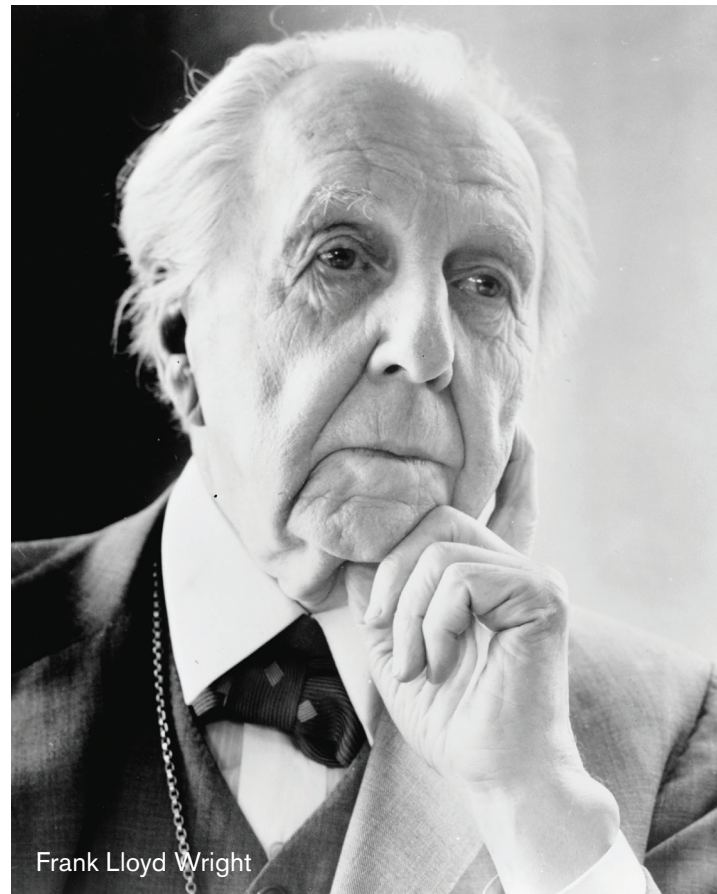


# The First Starchitect

By Roger Grody

The enduring legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright, America's original celebrity architect, continues to inspire residential architects today.



Frank Lloyd Wright



Most contemporary expressions of modernism — spectacular residences perched in the Hollywood Hills or sleek structures whose glass walls reveal expansive views of Miami's Biscayne Bay — are all, arguably, products of Frank Lloyd Wright's vision. His disciples, such as mid-century modernists John Lautner, Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra, energized a generation of designers and even those graduating from architecture school today appreciate the relevance of FLW, the godfather of American modernism.

Kevin Alter, the Sid W. Richardson Centennial Professor at the School of Architecture at the University of Texas in Austin, describes Wright as an incredibly important figure whose philosophies of design continue to be relevant. Some of Alter's own modern residential work — the professor is the founding partner of Alterstudio Architecture in Austin — reflects concepts that were first pioneered by Wright.

"Wright's architecture engaged with the outdoors and experientially related to the world in ways that were quite dramatic," reports Alter. He explains that while Wright's European counterparts in the modern movement focused on abstractions, craftsmanship afforded the American architect's work a sense of richness. "His attention

to materiality and emphasis on the integration of the landscape provides a very important legacy," says Alter, who suggests Wright's ethos of connecting to open spaces is particularly timely in the COVID-19 era.

Donna Gabanski, a Wright expert and tour director at the Chicago Architecture Center (CAC), reports the legendary architect's imprint is all over the Windy City, including Prairie-style residences such as the Robie House and FLW's own home/studio in suburban Oak Park.

Commenting on Wright's legacy, Gabanski explains, "One reason for his enduring influence is that he had such a long career. He kept evolving and reinventing himself."

Gabanski notes that FLW was rediscovered by preservation groups in the 1970s and 1980s, and that last year a body of his work, including several signature residences, was enshrined as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Some contemporary architects, even when dismissing Wright as too mainstream to be cool, emulate him. "Their work may not look like Wright houses, but the philosophies — fitting the natural setting, bringing the outdoors in and even sustainability — have references back to Frank Lloyd Wright," says Gabanski.

The sleek, horizontally oriented profiles

of Wright's Prairie-style homes were remarkably modern considering they emerged just after the turn of the century, years before Ford introduced the Model T. Their timelessness has spawned a "Modern Prairie" style that is popular today, particularly in the Midwest. One contemporary practitioner inspired by Wright's Prairie houses is Stephen Jaskowiak, founding principal of West Studio in suburban Chicago, whose homes combine the master's themes with new materials and technologies.

A specialist in the Modern Prairie style, Jaskowiak's designs are derivative of Wright's houses, but offer brighter interiors and possess the kitchens and bathrooms that contemporary families appreciate. "Some of my clients were considering purchasing a Frank Lloyd Wright home in the area, but after evaluating the maintenance costs, called me instead," reports Jaskowiak. Some West Studio clients prefer less of the copious woodwork typical in Wright's original Prairie houses, an option Jaskowiak refers to as "Prairie Light."

Jaskowiak reminds us that many of Wright's concepts have become mainstream in contemporary homes, such as the open-concept floor plan ("breaking the box" in FLW nomenclature), corner windows and the blurring

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Fallingwater is Wright's most iconic house and the ultimate expression of harmony between residential architecture and nature.



of borders between indoors and out. “When I was in architecture school, postmodernism was the craze, but I was drawn to the influences of Wright,” says Jaskowiak, who grew up in Greater Chicago where Prairie-style houses are an essential part of the city’s architectural heritage.

One of Wright’s most iconic homes, Fallingwater in Pennsylvania is perhaps the ultimate example of an architect integrating the built environment with nature, a consistent FLW doctrine. The home, with its horizontal lines, large expanses of glass and open-air terraces, is built over a 30-foot waterfall and complements, rather than overwhelms, the extraordinary site. Travel + Leisure magazine proclaimed Fallingwater as “one of the 12 landmarks that will change the way you see the world,” while National Geographic Traveler designated it as a “Place of a Lifetime.”

“Fallingwater, designed in 1935 for the Kaufmann family of Pittsburgh as a mountain retreat, is Frank Lloyd Wright’s tour de force and the architect’s primary expression of what he called ‘organic architecture,’” explains Justin Gunther, director of Fallingwater. “The result is a house unlike any other that has the power to demonstrate how people can respect, and live in harmony with, the natural world,” adds Gunther.

Bohlin Cywinski Jackson is a national architectural firm whose clients include high-tech giants, universities and cultural centers. Its team also creates some stunning modern residences — many ensconced in pristine natural environments — and designer Bill James suggests some inspiration can be traced to Frank Lloyd Wright. “We all owe a great debt of gratitude to him and much of our work as contemporary architects stands on Wright’s shoulders,” he states.

James, whose childhood visit to Fallingwater proved inspirational, was attracted to Bohlin Cywinski Jackson as a young architect because the firm’s humane brand of modernism embodied many of the principals Wright incorporated into his work. “In our practice, we appreciate the use of natural materials and the impact their expressions emote,” says the designer, who insists, “Wright was a master at that.”

In 2014, James became project manager for High Meadow at Fallingwater, a lodging facility for in-residence scholars on a farm adjacent to the iconic FLW landmark. It was a homecoming of sorts for James, who stayed on that very site as an architecture student, and concedes it was a daunting task to design a building in the shadow of an international architectural treasure. “Like Wright, we were very interested in how we



Architect Stephen Jaskowiak creates stunning contemporary residences inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie-style houses built more than a century before.

PHOTOS BY LANE CAMERON; DESIGNED BY WEST STUDIO, LTD ARCHITECTS, STEPHEN JASKOWIAK, A.L.A.

touched the land,” explains James, who adds, “We had a similar reverence for the land but used a different approach.”

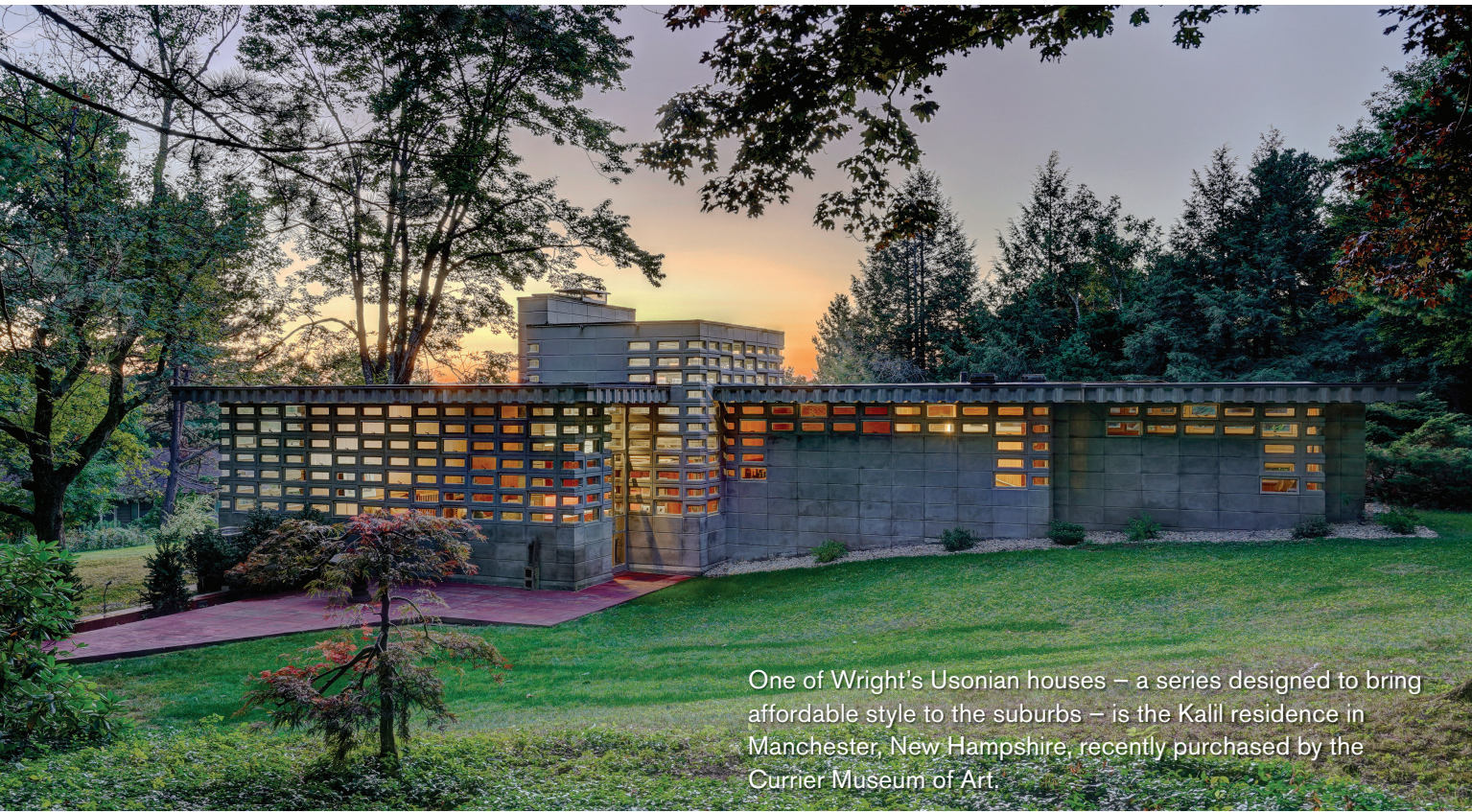
One of the reasons Wright’s work is so admired is that he contributed to an authentically American architectural tradition, with the Wisconsin native adapting his work to the plains of the Midwest before conquering the Arizona desert and burgeoning metropolis of Los Angeles. His style expressed an American independence while celebrating the natural environment. Wright had a penchant for Japanese aesthetics and culture, but his architectural expression represented a uniquely American perspective.

It is remarkable how many modernists practicing today have been inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright, and even those who do not specifically acknowledge it may cite one of his many disciples as their idols. Even some who believe their work is absolutely original (a near-impossible feat in any field of art) may be

subconsciously influenced by Wright, who was a century ahead of his time.

Nonetheless, FLW-designed homes sometimes linger on the market, although they certainly capture plenty of attention. Because they were not designed for 21st-century family lifestyles and many jurisdictions prohibit necessary renovations, it is sometimes best if cultural institutions acquire these properties, as they are more likely to restore them and share them with the public. Examples include the Freeman House in L.A., bequeathed to the School of Architecture at the University of Southern California, and the Robie House, which is occupied by The University of Chicago’s alumni association.

Last year, Paula Martin of Keller Williams Luxury International listed the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Kalil House in Manchester, New Hampshire, ultimately selling the 1,406-square-foot Usonian house to the Currier Museum of Art, which already owned another on the same



PHOTOS COURTESY PAULA MARTIN

One of Wright’s Usonian houses — a series designed to bring affordable style to the suburbs — is the Kalil residence in Manchester, New Hampshire, recently purchased by the Currier Museum of Art.



street. The Usonian houses were a series of about 60 homes Wright designed for middle-income buyers, starting in the 1930s, and Usonian Automatic residences like the Kalil House were built in the 1950s.

Wright intended the Automatics, which were essentially modular kits, to bring affordable style to the suburbs, but construction proved too complex for the mass production he envisioned. Wright expert Gabanski reports that even the early Usonian residences, with their one-story format and pioneering use of a carport, greatly influenced the suburban ranch house that became a post-World War II American staple.

“It’s like magic in this house, and it was such a privilege to have been associated with it,” says Martin of the Kalil residence, and reports

that after a brief pre-market period, the property sold in 13 days to the Currier Museum. It was priced at \$850,000 — the agent notes that an ordinary home of this size might be listed under \$200,000 — and was ultimately sold for \$970,000. “With a home so unique, casting a net very far and wide was the best way to generate a diverse array of buyers,” explains Martin, who received interest from as far away as China and Sweden. “You either get it or you don’t,” says Martin of the property, who adds, “And if you do, you just stand there in awe.”

While American residential architecture has never been so dynamic and diverse, there are no contemporary practitioners with the stature of Frank Lloyd Wright. Alter reports a strong tradition of modern architecture in Austin, noting

the Texas capital has one of the most innovative design communities in the nation. Meanwhile, the modern portfolios of architects Richard Landry, Zoltan Pali and William Hefner reflect the wealth of coastal modernism that has swept through L.A.

Pritzker Prize-winning architects Norman Foster, Renzo Piano and Frank Gehry (perhaps the only contemporary American architect approaching household name status) are bona fide celebrities, yet none have permeated society like Frank Lloyd Wright. In addition to his architecture, Wright was also a prominent furniture maker, textile specialist and overall master of the decorative arts whose work has inspired many of today’s great designers.

Among those who clearly have been influenced by Wright are potter, author and entrepreneur Jonathan Adler, celebrity designer Kelly Wearstler and Brooklyn-based furniture artisan Eric Chang. The aesthetics of FLW are so ubiquitous that Amazon lists more than 500 gifts — many carrying images of the master’s distinctive leaded glass designs — dedicated to the architect, from coasters, napkins and mugs to jigsaw puzzles, clocks and neckties.

Even his detractors must acknowledge that 60 years after his death, Frank Lloyd Wright remains the most famous architect in America. **KW**