

ROOM WITH NO VIEW

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S HOUSES ARE NICE PLACES TO VISIT BUT YOU WOULDN'T WANT TO LIVE THERE

By **Philip Martin** *Wednesday, Feb 10 1993*

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On the first day of March in 1985, the woman they all called "Mrs. Wright"--Oglivanna was the third wife of Frank Lloyd Wright, but the only one any of the Taliesin West Fellows ever knew--suffered a heart attack.

Though she was 87 years old and recovering from a flu that had escalated into pneumonia, her death was sudden and stunning. Dr. Joseph Rorke was with her when she died, and though he was the only one to hear her final wishes, no one doubted them.

She wanted the body of her famous husband removed from its Wisconsin grave, cremated and brought back to Arizona, the ashes mingled with hers within the walls of a memorial garden to be built on the grounds of their beloved home, Taliesin West.

Rorke says there was no question the Fellows would do their best to carry out Mrs. Wright's final wish. Frank Lloyd Wright was buried in Wisconsin, in a family plot adjacent to a cornfield, surrounded by the graves of his grandparents, his mother, several of his sons and daughters and even his murdered lover, who was killed by a deranged servant years before. His monument was simple. It bore the legend: "Love of an idea is love of God."

Iovanna, Frank Lloyd Wright's only child with Oglivanna, signed the necessary documents. Within days the architect's body was removed and the cremation carried out in Milwaukee, before many of the great man's relatives were notified. After Wisconsin legislators realized Wright's remains had been spirited off to Arizona, they unanimously approved a resolution protesting the exhumation and asking that the ashes be returned. They drafted a letter to the Taliesin Foundation that stated: "Much more than ashes have been taken from Wisconsin--the citizens of the state have lost one evidence of our history, spirit and genius."

When Robert Llewellyn Wright--the son who 26 years earlier had driven through the night to return Frank Lloyd Wright's body to Wisconsin after Wright died at St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix--objected to the "desecration," Iovanna sent him a terse telegram: "The heritage of Taliesin is not for the likes of you."

For more than two years, Wright's ashes remained in an urn in a vault at Taliesin West, while the Fellows constructed the memorial garden.

These days, when Joseph Rorke, wearing Birkenstocks, a tweed jacket and a bright-red "Dr. Joe" nametag, leads a tour through the Taliesin West compound, he does not take the visitors to the garden where the remains have been scattered. That is a private place, out of bounds to the 60,000 visitors who tramp over the grounds each year.

Instead, the tour ends where it begins, in a windowless souvenir shop, where tourists shuffle and gawk at plastic gewgaws. Caught in a certain light, "Frank Lloyd Wright" is no more or less than a registered trademark to be stamped on coffee mugs and key chains, and Taliesin West the official resting place of genius.

@rule:

@body:"What everybody knows about Frank Lloyd Wright is that his roofs leak and he didn't pay his bills," says

Edgar Tafel, a New York architect and a former Wright apprentice. "Maybe they know he designed chairs that made you black and blue or his personal life was messy. Most of them will tell you he was the world's greatest architect."

Even 33 years after his death, Wright is unquestionably the world's most famous architect; his name is recognized by people who have little or no familiarity with his work. During his life, Wright was as much pop star as artist, scandal-bitten and outrageous. Since his death, he has acquired a kind of secular sainthood--at Taliesin West, his aging former apprentices speak his name in hushed tones and say they can still feel his presence.

Not everyone shares that reverence, however. The problem is that after Frank Lloyd Wright became Frank Lloyd Wright, he didn't design for people anymore. "He designed for the ages," Tafel says. Wright would refuse to listen to his clients. Pennsylvania millionaire Edgar Kaufmann asked Wright to design a house from which his family could look out and enjoy the beautiful waterfall on its property. Instead, Wright built Fallingwater right on top of the waterfall--the house is the only spot on the property from which the waterfall can't be glimpsed. A longtime Dallas resident remembers the controversy when Wright accepted the commission to build the Dallas Theater Center in the late 1950s. The architect, she says, refused to meet with the board of directors, and insisted the theatre be built his way. If they wanted a Frank Lloyd Wright theatre, they were just going to have to trust his genius. Wright's drawing for the theatre did not allow for adequate backstage storage or for room to maneuver sets.

"That is the most horrible building," the woman--who asked for anonymity--says. "He did the whole thing with an eye to the external. . . . He gave no thought to what the people who actually had to use the theatre needed."

Similarly, Wright's houses are problematic. As early as 1910, the cantilevered balconies in some of his prairie houses began to sag. Wright assured the owners that the balconies would never give way, but "if it gave them comfort," they could slip a pillar beneath the overhang. And his roofs really did leak--his old office at Taliesin West, one of the first buildings completed on the compound, includes an indoor drainpipe system to funnel off the expected moisture.

And, for real estate agents, Wright's houses are tough to move.

"There's an added value because it's a Wright home, but you've got to have someone who wants that and understands that," says Diane Bunting, a real estate agent who is handling three of the four Wright homes currently for sale in the Valley. "Most people who are looking to buy in this price range, well, they'd just be disappointed in these houses. They want more space, more square footage, more features. We don't even want to waste their time."

Wright's proclivities for small, almost cruise-liner-size bedrooms and the didactic sense of "framing views" with his windows are apparently not to everyone's taste. The Lykes house, for instance, which has been on the market for several years and had its price cut from \$1 million to \$625,000, has a spectacular view of the Valley which disappears whenever one sits down.

"Some people would like it better if the glass went all the way to the floor," Bunting says. "But you can see what Wright was doing. He focused your eye; he used his windows to draw you to different things."

Though the Lykes house has five bedrooms, only the master bedroom is much larger than closet-size. Similarly,

the Benjamin Adelman house, on 30th Street--one of Wright's "Usonian" homes--was designed as an inexpensive winter retreat. It, too, has narrow hallways and small bedrooms, though it has been beautifully restored--and a second wing added to accommodate a full-size master bedroom, a study and walk-in closets. It's being offered for \$1.3 million.

"The owner has \$1.7 million in it, but we just told him that he was going to have to leave something on the table," Bunting says. "That's just the way it is in this market."

Another Wright house, the five-bedroom Price house on Tatum Boulevard, is priced at \$1.9 million. Bunting fears that the owners may eventually decide to sell the house to a developer and that it will be razed.

"We've had to do some serious thinking about how to market these houses, and what we've come up with is that you don't market them as pieces of real estate," she says. "They're wonderful works of art, and that's how we should approach them. It's like buying a painting or a piece of sculpture. Unfortunately, it seems that most of the people who appreciate them can't afford them. But we'll just have to keep trying.

"It takes a special person to live in a Frank Lloyd Wright house."

Such special people, once found, are loath to criticize the master's designs, whatever discomforts they may suffer. Kathleen Hall has rented the Lykes house on North 36th Street for 17 months while it's on the market. She defends the master bedroom, which prospective buyers routinely criticize.

"A lot of people say, 'Too bad the windows don't come down lower so you can see the city from the bed,'" Hall says. "Who wants to see the city from bed? It would be inappropriate to be in the bed and have all the lights of the city coming in." Hall, who is a test away from becoming an architect herself, described the house as "not something that is abstractly graspable."

Equally slow to criticize Wright are Floyd and Nancy Patterson, who bought Winter Cottage, the Paradise Valley home Wright built for one of his daughters in 1954. "It's almost like it has a healing aspect to it," says Nancy Patterson of the structure.

"It's just kind of a strange thing the way he designed things, and the way the feeling is still there," says Floyd Patterson, a Flagstaff roofing contractor. "The house is kind of funny like that. You feel a presence."

The Pattersons bought Winter Cottage, one of Wright's humbler projects, for about \$200,000 last October. They plan to use it as a winter home. The house has built-in bookcases, beds, couches, linen closets, hampers and dressing tables. "Really, to move in, we didn't have to purchase anything but mattresses," says Nancy Patterson.

She adds, however, that having a husband in construction makes it easier to own a Wright home. "It really needs a lot of attention, like the wiring and plumbing and all that kind of thing."

Wright's structures are only part of his legacy. He also wrote copiously, documenting both his work and his peculiar turn of mind. He may not have originated the concept of "organic architecture"--the principle that a building should harmonize with, rather than overwhelm, its natural surroundings--but he became its most important proponent. He distrusted urbanization and strove to create an American architecture, a way of building for a big, open country. His influence is pervasive, if not always apparent.

Wright not only invented the carport, he coined the term. And every split-level ranch home owes something to Wright's early, terrain-hugging "prairie houses."

But even a cursory examination of his life and career turns up seemingly irreconcilable contradictions. For instance, though Wright insisted his buildings were "site-specific," there are dozens of examples of his shopping designs around to different clients in different areas of the country. The Guggenheim Museum in New York, for instance, bears an uncanny resemblance to a 1925 sketch Wright made for a drive-in planetarium. The blueprints for his Dallas Theater Center fit neatly over his plans for the Community Church in Kansas City.

And it is difficult to imagine how the young Wright could countenance some of the more fantastic creations of his last years. For example, the Guggenheim Museum and Tempe's Gammage Auditorium seem to contravene many Wrightian "organic" principles. Both are visual spectacles, showy and grotesque. Rather than blending, they dominate their surroundings.

Gammage, on which construction was not begun until after Wright's death, may be his goofiest building, originally planned as part of a cultural complex for Baghdad, Iraq. Imagined at its original site--the land of the Arabian Nights--it might make a kind of exotic sense, but at a land-grant university in Arizona?

Like many another American artist, Wright had the capacity to shamelessly reinvent himself and to recast his oeuvre in light of his latest adventure. Perhaps what is most impressive about Wright's career is that more than half of his building took place after 1932, the year he turned 63 and, with Oglivanna, established the Taliesin Fellowship.

At that time, it looked as though Wright's career was over. He was socially ostracized, the Great Depression had dried up his commissions and, perhaps worst of all, Wright's work had fallen out of fashion with the rise of sleek-glass-box-building internationalists like Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier. Yet the last quarter-century of Wright's life--his Arizona years--was amazingly productive.

In 1935, Wright would design the famous Fallingwater in Bear Run, Pennsylvania. The next year, he would design the streamlined Johnson Wax building in Racine, Wisconsin, and refine his attempts at designing affordable housing for people of modest means with his first "Usonian" structure. Construction of Taliesin West would begin in 1937. He would begin designing the Guggenheim in 1943, and the Price Tower--his charmingly absurd skyscraper built in the small Oklahoma town of Bartlesville--went up in 1952. He was designing until the end. The project on his drafting table when he died--the Lykes house--was built in 1966 on North 36th Street, at the edge of the Phoenix Mountains Preserve.

Wright's first priority was always the maintenance of the Wright myth. Former apprentice Edgar Tafel says Wright refused to be photographed wearing his glasses, that he would rub graphite shavings into his hair once he began to gray.

"He announced on his 55th birthday that he wasn't going to get any older," Tafel says. "And I think he meant it. He certainly had more vitality, more energy than anyone else. When he got to the point where he actually needed that cane he always carried, he could still shake drawings out his sleeve. Or he liked to give that impression. He was so fast--but I also suspect he did a lot of secret work on those drawings he just dashed off. It looked like he was designing on the spot, but I suspect he had worked them all out in his mind beforehand." Wright's office chairs were low-slung, to force potential clients to peer up at the diminutive Wright--whose own desk and chair were raised on a platform. These days, according to a former Wright associate who asked for

anonymity, tour guides at Taliesin West are instructed to evade questions about Wright's physical stature or his personal life. His stature may explain the cramped feeling of some of Wright's buildings. Sometimes, large people must turn sideways to negotiate his doors, and he had a fondness for low ceilings--at one point, the ceiling in his breakfast room at Taliesin in Wisconsin was a mere six feet high.

David Dodge, a Taliesin Fellow, says of Wright, "He was, well, about five foot eight. He used to say, 'If I were six foot, I might build higher ceilings and bigger doors.' I think he was joking, but I also think there's something to that. If he had been taller, he would have had a different sense of scale."

Wright could be ruthless to those who threatened him. In 1941, Tafel designed a house in Racine, Wisconsin, and--as was customary at the time--split the fee with Wright. Tafel says when the client praised his work--and needed Wright--by noting that the house was built on time and under budget and that the roof didn't leak, the old man became furious.

"He called us all together and said there would be no more clients for students," Tafel says. "He said, 'There will be only one prima donna.' That's exactly the words he used."

Tafel left in tears the next day.

Frank Lloyd Wright was born in Wisconsin, two years after the end of the War Between the States, and died on April 9, 1959. As Edgar Tafel says, his personal life was "messy."

He was married three times, and in 1909, he deserted his first family, running off to Europe with Mamah Borthwick Cheney, the wife of a client. He continued that affair for five years, until Mamah, her two children and four others were murdered by Julian Carleton, a servant, at Wright's house in the Wisconsin countryside--the original Taliesin. Carleton also set fire to the house, destroying the living quarters. After burning the house, he had apparently tried to commit suicide by swallowing acid; he scorched his mouth and throat so badly that he died seven weeks later of starvation while in police custody.

Wright was in Chicago, overseeing the finishing touches on his Midway Gardens, an ambitious, open-air restaurant and entertainment park, when Carleton went on his rampage. After learning the news, Wright traveled back to Taliesin, sharing a private train car with Ed Cheney, the cuckolded husband of Wright's lover. In his eccentric memoir of his father, John Lloyd Wright reported that Cheney consoled Wright during the trip back and had breakfast with the architect the next morning. He left his wife's body with Wright, to be buried on the Taliesin grounds.

It would be eight more years before Wright would finally be granted a divorce by his first wife, Catherine. A year later, in 1923, he entered a disastrous, short-lived marriage with a woman named Miriam Noel, from whom he separated after a matter of months. In 1924, he met Oglivanna Lazovich Hinzenberg at the ballet in Chicago.

Oglivanna, 30 years younger than Wright, had been born in the tiny, central European principality of Montenegro. Her father had served as chief justice of the Montenegro supreme court, and her mother was the daughter of a famous general. Because her father's eyesight was poor, Oglivanna spent much of her youth reading him legal briefs, as well as works of literature and philosophy. In 1917, she married a Russian architect, Vlademar Hinzenberg, and gave birth to her first daughter, Svetlana.

The marriage was a failure. Soon after Svetlana was born, Oglivanna met the philosopher Georgei Gurdjieff, and soon made her way to his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, outside Paris. Gurdjieff, a shadowy figure, combined elements of Sufi, Zen Buddhism and other shamanistic teachings into a set of beliefs he called "The Work." Gurdjieff employed dance, art, music philosophy and arduous physical labor to obtain inner enlightenment through self-discipline and sacrifice. Later, Oglivanna would incorporate much of Gurdjieff's philosophy into Taliesin.

Almost immediately, Wright would move Oglivanna into his home, telling inquisitive neighbors and reporters she was his "housekeeper"--a transparent ploy, since he had done the same thing with Miriam Noel before marrying her.

Miriam did not go gentle. She sought to have Oglivanna deported, and several times managed to have Wright arrested for violating the Mann Act. For four years, Miriam hounded Wright around the country, until he was finally able to obtain a divorce in 1928. During those years, Taliesin once again burned, and Oglivanna gave birth to Iovanna--Oglivanna's second child and Wright's seventh. The lovers finally married on August 25, 1928.

By that time, however, Wright's career as an architect was in shambles. He was almost 60 years old, and his legal and financial troubles--Wright was never a conscientious businessman--had all but destroyed his practice. Holed up in the rebuilt Taliesin with Oglivanna and a few loyal apprentices, he scraped by on his reputation, earning a few hundred dollars at a time for delivering lectures or writing magazine articles.

But when things seemed bleakest, an escape hatch appeared. There was work in Arizona.

In February 1928, Albert Chase McArthur offered Wright a \$1,000-a-month salary to "consult" on the construction of the Arizona Biltmore hotel. In addition to this seven-month contract, Wright would receive an additional \$7,000 when the hotel opened.

McArthur, the architect of record on the project, had been an apprentice to Wright at Wright's Oak Park studio in 1908 and 1909. McArthur's brothers, owners of an automobile dealership, had purchased several hundred acres of what was then desert eight miles northeast of downtown Phoenix, and were determined to build a world-class resort hotel. The McArthurs had been impressed by Wright's Imperial hotel--reputedly, the only major building in Tokyo to survive the 1923 earthquake with no structural damage.

There was another reason Albert McArthur hired Wright: McArthur intended to construct the hotel from concrete blocks manufactured on the site. Wright had successfully used this system in California, and McArthur assured his brothers and other financial backers of the project that Wright had patented the system.

In 1930, however, a Los Angeles man claimed that the textile-block system employed in the building of the Biltmore violated his patent; when Wright was questioned about the claim, he cheerfully admitted he had never gotten around to patenting the method he licensed McArthur to use. While Wright publicly credited McArthur with the design of the hotel at the time--and the Biltmore's brochures still insist that McArthur was the architect--the horizontal lines and art-deco detailing of the building have long led to speculation that Wright actually designed it. After McArthur died in 1951, Wright did little to discourage that idea.

On October 21, 1957, after a speech in Detroit, a member of the audience asked him directly if he had designed the Biltmore. Wright did not equivocate in his answer.

"This lady wants to know if I designed the Arizona Biltmore hotel, and I did," he said. "I spent a whole year at it. There was a young student of mine who had the commission. He never built anything but a house, so they sent for me to help out and I helped out. So that is the Arizona Biltmore."

Concurrent with his work on the Biltmore, Wright was engaged in drawing up a luxury resort at the behest of Alexander Chandler, the veterinarian who founded and lent his name to the southeast Valley municipality. Planned for the south face of South Mountain, San Marcos-in-the-Desert would also have used the textile-block construction system employed on the Biltmore. In January 1928, Wright and his entourage--the handful of apprentices and draftsmen who prefigured the Taliesin Fellowship--arrived in Chandler. When Wright realized that the cost of adequate lodging was prohibitive, he prevailed upon Chandler to lend his crew a portion of land on which to construct a camp. Wright's "boys" built offices, living quarters and even a small electrical plant. They lived there from late January to late June, while Wright refined his plans for San Marcos-in-the-Desert and commuted to the Biltmore. With the stock-market crash of October 1929, Chandler was forced to put off his plans for the resort.

Wright often said he considered the San Marcos project the "most perfect" of his unrealized projects. From time to time, there is talk about reviving it--Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, a former Wright apprentice who is now the chief archivist for the Taliesin Foundation, says several inquiries have been made over the years, including one a few years ago that would have located the resort at Pinnacle Peak.

David Dodge, a former Wright apprentice who returned to Taliesin after a decade practicing architecture in Switzerland, says nothing remains of Wright's first desert camp.

"There's nothing out there," he says. "I mean, we know where it is, so we can see signs of it, but there's really nothing left at all."

Photographs of the camp show that it bears a marked resemblance to Taliesin West. Wright had established roots in the desert; he and Oglivanna would live here intermittently for the rest of their lives. "He felt a deep affinity for the desert," Edgar Tafel says. "It was a place to be renewed. I'm not sure he didn't see himself as sort of an Old Testament prophet, returning to the desert to see visions."

William Carlos Williams, the poet, wrote that "the pure products of America go crazy." Wright's megalomania was matched only by his talent. He was lucky enough to be the great man he always posed as, and his failures are often as grand as his successes. Like Elvis Presley, another uniquely American artist, Wright ended up insulated from the world, shuttling from his compound in Wisconsin to his compound in Arizona, surrounded by a crew of sycophants.

And those sycophants still carry on today, pretty much as if their beloved Mr. Wright was still tapping his cane around the grounds. They are the keepers of the flame, the protectors of his legacy. Some call them "grave tenders" and point out that in its 60-year history, the school founded by Wright has produced only a few architects of note. They say the work produced by Taliesin Associates--the for-profit architecture firm that is a subsidiary of the Frank Lloyd Wright Institute and that, in part, supports the school and archives--is a shadow of Wright's work.

The place has the scent of cult. The true believers have preserved the Wright lifestyle as well as his drawings and letters, they still commute from Taliesin to Taliesin, they still hold formal dinners with music and dancing provided by the Fellows and students. Like the members of a cloistered order, they have devoted themselves to a patron saint. And those who leave the order are not always welcomed back.

"It's clear that those of us who've left aren't welcome anymore," says a longtime Wright associate who asked not to be identified because he still "has dealings" with the group. "Some are more pure than others; that sort of thing. There's an awful lot of pettiness and political nastiness that surrounds it--all these people who take their identity from their closeness to Mr. Wright. It's pathetic."

Wright's aging former apprentices tend his memory with patient ardor. They speak his name in hushed tones and say they can still feel his presence. David Dodge, who lives on the Taliesin compound, says, "Sometimes, I get the feeling he is here. I'll come around a corner and I'll almost expect to see Mr. Wright standing there."

In a way, he is still there. Some 660 Wright-designed buildings were executed during his 72-year career, and at least 35 of his original designs have been realized since his death. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer of the Taliesin Foundation says there are more than 400 of the architect's finished drawings in the foundation's vaults. It is still possible to commission a Wright house; Madonna recently asked to examine the plans of a circular home Wright designed--but never built--for Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller in 1957.

At Taliesin West, they expect the building to go on. Pfeiffer says he believes that someday, somewhere, every single Wright drafting will be turned into a building. Wright, born just 43 years after the death of Thomas Jefferson--the other great American architect--is likely to have an influence on the architecture of the 21st century.