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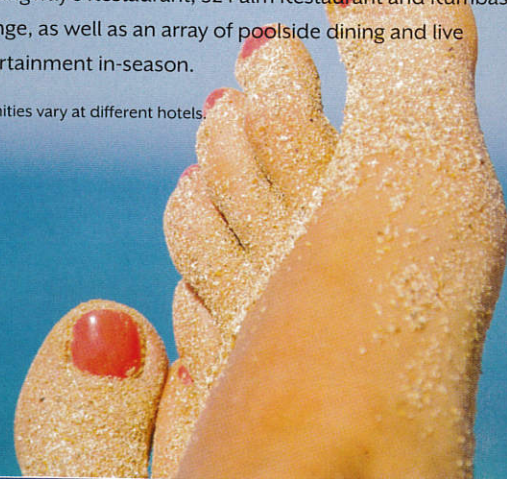
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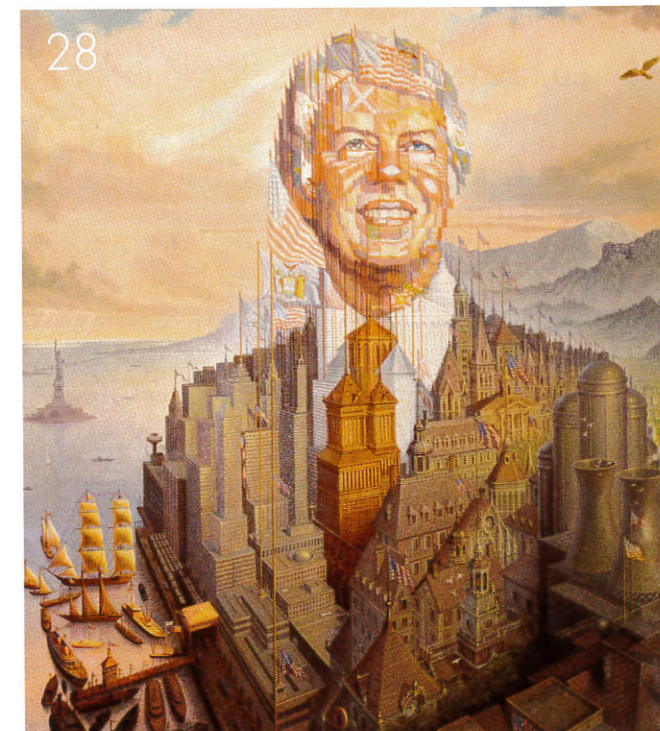
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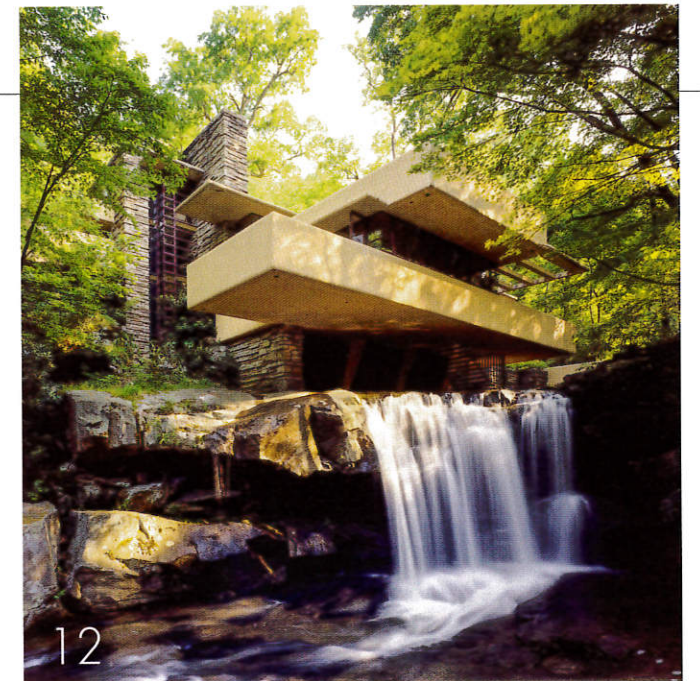
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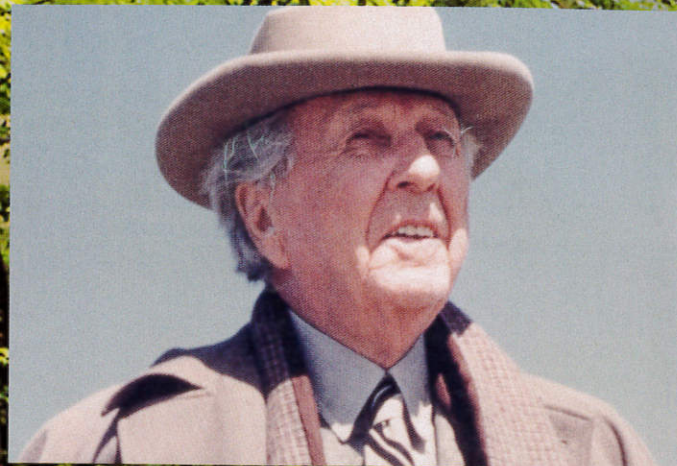
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# FALLINGWATER A Romance Between House and Nature

BY JOE MOTHERAL

When you drive into Pennsylvania's Laurel Highlands you can envelop yourself in the rustic surroundings. Its forests, friendly mountains, farmland and small towns no doubt attracted the Kaufmanns, a Pittsburgh family who owned Kaufmann Department Store.

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA CONSERVANCY



The family owned land in the Laurel Highlands that included a stream called Bear Run, about 70 miles southeast of Pittsburgh. Edgar Kaufmann Jr., a trained architect under Frank Lloyd Wright, and the family eventually hired Wright to design a weekend retreat at that location.

The design process began in March 1935 and the result was an architectural marvel recognized by Time Magazine as one of Wright's "most beautiful houses." In 1966, "Fallingwater" received a designation as a National Historic Landmark. Now the province is part of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, the natural home ultimately is situated so that it actually straddles a waterfall. And typical of Frank Lloyd Wright, it blends with the environment.

The home's visitor's center, gift shop and parking lot are able to accommodate a plethora of visitors each year. The conservancy sponsors well-organized guided tours. As visitors arrive they are assigned to small groups each with a knowledgeable tour guide.

During our visit, our guide, Nora, led us down a path to the bridge that spans Bear Run. We asked her to tell us that the house is, "site specific incorporating natural elements." A view of the house quickly verified Nora's statement. The work matches the north bank of Bear Run with its multiple layers of sedimentary rock. Our guide told us that the stone material came from a short distance downstream.

Wright had a vision that the architecture should reflect the natural environment and every facet of Fallingwater illustrates that principle. He also rejected "clutter" and in keeping with the axiom that the more empty space you have, the less clutter it will be empty, he insisted on a car port, for example, against the wishes of Kaufmann who wanted a garage. Wright protested that a garage would invite clutter.

As we stepped into the living room and Nora explained that Wright had designed all of the furniture except for some of the chairs. As the



PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBERT BRISQAR, COURTESY OF THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA CONSERVANCY





PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRISTOPHER LITTLE, COURTESY OF THE WESTERN PINES VANIA CONSERVANCY

tour proceeded we learned that the vanities and cabinets are attached to the various walls then cantilevered so that the bases of them don't rest on the floor. In Edgar Kaufmann, Jr.'s bedroom, Nora explained that the low-lying bed enabled the person in it to have a sizable perspective on the view out the full-length glass windows. And the terrace adjoining the bedroom was bordered by a low-lying wall no more than knee high, as opposed to a wall waist-high that could block part of the view.

In accordance with Wright's concept of extracting as much as possible from the surroundings, there are no screens or curtains on the windows most all of which are floor to ceiling.

Several on the tour wondered if Bear Run had ever flooded. "Yes," Nora told us, "at times it has come up to the lower level floor." The house has three levels plus a separate unit above with three bedrooms for the staff. The main house is well equipped with the usual rooms: four bedrooms each with attached baths, living rooms and kitchens. Stairways lead to all parts of the house.

We noticed several Japanese paintings. Nora said that Wright had a fondness for Japanese art and architecture. One may remember that he designed the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo — one of the few buildings standing after earthquake in the early 20th century.

#### THE PROCESS

Kaufmann received the preliminary plans in October 1935 after Wright had visited the site. The construction of the house wasn't without its pitfalls and wrangling between Wright and the Kaufmanns.

The house sits on a web of inverted T beams made of concrete, cantilevered out from the rocky north face outcropping. There was an argument between client and architect about how much reinforcing steel to use. Wright was satisfied with the minimum and Kaufmann, probably based on advice from the constructors, wanted more. The final outcome, although unofficial, was an added amount of steel.





PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBERT P. RUSCHAK, COURTESY OF THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA CONSERVANCY

correspondence exchanged between Kaufmann and Wright gauged the disagreements between them. In one case on Aug. 27, the argument over the quantity of steel exploded. Wright wrote referring to the steel issue: "I am willing you should take it over but I am not willing to be insulted. So we will send no more steel diagrams." Later Wright sent a telegram to his assistant: "Drop work and come back immediately. We are through until Kaufmann and I arrive at some basis of mutual respect." The assistant hesitated long enough for Wright to calm down and the project could proceed. Kaufmann wrote to Wright: "Now don't you think that we should stop writing letters and that you come to the situation to come to Pittsburgh and clear it up by getting the facts?" Eventually, construction continued. Nora told us that recently the Conservancy had to add to the concrete supports with post-tensioned beams. After much give and take, construction was completed in October 1937. The initial cost estimate was \$35,000. The final cost was \$155,000. Nora said that Wright would write Kaufman: "send

\$5,000" several times until the cost ran up to the final figure. The furnishings cost \$22,000; architect's fee: \$8,000.

#### THROUGH THE YEARS

The house was a nature retreat for the Kaufmann family from 1937 to 1963, when Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. donated the property to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy. During the period of time the Kaufmanns held sway, they had many guests. I asked Nora the most famous. She replied quickly, "Albert Einstein." And she said that a lot of movie actors come there on tours.

The Conservancy opened the house to the public in 1964. The day we took the tour, the place was mobbed with visitors: a couple we met came from California. Thousands are drawn to Fallingwater each year, and it has been nominated as one of the World Heritage Sites.

Visitors often write words such as "amazing," or "unexpected."

Nora summed up Fallingwater by saying, "it's a romance between house and nature."

#### PENNSYLVANIA

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#### RESOURCES

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Photo Courtesy of Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, Timothy Sakamoto in-D



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