

ART



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Frank Lloyd Wright's 1937 residential masterpiece, Fallingwater, in western Pennsylvania.

'Fallingwater' still makes a splash

The "historic house" museum: few towns today of even modest size are without one.

Perched at the top of a hill, strutting its stuff on a tree-lined boulevard, it is a community's antique, a quaint souvenir of a romanticized past. Perhaps it commemorates the life of some captain of local industry; more likely it is a frilly Victorian confection, appealing in the same way — and for the same reasons — as a crocheted comforter or a stored-away wedding dress.

Deep in the forest of western Pennsylvania, however, an hour-and-a-half bus ride from Pittsburgh, a house is preserved not for its association with some person or event; not for its age or its value as an example of type; but because it changed the way we see our world.

On a recent Eastern visit, I had the opportunity to visit Fallingwater, the 1937 residential masterpiece of America's greatest architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. The trip marked 50 years since the building was first announced to the American public, yet the ideas embodied by the house are as surprising and challenging today as they must have seemed to readers of that first *Life* magazine feature.

Surely the most famous aspect of Fallingwater is its site: a rock outcrop directly over a waterfall.

Edgar J. Kaufmann, the Pittsburgh clothing-store magnate who commissioned the house, had suggested that it be built near the falls — a favorite spot on his family's summer retreat property. Wright went him one better, cantilevering the living room and three terraces out over cliff and stream.

It wasn't only pride that led the architect to such a bold move — though he certainly had enough of that to utterly ignore any natural integrity the falls might have had on their own. But Wright saw at Fallingwater the chance to demonstrate his life-long ideal of "organic" architecture: a blending of the man-made with the natural.

This quality is the most striking thing about the house, and the most difficult to describe. We've all been in houses with great views, or cabins

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tucked invisibly into wooded crannies. Yet even among houses built during the intervening 52 years since Fallingwater was designed, I have never experienced so overwhelming a sense of perfect balance between house and environment.

Photographs — often the only way we get to see the most public of architectural history, not to mention hidden-away summer houses — are great for capturing light and form, but entirely useless when it comes to space.

You can pore over the books about Fallingwater (the new one by Edgar Kaufmann Jr., published by Abbeville Press is spectacular), but no two-dimensional image can surround you with the thick green curtain of native rhododendron, the sound of the waterfall, the moisture of the air.

More important, no number of photographs can give the full range of changing views from every vantage point. Or allow you to feel for yourself the correctness of proportion and detailing in a living room that doesn't look full with 40 people in it, yet doesn't look barren with two.

The interweaving of building and site is the main theme of the house. Terraces — some, hundreds of square feet in area — are entered through glass doors from every major room, creating huge, outdoor rooms to be used in pleasant weather. A stairway from inside the living room leads directly into the stream below. The rectangular planes which make up the floors of the house are stacked and balanced and shifted around to allow the forest to show through, even grow through.

The main vertical pillars holding it all together are built from local rock,

quarried on the Kaufmann property 500 feet from the house, and left irregularly finished to suggest the rough cliff walls nearby. The floors, too, are of rock, and in the living room a bedrock bulge on the site was left to jut into the room.

Wright designed numerous little features to allow the outdoors to penetrate the house, like mitred glass corner windows which would not obstruct views and a glass roof over part of the living room to let in light. But the house is not meant to disappear into its surroundings.

Waist-high walls painted a light color rim every floor, and copious metal door frames and window mullions are painted an unforestry "Cherokee Red." Wright clearly wanted the human side of the man/nature equation to assert its own strength.

Fallingwater has had its share of problems, as one might expect of a building so experimental that engineers warned the owner it would never stand. (Wright's reported response to Kaufmann's concerns: "If you believe that, you don't deserve a building of mine.")

When the family found the roof leaking, Wright advised them to put a bucket under it. Edgar Kaufmann Jr. remembers 14 buckets at one point.

Even today, broken windows must regularly be replaced because the glass and the steel frames respond differently to temperature changes.

But Frank Lloyd Wright's visionary architecture, his reliable instinct for transforming his two-dimensional drawings and plans into three-dimensional spaces of extraordinary power, left America with some of its first indigenous residential building design.

It also left us with one of the great works of art of the 20th century — a home historic on its own terms as a model living environment, and an expression of imagination as alive today as half a century ago.

Frank Lloyd Wright's *Fallingwater* and its 1,500-plus acres of forested grounds were donated to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy in 1963. The Conservancy gives tours of the house all summer, and on winter weekends. For information write P.O. Box R, Mill Run, Penn. 15464, or call (412) 329-8501.