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WRIGHT *at Home*

The Ohio footprints
of a master architect



The Penfield House,
designed by Frank Lloyd Wright,
in Willoughby



travel

The Wright Place

Fans of renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright can now spend a weekend or a few days in one of his Usonian homes, located in northeast Ohio. **BY MIRIAM CAREY**

PHOTOS BY ERIC HANSON



When Louis Penfield, a high school art teacher, and his wife, Pauline, wanted to build a new house in the early 1950s, he went straight to the top. At first glance, it might have seemed like a pipe dream to commission world-renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright to design the home. But the Penfields read all they could about the architect they admired, and found that Wright was designing what he called "Usonian" homes — affordable and elegant houses for the average American.

Armed with this knowledge, the Penfields corresponded with Wright, fitting their profile into the architect's Usonian vision with one additional card to



weekend



The Penfield House in Willoughby, designed by architect Frank Lloyd Wright in the early 1950s, is opening this month to overnight guests.

play — Penfield's height. Standing at 6-feet, 8-inches tall, Penfield knew he might pique the interest of the diminutive architect who was famous for building low-to-the-ground housing. Wright took the challenge.

The resulting design took into account the client's height, his family's desire to live casually and the natural landscape of the couple's 30 acres along the Chagrin River in Willoughby. The cost? An affordable \$25,000.

To keep the price low, Wright's design incorporated as much do-it-yourself and low-cost building as possible. The Penfields worked with local contractors, and the home was built in 1955. Constructed of concrete block, wood and glass, the home achieves Wright's intent. It is long and subtle, blending with the fantastic woodlands on the Penfields' property, and meeting the needs of the couple and their two children, Paul and Tisa Ann.

Nearly a half century later, the Wright-designed home can be experienced by visitors, who can rent the structure and enjoy both the Usonian architecture and the beautiful property that surrounds it.

Inside the home, the first level is one big room that incorporates the kitchen and living areas. The entranceway doors — in fact, almost all the doors in the home — are 8 feet high and 22 inches wide. The ceilings also reflect a need for height in the room, extending 8 feet in the entranceway portion of the home and rising to 12 feet in the living area. An expanse of glass across the length of the room draws the wooded property into the living area visually; a long, built-in bench stretching across the length of the far wall provides a place to sit and enjoy the view.

The home is heated through its floor, using an in-floor radiant heating system that Wright innovated in the 1930s. A series of boilers emits heat through cement flooring. The cement itself is designed to withstand many years of use. Tinted with "Colorundum," a process that colors the cement while it's still wet, the floor will never need painting, and only occasionally needs waxing. The cement walls are similarly easy to care for. The



A focal point of the home's spacious foyer is a floating staircase to the second floor.

kitchen and utility room, near the entrance to the home, blend in with the rest of the first level.

A narrow, floating staircase extends to the second level, where the master bedroom and two additional rooms for the Penfield children reflect Wright's idea of simplicity. Plenty of storage and closet space is built into the bedrooms, as if to say, "put your things away and enjoy the look of this room in its intended simplicity."

If Wright and Penfield differed in size, there also was a disparity in their philosophies about budgets. In this case it was the reverse: Wright thought big, always going over budget, while Penfield was

conservative. He stopped building when the house reached its original budget of \$25,000. The house was finished, but the furnishings and some of the extra cabinetry originally designed by Wright were never made.

This is where Paul Penfield comes in. One of two Penfield children who grew up in the house, Paul has since inherited the property, which has been in the family since 1876. He worked for years to restore a cottage and farmhouse while maintaining the tree farm here. He left restoration of the Wright home for last.

"It's almost as if restoring the house was waiting for the trees to grow," says Paul, with a smile. Most of the details left

undone by his father involved wood-working. Looking at Wright's original designs, Paul slowly began the process of cutting the wood and working the pieces into the furniture and cabinetry intended by Wright. As he negotiated this delicate process, he sometimes had to retool or build new machinery to accommodate unusual sizes and needs demanded by Wright's designs. He also sought advice from John Origlio, a consulting architect on the project, and a member of the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy. Working together, they recreated the original vision that was among Wright's last projects.

The results of Paul's labor are a series of tables, chairs and cabinets all hand-crafted from cherry wood found on the property. Paul and his wife, Donna, chose area rugs reflective of Wright's designs. Accessories throughout the home finish off the Wright look with style.

The rehab was a labor of love for Paul and Donna. But all through the process, their dream was to share this house with other Wright fans. "We wanted to offer something to the public that's more than a house to tour or a museum to see," explains Paul. "We wanted to create a space where they could take up residence and occupy the house. It's such a different experience to watch the light change through the day, enjoy the fireplace at night and actually wake up in the morning thinking, 'the house is mine.'"

Beginning this month, the Penfield home will become only the second Wright house in the country to open its doors to vacation rentals. The other is in Wisconsin. There are only 11 Wright designs in Ohio.

For \$275 a night — with a two-night minimum — a maximum of five people can enjoy the home and the woodland property that surrounds it. "There is fishing in the Chagrin River," notes Paul, "and wooded trails to walk throughout the property." The Buckeye Trail winds its way through the nearby North Chagrin Reservation, and visiting nature-lovers can further indulge themselves with a visit to the Holden Arboretum, which is a short drive from the Penfield house.

For reasons now inexplicable, Wright



The beauty of the landscape along the Chagrin River complements the home's interior.

Master Builder

Born in 1869, Frank Lloyd Wright grew up on a farm in Wisconsin. Although it is unclear whether he graduated from high school, Wright did pursue his interest in building and architecture by taking classes at the University of Wisconsin while working as a draftsman. Eventually, he found work with influential Chicago architect Louis Sullivan. Wright was fired from the firm for designing houses on a free-lance basis; however, he always credited Sullivan with inspiring and motivating him.

From the start, Wright's designs were ground-breaking. In the late 1800s, commercial and residential architecture maintained close ties to classical European traditions. Wright felt the boxlike structures being produced at the time were formal and confining. He sought to break tradition, tearing down walls and fostering the idea of open floor plans that allowed space to define itself without the traditional enclosure of walls and doors.

Wright worked chiefly on private residential homes, relying on clients who understood and could afford his cutting-edge work. But he also developed commercial properties, most notably the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Administration Building for the Johnson Wax Company in his home state of Wisconsin.

It didn't take long for Wright's fame to spread to Ohio. Among his first commissions here was a prairie-style home that was reflective of his designs of the early 1900s. Taking up the space of an entire city block, the Wescott home in Springfield is a sprawling expanse that draws from the surrounding flatlands to create an open floor plan that looks as unusual from the outside as it does inside. Currently, the home is undergoing restoration. It is

scheduled to open as a museum in 2004.

It wasn't until the late 1930s that Wright began to build his famous "Usonian" houses. They represented his goal of designing affordable, usable homes for families. Most of the Ohio Usonians were built after Wright had perfected the technique in the 1950s. In Cincinnati, the Boswell and Boulter residences reflect this style. Wright was also busy in Canton, where he built the Dobkins, Feiman and Rubin homes. In North Madison, the Staley house is complemented by the Lake Erie shoreline.

The Tonkens residence in Amherly Village was built from Wright's Usonian Automatic technique. Homeowners could commission a Wright design, then buy the materials and build it themselves, saving time and money.

Wright was also responsible for the Meyers Medical Clinic in Dayton, a commercial property that has been altered slightly — to the dismay of some Wright puritans. Located at 5441 Far Hills Ave., this structure is visible from the street.

The only Wright home open for tours in Ohio is the Weltschliemer House, which is now owned and operated by Oberlin College. Tours are given on the first and third Sundays of each month from noon to 4 p.m. Cost is \$5 per person. Call 440/775-8665 for more information.

For details on Wright homes, visit www.franklloydwright.org, the official web site of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, or visit www.savewright.org for additional information on current activities related to salvaging and rehabbing Wright homes. For information on Ohio Wright homes, visit <http://www.ohioonline.com/v01/12/wright.html>.

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