like the U-shaped desks, the idea was that one person could perform all necessary tasks without moving much in any direction. Everything was at hand; modern appliances, including dishwasher, were standard and the plastic laminate counters were durable and easy to clean.

Present Interior Appearance

In 1960, William Wesley Peters and Taliesin Associated Architects developed schemes for converting the unoccupied apartments into business offices for the H. C. Price Company. The modifications included the addition of a partition wall on the lower level, which created a private office/conference room, and separating it from a general office featuring five work areas. The kitchen area was gutted and replaced with built-in counters for business machines and sample product storage. The apartment's upper floor was also sectioned off with a partition wall, creating two private offices and a secretarial work station. Modifications to the original lavatories were made, and furnishings appear to have been reused from other parts of the tower or built to resemble the original pieces.

The renovations to the interior during the years the Phillips Petroleum Company occupied the Price Tower centered on enclosing the drive-through passage; however, some work was done at the time to the offices and apartments-turned-offices to allow for the placement of modern office furnishings, telephone and computer terminals, carpeting, and draperies. The reinforced concrete structure devised by Wright for the Price Tower protected the building from severe structural modifications since all of the interior walls were load-bearing and therefore could not be moved. The majority of the renovations by the Price Tower Arts Center at the time of their occupancy were merely cosmetic and involved repairs to the floors, staircases, and plumbing and electrical systems.

In 2001, ownership of the Price Tower transferred to the Price Tower Arts Center, following a comprehensive eighteen-month renovation of the building's exterior and interior. The Price Tower Arts Center moved its exhibitions space and office from a temporary location nearby, and concluded a capital campaign to convert twenty-one of the tower's upper floor offices and apartments into high-style hotel rooms and a restaurant, known as the Inn at Price Tower, with interior architecture and furnishings designed by Wendy Evans Joseph Architecture, New York City.³² The tower's first two floors, including the former Public Services Company of Oklahoma, are dedicated space for the Price Tower Arts Center galleries, storage and collections areas, and gift shop. Floors three through six are offices used by Price Tower Arts Center and Inn at Price Tower employees, including a restored office interior on the fifth floor. Floors seven and eight house six hotel rooms and one hotel suite. Floors nine and ten house six hotel rooms and a historic duplex apartment, which had been previously occupied by Bruce Goff and is being retained for future use by the Price Tower Arts Center. Floors eleven through fourteen house six hotel rooms, two hotel suites, and two sets of private offices. Floors fifteen and sixteen are occupied by the Inn at Price Tower for their restaurant and bar area, and floors seventeen through nineteen are museum spaces administered by Price Tower Arts Center.

³² Wendy Evans Joseph Architects was the design firm for the project, providing furniture designs and finish specifications. Ambler Architects, Bartlesville, was the architect of record for the renovations. Drawings and presentation materials are currently in the PTAC Archives.

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The conversion of a number of floors in the tower into a hotel has been largely superficial and reversible. Except for the present PTAC director's office and two other spaces, the original, non-bearing, Wright-designed plywood and glass partitions in the offices were mostly lost during four decades of use by various tenants. The renovations of the original offices for hotel use included the addition of narrow walls to allow for a shower stall within each existing powder room. This wall was designed so as not to impact the structural integrity of the building, and can easily be eliminated in the future. The apartments-turned-offices, now converted to hotel suites, retain the original bathroom and powder room layouts. The kitchens walls have not been changed, but are fitted with modern furnishings; the original cabinets and appliances were removed ca. 1960. In all of the rooms and suites, the armoires, sink counters, and bedroom furnishings are portable and designed to be easily removed. In cases where original fabric was removed to accommodate present functions—such as some of the partition wall panels and fireplace units and patinated copper hoods—the items were incorporated into the PTAC's permanent collection.

At present, a restoration of the building's lobby areas and upper three floors—those housing the Price Company corporate apartment, initially used by the Price family, and Harold, Sr.'s office suite—is underway, and explanations of the intended work are described below. This work entails conservation of the built-in furnishings, replacement of draperies and upholstery, refurbishing of the floors, and the manufacture of lost items of furniture. Much of the direction for the interior restoration of the top three floors is detailed in a 2004 survey conducted with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, and includes recommendations on repairs, conservation, and restoration of those interiors.

The Price Tower currently utilizes only three of its four elevators. The residential elevator was removed from service prior to the hotel conversion to provide a central chase for the building's electrical, telephone, data, and plumbing systems. The main lobby retains its original interior features – pigmented concrete floor, Wright's decorative text panel, and ceiling and wall lighting fixtures. The hassock seating is still located between the triangular fluted columns of the west wall, and efforts are presently being made to replicate the upholstery fabric for their seat and back cushions. The mezzanine gallery's painted wood handrail, which is not an original detail, was added to meet building code height requirements and will soon be replaced with a clear tempered glass substitute to lessen its visual impact and to meet current codes.

The gallery spaces for the Price Tower Arts Center have been subtly improved for use, including the addition of a wheelchair-accessible toilet room and extensions to the south gallery's stair handrails. Two walls have been added to the interior, to create an enclosed museum shop office, and to allow for a continuous double-height wall on the southeast wall of the north gallery, enabling the reuse of the room's original projection booth. The second floor has been adapted to allow for permanent exhibition spaces, and a portion of it is presently being converted to an architecture study center, utilizing Wright's original movable partitions to create a separation from the gallery.

The Price Company corporate apartment on the seventeenth and eighteenth floors, originally used by the Price family mainly for entertaining and lodging guests, retains much of its original built-in furniture.³³ The lower level's "Blue Moon" mural, inscribed by Wright, was recently conserved in an effort to remove the effects of overpainting and redecoration of the room over the years. The kitchen, in its original condition, includes the cabinetry, appliances (dishwasher and refrigerator/stove unit), garbage chute, laminate counters, and plumbing

³³ On seventeen, the dining table, banquet sofa, and wall-mounted bookshelves remain while on eighteen two small drawer storage units are in their original location in the bedroom. At time of nomination, restoration work is being completed on the apartment to replace missing built-in pieces with reproductions, as well as replicate the drapery and upholstery fabric. The reproductions include the desk and wall shelves in the living room, the remaining wall shelves above the dining table, and additional shelves attached to the top of the banquette sofa.

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fixtures that were installed in 1955. The eighteenth-floor bedroom is devoid of all built-ins except for one drawer unit, which was altered to receive a stone top. The bathroom, like the powder room below, is in need of restoration to the countertops and mirrors.

Price's office on the nineteenth floor received the most recent attention when the desk, daybed, map and globe stand cabinetry, and shelving were conserved. Composed of painted and applied triangular shapes, the glass mural is a unique extant example of Wright's abstract design. The workstation for Price's assistant includes the original fixtures and furnishings, and is the only room where the gold-tinted glass serves as a clerestory window. The built-in furnishings in this area will soon be conserved as well.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

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

Nationally: X Statewide: __ Locally: __

Applicable National Register Criteria: A__ B__ C X D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A__ B__ C__ D__ E__ F__ G

NHL Criteria: 4

NHL Theme(s): III. Expressing Cultural Values
5. Architecture, landscape architecture, urban design

Areas of Significance: Architecture

Period(s) of Significance: 1952-1956

Significant Dates: 1952-1956

Significant Person(s): N/A

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Wright, Frank Lloyd

Historic Contexts: XVI. Architecture
5. Wrightian

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**Introduction**

Frank Lloyd Wright designed the Price Tower in 1952, at a time when the eighty-five year-old architect was further refining designs for Usonian houses, and overseeing such large-scale projects as Beth Shalom Synagogue (1954-59), the Dallas Theater (1955), the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church (1956), and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1956-59). Built as a headquarters, and rented commercial and residential space for the H. C. Price Company, the Price Tower is one of two completed designs for high-rise buildings during Frank Lloyd Wright's long career. Constructed in 1953-56, it was a unique and visible addition to the urban landscape of Bartlesville. Wright relied on an earlier design concept to shape the building, but its siting a few blocks beyond the densest part of Bartlesville provided for a high-profile silhouette and associated corporate identity pioneered earlier in the century, but somewhat diluted as American city skylines became more and more populated with skyscrapers. In addition to general trends, the Price Tower's location also responded to Wright's personal opinion about ideal cities and urban densities, which he introduced two decades earlier in the Broadacre City concept.

Wright's contributions to architecture and overall influence in this country and across the globe are, perhaps, unmatched. He worked on well over one-thousand projects including houses, office buildings, churches, schools, libraries, bridges, stores, and museums. Of these projects, an estimated 430 were seen to completion (not including work that may have been done on projects with other principal architects) and a vast majority of these are still standing.³⁴ Wright pursued these projects during five chronological periods that provide a flexible framework for comprehending the constancy and change in his work over time. The divisions are as follows: Early Period (1890-1900), First Mature Period or Golden Age (1900-12), Second Period (1913-29), Third Period (1930-41), and Fourth Period or Second Golden Age (1941-59). At the time of the Price commission, Frank Lloyd Wright was enjoying a major resurgence of his career, life, and fame. The Guggenheim Museum exhibited his work as *Sixty Years of Living Architecture: The Work of Frank Lloyd Wright* (1953) and his own writing at the time included *Genius and the Mobocracy* (1949), *The Future of Architecture* (1953), *The Natural House* (1954), and *The Story of the Tower: The Tree That Escaped the Crowded Forest* (1956). It is *The Story of the Tower* that best chronicles the history of the Price Tower. Illustrated with floor plans and both color and black-and-white photographs by Joe Price, *The Story of the Tower* explains the growth and development of the Price Tower. It was introduced by Harold Price, Sr., with Wright penning the main text and describing its location in the prairies of Oklahoma as ideal: "As a tree crowded in the forest has no chance to become a complete entity—standing free it may establish identity and preserve it."³⁵ The Price Tower's importance not only to contemporary design, but also to broader American culture was immediate. Soon after Wright's death in April 1959, *The New York Times* called for measures to be taken in order to preserve the evidence of Wright's "immortal greatness."³⁶ This article made "an earnest plea" for architectural historians to acknowledge a handful of Wright's most influential buildings and lay the foundations for their future preservation. The following month, *Architectural Record* mentioned the joint effort between the American Institute of Architects and the National Trust for Historic Preservation to select properties of significance "to the nation" that should be "preserved in their original form"—among them was the Price Tower.³⁷

³⁴ For a catalog of Wright's work, see: William Allin Storrer, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright: A Complete Catalog* (1978) (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995).

³⁵ Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Story of the Tower: The Tree That Escaped the Crowded Forest* (New York: Horizon, 1956), 18.

³⁶ Aline Saarinen, "Preserving Wright's Architecture," *New York Times*, April 19, 1959: X-17.

³⁷ "Watch on Wright's Landmarks," 9. *Architectural Record* reported in 1959: "In the first such joint effort in their history, the American Institute of Architects and the National Trust for Historic Preservation have selected sixteen buildings by Frank Lloyd

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Bartlesville as the Setting for the Tower

Merchant Jacob H. Bartles founded Bartlesville in 1873, and as home to Oklahoma's first oil well, drilled April 15, 1897, Bartlesville enjoyed an early boom as large oil and natural gas companies built corporate offices and research facilities within its town center. Regional reserves were so great that by 1904, seven years after the town's first paying well was dug, there were one hundred and fifty oil companies with offices in the area. The most prominent architectural monument during this early phase of corporate growth was the Frank Phillips Building, begun in 1925 as a seven-story office block on the northeast corner of Fourth and Johnstone streets for the Phillips Petroleum Company. By 1927, its plants produced one eighth of all the petroleum manufactured in the United States, and the company entered the retail marketing of automobile fuel. Soon they added an eighth floor to their relatively new quarters as well as a corner tower in an Italian Renaissance style.³⁸ While the H. C. Price Company fit within the context of the area's booming oil industry, it retained its familial personality and modest scale. The Prices searched for a design that would make a statement, yet they also wished to remain meaningful to the context of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, where their "modern" offices would be in dialogue with earlier tall buildings of different patronage, structure, and form.³⁹

Downtown Bartlesville has changed markedly since the Price Tower was constructed. The population of Bartlesville at the time of the Price Tower's commission was under 19,000, in contrast to the approximately 35,000 in 2000. Significant cultural events and honors in the town's history include the invention of polyethylene (Phillips Petroleum, 1951), the naming of the town as an "All-America City" by the National Civic League (1962), the opening of the Bartlesville Community Center (Taliesin Associated Architects, 1983), and the premiere of the OK Mozart International Music Festival (1985). In March 2006, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named Bartlesville one of "America's Dozen Distinctive Destinations." "Bartlesville is a unique town that prides itself on rich culture and tradition," according to Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "Visitors of all ages will enjoy the lively spirit, colorful prairie history and host of interesting activities offered here."⁴⁰

Elements of Design in the Price Tower

The commission of the Price Tower coincided with a revival of interest in decoration, in many cases by architects and designers influenced by International Style Modernism, a movement associated with the eschewal of decoration. The Price Tower is an excellent example of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a concept popular in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe and America that regarded interiors and everything therein as a "total work of art." Wright was not the first architect to apply the concept to non-domestic interiors but his Larkin Building (Buffalo, New York, 1903) was an influential application of such principles to office space. The interrelationships of the interiors and their parts at the Price Tower epitomize what Wright called "the

Wright for recommendation 'to the nation' as important landmarks in American architectural history which ought to be preserved in their original form. This action, which in effect sets up a national watch over the buildings named, was formalized...less than three months after Wright's death."

³⁸ Siry, "Wright's Price Tower: Context, Clients, and Construction," 46. The tower is the only portion of the original Frank Phillips Building that remains today. With the demolition of the adjacent block, 43,000 bricks were saved to finish the south and east sides of the Frank Phillips Tower Center, encasing the tower's lower stories on its east side. The adjacent fifteen-story Plaza Office Building (1984-86), designed by Hellmuth, Obata, and Kassabaum, is the company's largest office facility in Bartlesville, set in an entire city block amid parks and fountains. ["Bartlesville Facility Facts," Conoco-Phillips Corporate Archives, Bartlesville, n.d.] The original Frank Phillips Tower is distinct from the later Phillips Building (1962-63), designed by Welton Becket of Los Angeles and built by George A. Fuller Co. of New York, sited east of Keeler Avenue across from the Adams Building.

³⁹ Siry, "Wright's Price Tower: Context, Clients, and Construction," 44.

⁴⁰ National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Dozen Distinctive Destinations: Bartlesville, OK," accessed online, July 7, 2006, http://www.nationaltrust.org/dozen_distinctive_destinations/bartlesville.html.

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integrity of each in all and all in each,” within an organic whole that was the building in its entirety.⁴¹

For a large part of his career, Wright used modular schemes based on geometric forms to order his work. Although not unusual across his career, there was a strong emphasis on geometry in commissions of the 1950s, including a commission undertaken shortly before the Price Tower, the William and Mary Palmer House (Ann Arbor, MI, 1950) in which Wright used triangles, and their double, the hexagon, as the dominant module. At the Price Tower, Wright returned to the right or 30-60-90 triangle as a basic unit, doubling it to form equilateral triangles, which in turn were doubled to form equilateral parallelograms—the modular unit for the interior floor plans (all the walls and partitions fall on unit lines or subdivisions thereof).⁴² The dialectic between the triangles and parallelograms—between each of those and hexagons, and between the modular and the “one-off,” as well as the weaving of non-geometric pattern through all the room, assured that the interiors never felt or looked “modular.”

The mediation between indoors and out was central to Wright’s approach to design. He sought to destroy “the box” by opening up walls and providing vistas between rooms and between indoor spaces and the outdoors by means of broad horizontal windows that flooded rooms with natural light.⁴³ *The Bartlesville Morning Examiner* noted that “every unit [was] an outside unit,” but Wright saw terraces as *intermediaries* between an interior and “nature” beyond.⁴⁴ The stunning views of the Oklahoma countryside were mediated through sun-louver “fins,” tinted glass, and window frames (some emphasized by painted struts and accents). Such features broke up and “framed” the panoramas but also served as reminders of enclosure, of being *inside* a building.

The Price Tower: American Building Form and Landscape

Wright spoke of his Tower this way at its dedication in February 1956: “This is an assertion of the American sense of itself. This upraised hand on the prairie is a symbol of American independence. Now the skyscraper comes into its own on the rolling plains of Oklahoma.”⁴⁵ He continued:

Big cities are out of date, out of character with modern life. They have become overcrowded architectural pigpiles. Now, buildings like the Price Tower point the way to decentralization of our civilization. This building will say to people: ‘Stay at home and be as beautiful and productive as you know how to be in the American way.’ This nation had to come to Bartlesville to find an American who had the courage, initiative, character, and enterprise to build this Tower and make a reality of an American dream.⁴⁶

Perhaps no tall building of the 1950s in the United States received more critical attention than the Price Tower after it opened in February 1956. *Architectural Forum* referred to the planned project in 1953 as: “somewhat small in size but vast in reach.”⁴⁷

⁴¹ Frank Lloyd Wright, “To the Young Man in Architecture,” in *Frank Lloyd Wright Collected Writings, vol. 2, 1930-1932*, ed. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (NYC: Rizzoli, 1992), 92.

⁴² Peters, interview. PTAC Archives. For Wright’s geometric grids and the Price Tower, see Storrer, *The Frank Lloyd Wright Companion*, 378-379.

⁴³ See Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (New York: Horizon, 1943), 142, as quoted in Grant Hildebrand, *The Wright Space: Pattern and Meaning in Frank Lloyd Wright’s Houses* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 27.

⁴⁴ “H. C. Price Company Had Humble Beginning,” *The Bartlesville Examiner*, February 9, 1956.

⁴⁵ Ruth, “Price Tower” NRHP nomination.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ “Frank Lloyd Wright’s Concrete and Copper Skyscraper on the Prairie for H. C. Price Co.,” *Architectural Forum* 98 (May 1953): 98.

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The siting of the Price Tower, deliberately a few blocks from the most built-up section of Bartlesville, responded both to the well established American trend of business headquarters as corporate symbol, as well as Wright's own ideas about the future of American cities.⁴⁸ The link between tall building architecture and business identity occurred almost immediately upon its inception and rapid development in the last decades of the nineteenth century; however, it was the first decades of the twentieth century that cemented that link.⁴⁹ Spirited projects reaching high above the skyline such as New York's Singer (Ernest Flagg, 1908) and Metropolitan Life (Napoleon LeBrun & Sons, 1909; NHL, 1978) buildings were soon followed by such benchmarks as the Woolworth Building (Cass Gilbert, 1913; NHL, 1966) in New York and the Tribune Building (Howells & Hood, 1922) in Chicago. In the 1920s, virtually every major city in the United States grew a skyline populated with at least one or two, but in some cases a number of competing buildings. While Bartlesville was far from Manhattan or the Loop in terms of buildings, by moving the building site a bit further from the city's other large buildings, the Prices assured visibility of the type enjoyed by predecessors like the Woolworth Tower.⁵⁰

The Price Tower provided the H. C. Price Company with a uniquely modern, individualistic, and remarkable corporate headquarters that finally realized his 1929 design for the St. Marks-in-the-Bouwerie project as well as ideas present in his Broadacre City concept launched in 1934-35. With the encouragement and funding of Edgar Kaufmann, who a year later commissioned famed Fallingwater (NHL, 1976), Wright was able to develop a traveling physical and theoretical model, depicting his idea for a new type of decentralized, yet integrated urban development.⁵¹ Responding in part to the cultural dislocation brought on by the Depression, Broadacre City included all the components Wright believed necessary for a zoned, modern anti-urban community into which he integrated new building prototypes as well as specific unbuilt commissions including the St. Marks-in-the-Bouwerie apartments and the Gordon Strong Automobile Objective.⁵² The scheme is perhaps best known as the conceptual location of what became known as Wright's "Usonian" houses, but Hilary Ballon explains that "numerous miniature versions of the [St. Marks] tower were scattered across Broadacre to demonstrate the proper siting of the skyscraper, no longer an urban form."⁵³ Given the Price Tower's solitary siting in a city of modest size located on the prairie, Bartlesville was probably considered by Wright a more suitable stand-in for Broadacre than the tower's original situation in Manhattan.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ In *Form Follows Finance*, Carol Willis acknowledges that the most high-profile skyscrapers were good exposure for the companies for which they were named (if not fully occupied by them). However, she tempers the emphasis traditionally placed on this aspect of tall buildings by convincingly arguing how their spiking heights during the first three decades of the twentieth century responded most to speculative forces that made a building attractive to tenants. She even terms the commercial skyscrapers of the era "vernaculars of capitalism." See Carol Willis, *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995).

⁴⁹ See Paul Goldberger, *The Skyscraper* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), particularly Chapter 3, and Katherine Solomonson, *The Chicago Tribune Competition: Skyscraper Design and Cultural Change in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ch. 4.

⁵⁰ See Siry, "Wright's Price Tower: Context, Clients, and Construction," 50-54, for a discussion of the site, and 69-71, for comparison with other mid-century skyscrapers (see also Goldberger, 109-110). Wright finally got to build his skyscraper and implement a feature of his Broadacre City concept; however, its use in low-rise, low-density Bartlesville shows that while he understood the "skyscraper as a symbolic form and engineering feat," he missed the meanings inherent to its "social form." See Ballon, 111.

⁵¹ Richard L. Cleary, *Merchant Prince and Master Builder: Edgar J. Kaufmann and Frank Lloyd Wright* (Pittsburgh, PA: Heinz Architectural Center, 1999), 29; Alvin Rosenbaum, *Usonia: Frank Lloyd Wright's Design for America* (Washington, DC: The Preservation Press, 1993), 115.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵³ Ballon, "From New York to Bartlesville: The Pilgrimage of Wright's Skyscraper," 110.

⁵⁴ Alvin Rosenbaum observes that later iterations and explanations of Broadacre City by Wright, remade the entire country as a patchwork of them, with the exception of New England, which would be "left alone as a trading and financial center." Rosenbaum, 113.

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As Wright's only tall commercial building, it was widely reviewed in both the architectural and popular press. Among the initial accounts was a particularly critical article that appeared in *Business Week* that identified the Price Tower as the world's most modern office building—and the most expensive per square foot. The article implied that Wright's design had been accepted by the Prices without their understanding its costs of construction and operation. In response Harold Price, Sr., wrote to the editor:

If the inaccuracies and seemingly derogatory statements affected only our Company, I would disregard the matter entirely. But I cannot refrain from calling to your attention to what I consider a most unfair attitude toward Mr. Frank Lloyd Wright and also toward the city of Bartlesville...It is also intimated that I and the officers of my Company are dissatisfied with the building. Nothing could be further from the truth. Your reporter asked me that question in my office and I told him in front of others that we were very proud of the building and thoroughly satisfied with Mr. Wright's design.⁵⁵

Years later, Joe Price assessed the building's value in terms of its effect on the working life of the company's employees. He admitted that in terms of rental income per square footage, the building did not pay. Yet, he argued that "you have a terrible time when you try to judge a building by its balance sheet. Because on the balance sheet it never shows that the employees come in early and they leave late because it's so much more of a pleasure being there than being home. It doesn't show when you haven't had an employee leave you in thirty years...that the wait list of people wanting to work there is unlimited."⁵⁶

Bill Creel similarly recalled that the tower's design and the company's management were mutually reinforcing, concluding:

In spite of the troubles with the slow elevators, the heating—I think everybody who was working in the building liked the building. You didn't hear a lot of complaints, 'Oh, I wish we'd go move somewhere else.' We enjoyed it and it is always kind of hard, I think, when you are in a building like this that is so novel and so different, to know how much of an effect on your corporate psychology, or character, or whatever you want to call it, is due to the building and the environment you have and how much is due to the people that are actually running and motivating. But we had, several of us still maintain, the finest corporation there ever was in existence. We never had trouble trying to find

⁵⁵ Siry, "Wright's Price Tower: Context, Clients, and Construction," 66. Harold C. Price, Sr., to Elliott V. Bell, Editor and Publisher, *Business Week*, February 25, 1956. FLWF, microfiche no. P147D09. PTAC Archives. Wright was quite upset at the article, writing to Price: "Beware of the envious. We are where envy will come our way. Regarding 'Business Week'—slander in its worst form. A reporter, instead of factual reporting handing in hearsay." Wright contemplated suing the magazine for damages to investment and reputation. Frank Lloyd Wright to Harold C. Price, Sr., February 29, 1956, FLWA, microfiche no. P148A03. Wright soon discussed the Price Tower on television with Tex McCrary on 23 April 1956, and on the Will Rogers and Monitor programs. Kenneth S. Adams to Harold C. Price, Sr., May 3, 1956; Harold C. Price, Sr., to Frank Lloyd Wright, May 4, 1956, FLWF, microfiche no. P148E10; Frank Lloyd Wright to Harold C. Price, Sr., May 11, 1956, FLWF, microfiche no. P149A01; and Harold C. Price, Sr., to Frank Lloyd Wright, May 41, 1956, FLWF microfiche no. S254E03. PTAC Archives.

The project contractor, Haskell Culwell, confirmed that Price supported the project all the way: "I probably, in all my years of construction, I never ran across a nicer, more agreeable man than Mr. Price. He was just unbelievable. I don't think he ever wanted to waste a dime but if it made the building prettier or better, he was for it. I mean, he never, I don't think he ever complained about the costs. Whatever Mr. Wright wanted, Mr. Price would go along with it with never any talk of what the cost was going to be, he'd never ask. He'd just say, 'Do it.'" Haskell Culwell, interview with Sue Lacey, August 3, 1990. PTAC Archives.

⁵⁶ Siry, "Wright's Price Tower: Context, Clients, and Construction," 68. Joe Price, interview with George M. Goodwin, April 10, 1993. PTAC Archives.

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people to work, never had trouble with people leaving. It was a wonderful place to work, the company was, of course. That flowed into the tower and the tower, I think, helped make the people here like it because it was a very relaxed atmosphere.⁵⁷

Overall, the tower gave the relatively small H. C. Price Co. an identity in its townscape and well beyond.

In 1983, the Price Tower was awarded a “Twenty-Five Year Award” by the American Institute of Architects, the third of Wright’s buildings to be so honored.⁵⁸ The Price Tower is one of many tall buildings Frank Lloyd Wright designed during his long and creative career, but it is the only one built to his ideals.⁵⁹ It has endured over five decades, almost always a multi-functional building, and continues to be appreciated by local, national, and international visitors and scholars for its majestic allure. As Wright’s only realized example to incorporate commercial, retail, and living spaces, the Price Tower remains a unique symbol, readdressing the shape, materiality, and function of a modern skyscraper during the mid-twentieth century. Its location in the prairie land of Oklahoma challenges the urban skyscraper myth; by creating a “vertical street” Wright has freed land around the base and allowed the building to stand “in its own park casting its own shadow upon its own ground.”⁶⁰

The Price Tower is nationally significant as one of the most important buildings designed by Frank Lloyd Wright who can, arguably, be considered the most important twentieth-century American architect. As his only skyscraper, Wright’s Price Tower acknowledged the relationship between American corporate identity and tall-building architecture, but did so within his own design idiom and approach to urban planning. With sensitive and sympathetic stewardship, it remains the “tree that escaped the crowded forest” on the Bartlesville skyline and a testimony to the breadth and depth of Wright’s architectural inspiration.

⁵⁷ Bill Creel, interview with Sue Lacey and Arn Henderson, August 21, 1990. PTAC Archives.

⁵⁸ The other two were Taliesin West in 1972, and the S. C. Johnson & Son Administration Building in 1974. American Institute of Architects Press release, dated April 1, 1983. PTAC Archives.

⁵⁹ Anthony Alofsin and Monica Ramirez-Montagut, “Acknowledgements,” in Anthony Alofsin, ed., *Prairie Skyscraper: Frank Lloyd Wright’s Price Tower* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 16.

⁶⁰ Wright, “Toward All.” PTAC Archives.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
 Previously Listed in the National Register. NR # 74001670, September 13, 1974
 Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
 Designated a National Historic Landmark.
 Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
 Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
 Other State Agency
 Federal Agency
 Local Government
 University
 Other (Specify Repository):

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreeage of Property: Approximately 3 acres

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	15	234290	4070830

Verbal Boundary Description: Price Tower is located in downtown Bartlesville, Oklahoma, upon lots 4 and 5 of the city block 47 bordered by Dewey Avenue (on the west), Sixth Street (presently known as Silas Street, on the south), Osage Avenue (on the east), and Fifth Street (on the north).

Boundary Justification: The boundary includes the resources that have historically been part of the Price Tower property and that maintain historic integrity.

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DESIGNATED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK
March 29, 2007