IN THIS ISSUE

So You Bought a Wright House

Guest Editor: Edith Payne
In keeping with the mission of the Conservancy, we have devoted the second issue of SaveWright to the homeowners who, after all, are the genesis of the Conservancy’s existence, the original core of its membership, and its greatest blessing.

In doing so, we have focused on three main themes: restoration, buying and selling, and Conservancy resources for homeowners.

In the three articles that concern restoration, we have chosen to focus first on two “saves”: the Glasner and Turkel houses. Both were well on their way to destruction at the time that they were purchased by their present owners. Glasner was about to become victim to McMansion fever; Turkel was in a state of advanced deterioration. Their restoration has been superb, and they stand now as the architectural gems that Wright envisioned. The restoration of the Richardson house, in which I live, has been included to suggest what can be done, over time, and on a modest budget, to rescue a house in declining but by no means terminal condition.

The next two articles are focused on the process of buying and selling a Wright house. Leo Koonmen has taken the long view as a real estate professional at the factors that must be kept in mind in appropriately pricing Wright property. Deborah Vick tells a more personal story of her successful efforts to sell her Usonian home, the Brandes house.

As a final matter, we could not neglect to mention the incomparable resources of the Conservancy, its Homeowners’ Committee, and, particularly, its Architectural Advisory Committee. Our joint mission, after all, is conservation, and we stand ready to provide advice as well as technical and personal support to those of you who confront the challenges of Wright homeownership. In this area, in particular, we welcome your suggestions as to what communications, services and programs would be of most value and interest to you.

Edith Payne
Guest Editor

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owning and preserving a Wright work of art

For several years now we have been celebrating the 100th anniversary of a number of houses designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Next year we will celebrate the construction of Taliesin, his home and studio in Hillside, Wisconsin. Their longevity, and the continuing interest in owning and preserving these residential structures brings joy, but also can test the dedication of new owners.

The recent acquisition of Wright houses is the theme for this SaveWright, allowing us to celebrate the preservation and renewal of three houses, one over 100 years old and two over 50 years old. Changes by multiple owners, physical condition, and the threat of being torn down were all at play.

Each sympathetic owner came to their house by a different route, with a general interest in architecture, but not necessarily looking to buy a Wright house; the architecture seemed to choose them. For two of the most threatened of these houses, it was the media attention brought through the Conservancy’s Advocacy Committee, plus the potential buyers’ belief that these houses are works of art, that convinced them of the need to save them.

During the research process, the Conservancy was consulted for help in finding preservation architects and technicians and the Frank Lloyd Wright Archive at Taliesin West provided important drawings, correspondence and historic photographs.

The Wright Archive staff is more than willing to help homeowners on any restoration work. They are welcome to make an appointment to visit and look at the drawings and other related materials that would assist in restoration. Copies of working drawings can be provided when required for ongoing work. To make an appointment or request materials, one should contact Oskar Munoz and Margo Stipe directly: omunoz@franklloydwright.org and mstipe@franklloydwright.org.

There is also an extensive oral history collection of both audio and video interviews with original clients, plus contractors and apprentices who worked with them, available upon request from Indira Berndtson; iberndtson@franklloydwright.org.

I am sure many of you will resonate with the joys, challenges and solutions presented in this issue.

Susan Jacobs Lockhart
President,
Frank Lloyd Wright
Building Conservancy
PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF PAUL HARDING, FAIA © 2010.
The Glasner House (1905) in Glencoe, Illinois, with its original facade and color palette.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JACK REED.
Period photo of the Glasner House, circa 1928.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL BADZECZKA AND COURTESY OF THE GLASNER HOUSE.
The Glasner House (1905) in Glencoe, Illinois, with its original facade and color palette.

A Preservation Model: The Glasner House
BY RON SCHERUBEL WITH JACK REED

Perched on the shoulder of a ravine feeding into Lake Michigan north of Chicago, the William A. Glasner House was designed and built by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1905-1906 for an executive of the First National Bank of Chicago and his wife, Cora.

“In it, when you’re on the ravine side, you’re two stories up, unaware of the ground sloping away beneath you. The nearest trees are a couple of arm’s lengths away. I think it’s the best tree house this side of southwestern Pennsylvania,” says Jack Reed, current owner of the Glasner House. “Some squares in the art-glass windows change from green to yellow when the ash and maple trees outside do; the newly unpainted stucco above the horizontal board-and-batten exterior is light gray in dry weather, darker mottled when it’s humid: it’s in the nature of the materials Wright chose for the house to make it harmonize with the changing seasons and the weather.”

While strongly influenced by his Prairie-style motifs, Wright’s design of this house, responding to Cora Glasner’s progressive ideas about running a household without servants in a house without a dining room, made it an early precursor of his Usonian house concept.

The Glasner house has changed ownership five times in its 105 years. The owners for the longest period, architects themselves, held the property for 43 years. They, and numerous other owners, have made changes, “some more imaginative than sympathetic,” says Reed, “but they all helped save the place, let’s remember that.” Preservation groups have also had to help save the residence on more than one occasion. In 1997, the Glasner House was on Landmarks Illinois’ Most Endangered list until a sympathetic buyer was found; and again in 2002-2003 the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy engaged in a widespread publicity campaign to find a preservation-minded new owner.

About the Authors
Ronald L. Scherubel, a native Chicagoan, capped a legal career as vice president and general counsel of the Sara Lee Corporation with service for eight years as the executive director of the Conservancy. He is currently a member of the Conservancy’s board and remains actively involved in its preservation efforts as well as those of other organizations.

Keen on science as a child, Jack Reed graduated from the University of Chicago with a BS in mathematics. However, some courses remaining from Chicago’s famed Great Books-based liberal-arts program more effectively nurtured his interests in aesthetic (and ethical and social) questions. He still lives in Chicago.
In 2003, after developers had already measured the property for the mansion they intended to build after razing the house, a friend sent Reed a Washington Post article chronicling the threat to the house and suggested that he buy and save it.

Reed had a longstanding interest in architecture and had visited and photographed numerous Wright and other modern architects’ works; however, he had never thought of owning and restoring one. “But,” he says, “I considered how it would be to try to save it and compared that to how it would be not even to try, and to see it go down, and that felt like the worse alternative.” Fortunately for the Glasner House, he purchased it just ahead of the developers.

Wright realized where the rewards were here, and he put his house on the edge of the ravine.
Reed had to exercise his preservationist skills even during the negotiations. The seller wanted to remove and keep one of the 50-plus original art-glass windows as a souvenir, but ultimately settled for the glass-top dining table he had had made for the house.

“I intended a faithful restoration of house and site; I had no intention to live in it” says Reed. “I had a good intuition of what would be needed.” And a faithful restoration is what he has accomplished. Some people buy a historic house and attempt to restore it themselves, without professional help from historians or architects. Jack Reed never considered this perhaps less costly alternative. In his view, “People who think they’re just as smart as Wright need to think through why they bought a Wright house in the first place. Do they want to deny themselves the maximum reward?” To assure getting that “maximum reward” from the Glasner House, Reed obtained copies of the original drawings, including a contour map, from the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives. He also sought the highly expert input of historian Jean Guarino and of Vinci|Hamp Architects, Inc., one of Chicago’s top restoration firms. In Reed’s opinion, “No one should think architects are just aesthetes and designers and makers of pretty drawings; it’s part of their job to know who can build it and finish it and make it work. Neither should they think, though, that all architects are equally skilled at restoration.”

Vinci|Hamp brought in experienced, proven specialists to engineer a structural reinforcement system; to analyze and restore surface finishes; to restore (off-site) the art-glass windows, as well as to construct a few new ones; and to provide a mixed radiant and forced-air comfort system (inaudible when running) fed from geothermal wells under the driveway.
The house was so delicately constructed out of two-by-fours—not even two-by-sixes—that overhead tie-rods had been installed across the living room to resist the tendency of the weight of the roof to bow out the living room wall, as well as a beam and post in the downstairs family room to support a sagging floor. Robert Silman Associates, recipient of a Wright Spirit Award for, among other things, designing the structural solution to the sagging cantilevers at Fallingwater, was engaged by Vinci|Hamp to devise a way to slip in several tons of steel to stiffen the structure invisibly, so the additions, so long an eyesore in the living room and below it, could be removed.

Reed had a pretty good idea of what the original kitchen had looked like from drawings and photos, and because the new one, recently installed by former owners, seemed to impose a different style, he gave most of it back to its builder, and constructed a newer one much more like Wright’s original. “Wright’s overall floor plan seemed pretty good to us, too,” explains Reed, “and as the main-floor bathroom came back to
its old location, so did the stairway, although ours is better suited to today’s use by being less steep, and that change helped make the room arrangements downstairs more pleasing as well. We moved some walls down there, none of them original anyway, to get windows out of corners without changing the exterior appearance.”

Now that the restoration of the house is basically complete, the next phase will be outdoors. Landscape architect Stephen Christy has discovered original site contours long lost to extensive leveling and filling. “We’d like to restore all the original contours, remove invasive opportunistic plant species, and plant native species, all in a naturalistic way” says Reed.

The house itself is not the whole picture. In Wright’s words, the result of his work was a building “not on the ground, but of it, each the happier for the other.” A good relationship, in other words. “We can imagine how a conventional architect might have placed a conventional house conventionally, in the middle of the lot, separated from the ravine; but loving nature as he did, Wright realized where the rewards were here, and he put his house on the edge of the ravine instead,” muses Reed. In fact, the ravine was such an attraction that early owners of the house next door proposed to buy and demolish the Glasner house to improve their view of the ravine. Ironically, this beautiful site itself has suffered much remodeling. Part of the ravine has even been filled and leveled to make a patio on the north side of the house and to smooth an area west of it—both changes taming the ravine experience and weakening the relationship of the house with it.

Forty-two feet on the south side of the original lot were sold off to allow the neighbor to enlarge his property, which required the approach drive to be squeezed against the Glasner house. Reed’s future plans call for removing about 100 truckloads of fill to restore the relationship of the house and its site. He is also contemplating the possibility of restoring some of the lost land to the south, allowing him to re-align the driveway away from the house again. It remains to be seen whether financial realities will compromise this phase of the project.

Returning this magnificent one-acre lot, with its 2,500-square-foot house, including two octagonal rooms, three bedrooms, two and one-half baths, and two fireplaces, to its 1906 appearance has not been a quick or inexpensive undertaking. No expense has been spared and no shortcut has been taken to give the house new life and contemporary functionality during
the seven-year project. Reed, a self-described perfectionist, confesses: “I don’t remember insisting on fully estimating and properly budgeting the project before starting it. I’ll never do this again, but I’d like to think I’d do that part better.”

With all of its surprises, problems, solutions, headaches and joys, Reed has no regrets about having undertaken such a thorough restoration of this previously unsung Wright house. “Never looking to do this in the first place, I must say that on the one hand it’s been something of a distraction of attention and other resources from more basic interests, but on the other hand, the results, not to mention meeting the capable and enthusiastic people I have, have been rewarding.” Not sentimental about parting with the house, and in keeping with his strong preservation orientation, Reed hopes that his meticulous restoration work will entice someone to become as good a residential steward of the property as he has been in resuscitating it. He does intend to protect the Glasner House in perpetuity with a preservation easement: “…as comprehensive an easement as possible, indoors and out, to protect all this good work, and make it possible for others to have the experience here pure, undiluted, and strong. Then we’ll see whether we can find someone to live in it and love it.”
This past July a three-day jazz festival was held at the 1955 Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Turkel House in the Palmer Woods neighborhood of Detroit, Michigan. Homeowners Dale Morgan and Norman Silk, founders and proprietors of Blossoms, a floral business in nearby Birmingham, hosted nearly 500 people at the event that benefited the neighborhood in which the house stands. Although music was a draw, many attendees came for the architecture and to experience the recently restored house—Wright’s sole building within Detroit’s city limits. Unquestionably, the house has become a distinctive architectural feature of Palmer Woods and a source of community pride. But for some years, this wasn’t the case.

The house was designed for Dorothy Turkel who, with her four children, moved into the house in February of 1958. It is the only realized two-story example of Wright’s Usonian Automatic designs. The automatics were a later variation on the theme of the Usonian house, Wright’s answer to the problem of a house of modest cost suitable for an American lifestyle, of which the 1936 Jacobs I House in Madison, Wisconsin, was the first built exemplar. The Usonian Automatic was a concept Wright created in the 1950s to reduce construction costs and the need for expensive unionized labor. “With the limited budget of a G.I. you cannot pay a plasterer, mason, bricklayer, carpenter, etc., 29 dollars a day...” Wright explained in The Natural House (1954). Instead, for the automatics, Wright proposed a construction system of precast concrete blocks joined by horizontal and vertical reinforcing rods that (conceivably) homeowners could affordably fabricate and assemble themselves on site. Ultimately, the 4,000-square foot, L-shaped Turkel house—which required hundreds of blocks in more than three-dozen different shapes and types—cost more than $65,000 to build.
Loretta Benbow purchased the house in 1978 and succeeded in securing local historic designation as the Turkel-Benbow Historic District, which, down the road, would protect the house from owner demolition. The house is also listed on the State of Michigan Register of Historic Homes. Following Benbow’s departure several years later, the house passed to a series of owners, including Thomas Monaghan, founder of Domino’s Pizza and owner of the Detroit Tigers, who never lived in the house. Eventually, the house endured a period of neglect, deterioration and vandalization that resulted in foreclosure. By the spring of 2006, the situation was dire, prompting the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy to publicize the building’s plight in the BULLETIN and to urgently seek “preservation-minded” buyers.

As 25-year residents of Palmer Woods with a particular interest in historic homes, Morgan and Silk knew of the house and its provenance and were worried about its future. “No one was looking at the house seriously—people would visit it and walk around it, but few knew of its significance as a Wright house,” Morgan said. Even fewer “talked about it in a respectful way,” he added. Instead, people discussed “the changes they would make, the walls they would rip out and the parts they would tear down.” Concerned that an unsympathetic buyer could disrespectfully—and irrevocably—alter the house, they purchased it in June 2006.

As veterans of the restoration and renovation of a series of historic homes over the years, Morgan and Silk had few illusions about the enormity of the research, labor and costs associated with the project they were about to undertake. Nor did they view the purchase of the house as an investment, realizing the financial outlay and return would probably be a wash. Instead, it was their interest in Wright as an artist that convinced them to buy the house. “It was like buying an extremely rare and unusual antique,” Morgan explained. “We always buy a house with a story behind it.”

Before Morgan and Silk did anything, they “digested” the house by simply experiencing it for a while.

Then they did their homework. They contacted the Detroit Historic District Commission to gain information about their property, suggestions regarding how to proceed with its restoration and names of organizations and experts to assist them. The Commission put them in touch with architect Lawrence Brink, principal of Lawrence R. Brink Associates of Dexter, Michigan, a former Taliesin apprentice and Conservancy board member, who had worked on other historic properties in the area. Brink, in turn, worked with Silk and Morgan to find a general contractor. A cabinetmaker and other skilled craftspeople from the Detroit area were chosen to work on the house. Although all were accomplished professionals in their respective fields, only Brink had experience with Wright-designed architecture.

They also contacted the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives in Scottsdale, Arizona, to ascertain what original material was held in the collection. The search revealed drawings; a specification book that detailed materials and finishes; furniture plans for the three coffee tables and twelve hassocks, which had disappeared from the house long ago—an original set sold at Sotheby’s in 2008 for $78,000; and correspondence between Turkel and Wright. Among the surprises they discovered was that Wright agreed all trim on the 16 exterior steel doors and numerous small operable windows could be painted “robin’s egg blue,” after receiving a letter from apprentice Robert Pond requesting the color be used.
Major challenges faced the restoration team. None of the mechanical systems—including air conditioning, which was original to the house—functioned and the house had been without a working furnace for two years. A leaking roof had allowed extensive water infiltration that compromised the wiring and contributed to structural damage to the carport. Numerous concrete blocks on the exterior of the house needed repair or replacement. Although Wright had specified interior concrete blocks were to be left natural, a previous owner or owners had painted them butter yellow with a penetrating sealer primer—a problem that would prove to be irreversible. Over the years, all the Philippine mahogany cabinetry and built-ins in the house had suffered sun damage and required refinishing, as did the tinted red concrete exterior terrace, balcony and steps.

An overarching concern of the team was that all system updates and structural repairs not compromise Wright’s original design for the house. Decisions were made, often at additional expense, to minimize or conceal the visual impact of heating, plumbing and electrical upgrades.

Morgan and Silk thought carefully about the question of “restoration” versus “renovation.” They recognized the house’s significance as Wright’s only realized two-story Usonian Automatic and resolved to “return it to its 1955 midcentury appearance.” At the same time, the men wanted to make their home suitable for 21st century living. “The question we asked was, how can we take the house back to what it was and allow for modern living?” Silk said. “We believe if Wright were designing the house today, he probably would have incorporated modern amenities in it,” he reasoned.

The kitchen, which featured out-of-date appliances, including an above-counter refrigerator, an antique Thermidor oven (now in storage) and vintage St. Charles cabinets that had been stripped of their original steel doors, required a complete remodel. New cabinets inspired by the original Philippine mahogany work island cabinets were produced for the updated kitchen. Although Philippine mahogany is no longer readily available, an enterprising contractor located a log of the wood in Kentucky and fashioned veneered plywood with which to build the cabinets. An original wooden ceiling treatment was duplicated to cover new mechanical systems. Although the floor plan remains the same, the space now offers modern appliances and conveniences, just as it did in 1955.

For the restoration of the music room, the spacious central living area of the house, a period photograph provided by a member of the Turkel family guided Morgan and Silk in their efforts. The soaring space with 15-foot ceilings now boasts refinished and reupholstered Philippine mahogany built-ins and reproduction coffee tables and hassocks produced from the original Wright plans.

In the upstairs “L” of the house Morgan and Silk employed a creative solution to re-conceive the use of five original bedrooms. As built, two bedrooms included private baths, while three others shared a bathroom. However, the bathrooms were not realized as Wright specified. Instead, Turkel chose pink and blue over Wright’s white fixtures and tile rather than wood surrounding the tub. Without removing any walls, Morgan and Silk “repurposed” three bedrooms as a master suite. One bedroom is now the master bedroom, another bedroom became a walk-in closet that incorporated existing built-ins and a third bedroom became a master bath with new cabinetry patterned after existing cabinetry in the house. The original master bedroom and bath and second family bedroom remain unchanged. Where new hardware was needed, Morgan and Silk selected the same style as originally used, but opted for polished chrome, instead of the polished brass used on existing cabinets, to mark the distinction between new and the old.
Although much has been accomplished, much remains to be done. The last major project is the repair of the sagging carport roof, which has been temporarily shored up with steel beams and support posts to prevent further structural damage. Morgan and Silk estimate it will cost $50,000 to fix the problem. Corrections to the new roof are also needed.

A red-tinted concrete terrace originally designed by Wright but never built will contribute an additional 1,000 square feet of outdoor living space. According to Silk, the gardens are “75 percent complete.” For the main garden of the house, Morgan and Silk favor the unstructured look of grasses and natural mass perennial plantings. Landscape architect Richard Hass, of Stewart Hass & Associates LC in Eastpointe, Michigan, has been hired to design a perennial garden for this section. But another portion of the lot will feature “rooms and spaces including a hedged sculpture garden.” The men hope to offer this space to local artists as a venue to display their sculptural works and to hold receptions. “It’s close to the street, so people could see the artists’ work. We like the idea of fostering the arts,” Silk explained.

Morgan and Silk’s reclamation and restoration of the house, coupled with their generosity in opening their home and gardens to a host of organizations for their charitable and fundraising events, has transformed the Turkel House from a derelict and endangered property to a well-known neighborhood landmark. “We are amazed at how much interest there is in the house,” says Silk. “We receive many requests to see the house from students of Wright’s architecture, to people in town for conventions who are curious about the house.” Recently, two visitors—violinists with the Saint Louis Philharmonic—asked to see the house and thanked their hosts by playing an impromptu concert in the music room.

Perhaps one of the reasons they welcome so many to the house is that “we don’t like to leave it because it’s very Zen and calming,” Morgan explained. We prefer people to come to us. The longer you are in the house, the more you appreciate the simplicity and purity of Wright’s design.”

Morgan and Silk believe these qualities are particularly evident at night, when the interior lighting of the music room illuminates the house like a glowing lantern. Apparently others agree. Upon experiencing the effect, a recent visitor remarked, “I’m an atheist, but this is the closest to a God-like experience that I could ever imagine.”
Making a Wright House a Home: Restoration of the Richardson House

BY EDITH PAYNE

Although I lived for many years in the northern suburbs of Chicago within spitting distance of many Wright-designed houses, I was not raised to be a Wright aficionado.

My parents, persons of Wright’s era, at least in part, were concerned by the usual: the apprentice system, the scandal, the lack of a formal education. In contrast, my husband, an architecture buff from the outset, became a fan of Wright immediately upon seeing the Usonian Exhibition House, temporarily constructed at the Museum of Modern Art. His enthusiasm never waned.

In any case, when the Wright house in our town in New Jersey came on the market, my husband was intrigued. We saw it on a clear February morning, with the usual response. We signed a purchase contract within two weeks of that first visit.

As background, our house, designed in 1941 and built in 1951, has a hexagonal module, and thus has only 120- and 60-degree angles throughout. It has just two right angles, with which we challenge school-age visitors. Its design is somewhat unusual, in that the bedrooms radiate spoke-like from a central “loggia,” as Wright called it, rather than being in-line as in many Usonians. Furthermore, the living room has 19 full-length French doors, and, because of the multiple doors, none of the usual built-in banquettes. The living room, from the exterior, is prow-like, and was designed for a steeper site with patios on either side of the prow, enclosed by relatively high brick walls. However, the original homeowners, Betty and Stuart Richardson, asked Wright to eliminate one of the walls so it would be possible to look into the yard while sitting inside—a sensible, albeit non-architectural solution. By far the most arresting feature of the house is created by an inverted truss that supports the flat roof over the living...
room. And, as anyone familiar with bridge design can
tell you, an inverted truss has a considerable down-
ward mass. Ours is clad in cypress, as is the rest of
the house, where it is not brick (hand-cut because of
the geometry), so that the truss resembles an inverted
pyramid the entire dimension of which is the same as
that of the room. Hanging an inverted Christmas tree
from the point of the inverted pyramid has always
been a goal of my children.

At the time we moved into the house, the radiant
heating system had failed. The furnace had been
removed, and heat was supplied by glaringly white
electric panels, installed on every available wood sur-
face. The effect was repellant, and the heating cost was
enormous. The house had a new roof, albeit not one
of lasting value. Otherwise, cosmetic restoration had
been undertaken by the prior owner, who never lived
in the house but used it for parties. None of the sig-
ificant problems with the house had been addressed,
including cantilevers that resembled the nose of the
Concorde at rest and a GE “kitchen of the future” in
brilliantly white metal that had been installed for free
by GE when the house was built in the hopes that it
would offer advertising possibilities. It did not. At the
time, the Richardsons were unable to afford something
that was Wright-designed. Betty Richardson always
regretted their compromise.

Our behavior in purchasing the house was not, howev-
er, entirely foolish, even given the fact that we are both
state employees (my husband was a law professor;
I am an appellate judge) and our combined income
could charitably be deemed modest. We contacted the
Conservancy (whose WRIGHT ON THE MARKET had
led to our initial interest) and through its referral,
contacted a respected Wright architect in the area,
who gave us a good idea of what we could expect in
terms of restoration, which was a lot.

Our initial focus was on the heating system. Consider-
able detective work went into the task of determining
where the leaks were that had rendered the system in-
operative. Under the guidance of Lawrence and Sharon
Tarantino, of Tarantino Studio, who have shepherded
our restoration endeavors, we purchased a wall-hung
Monitor furnace with a flash water heater and recon-
nected the heating system to see how bad things were.
Eventually, Frankie the leak man, an employee of a
local sewer authority, brought in a giant stethoscope,
which was instrumental in locating the worst of the
problems. We discovered as well that a cat is a good
detector, curling up contentedly on the spot below
which warm water is leaking.

After jack-hammering two hexagons in the living
room, a portion of the system was repaired, and for
several years, we lived in relative comfort, until the
system failed entirely. The cure: removing all the built-in cabinetry, jack hammering up the entire floor, digging down four feet, replacing the plumbing and heating, and then recasting the concrete floor using the methods that Wright had utilized, including the Colorundum final layer. The experience taught us that modern workmen, however skilled, are unfamiliar with Wright’s techniques and therefore must be carefully supervised to ensure a satisfactory result.

An additional challenge was the white kitchen, not only because it was ugly and falling apart, but also because it raised restoration challenges, being part of the original fabric, albeit far from a Wright design. We struggled with whether we should restore the existing cabinets or start anew. We eventually chose the latter course, and have thereafter adopted the philosophy that, unless truly original and unique, kitchens and bathrooms deserve to be modernized. The remainder merits as authentic a restoration as possible, with any additions designed in a fashion that makes them easily removable.

In figuring out what to do next, we consulted Wright’s original plans for the house, which fortunately had been kept, although not in archival conditions, in our town’s building department. We now have copies, which are invaluable. However, they did not include a kitchen design. The Tarantinos therefore stepped in, and the result was a new design in cypress plywood with Miele appliances. Betty Richardson, who returned to the house after the kitchen had been reconstructed, gave it her approval.

Our additional projects have included installing steel in the two sagging cantilevers; reinstalling bookshelves that had not been properly aligned with the battens of the board-and-batten interior and had been supported on L-braces; refinishing portions of the exterior using a Sikkens coating system; removing obtrusive air conditioners and replacing the cut-out patterned panels they defaced; performing a roof-ectomy to replace all cypress existing above the vertical walls (yes, cypress is available from wood brokers and some lumber yards) as well as re-engineering the contours of the flat roof and rebuilding it; refurbishing one bathroom; and restoring and recreating skylights. Our most recent project was the construction of a corten steel and brick fence at the front of the property to replace a sagging and architecturally incompatible stockade one.

My advice? First, unless you have all the time in the world and abundant research skills, find an expert to work with. The Conservancy is a good resource to use in locating one. If you are interested in the history of your house, Taliesien and the Getty Museum have considerable archives. The Tarantinos were able to get the correspondence relating to our house from the Getty for $15, a bargain. Spend time finding the craftspeople that you will need for restoration work. In our area, where few Wright houses exist, it is not possible to find people who are experienced in working with his houses. However, you will want to find someone with an appreciation for the materials and
techniques that he employed and a love of architecture. Wright houses present construction difficulties. Whomever you hire must be willing to relatively cheerfully meet those difficulties, many of which are utterly unexpected and time-consuming.

I also suggest that you take a long look at whether the house that you have fallen in love with is the right one for your lifestyle. For instance, think whether you would be able to accommodate small children in the house. Children have lived in our house, which is a mere 1,800 square feet and is probably more fragile than the average residence. (We found the name of the daughter of a prior owner scratched in the cypress of a bathroom, and scuffs abound.) However, my sense is that the house more comfortably accommodates two adults. Are you collectors, and if so, where will you store your stuff? Recognize that your furniture is unlikely to be compatible with a Wright house, and particularly with a Usonian. There were virtually no furniture designs on our plans; we opted for Italian modern and Japanese pieces we had as a result of living in that country.

Also, think out the finances of Wright homeownership realistically. We paid a “market” price for our house. When the money we have put into it is added to that price, the total is far more that I will ever realize by selling it. Resign yourself to that fact, if your numbers resemble mine.

Finally, get to know the Wright community. Those who purchase or appreciate Wright houses are on the whole a stimulating group of architecture enthusiasts who are most generous with advice and fellowship. My husband met the Richardson’s daughter and son-in-law at his first Conservancy Conference in Seattle. They have become treasured friends, and through them we have had the opportunity to meet and entertain Betty Richardson and to tap her knowledge and advice.

In conclusion, what can I say? As this piece reflects, the ownership of a Wright house is a challenge, but it is for many, including me and my husband, a transformative one. I can only say that, for us, the house that Mr. Wright designed has become a home that provides immeasurable pleasure, solace, and true comfort. I hope as you experience your own Wright house that you will come to agree.
Valuing and Pricing Wright Houses: General Principles

By Leo Koonmen

At the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, an important part of our mission is to help facilitate the sale of Wright-designed homes to buyers who not only appreciate the wonderful design qualities of these great houses, but also who are willing and able to serve as long-term custodians via ongoing maintenance and eventual sale to like-minded buyers. By doing so, the purchasers ensure that these houses are preserved for the enjoyment and appreciation of future generations. Given that the newest of the houses designed by Wright is now 50 years old, and with Wright’s earliest designs dating from the early 1890s (nearly 120 years ago), this aspect of our mission is becoming increasingly important in the preservation of Wright’s architecture.

The WRIGHT ON THE MARKET section of the Conservancy’s website helps to connect Wright buyers and sellers as well as to encourage sale transactions among preservation-minded parties. At any given time, there are 15 to 20 Wright-designed houses listed for sale in WRIGHT ON THE MARKET. These houses are located across the entire United States, with current listings spread out from Manchester, New Hampshire, to Pasadena, California, and down the Gulf Coast in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. As would be expected, there is a strong concentration of houses for sale in the northern Midwest, given the preponderance of Wright’s work in that region. The houses listed on WRIGHT ON THE MARKET also represent a wide spectrum in terms of pricing (currently ranging from $169,000 to $5.6 million in asking prices), size, land area, and condition.

The WRIGHT ON THE MARKET forum thus provides us with a helpful, up-to-date snapshot of the current market for Wright’s houses across the country. We are first contacted when the homes are initially listed, and when they sell we celebrate their removal from the active for sale list. Through our advocacy programs, we are also in regular dialogue with several Wright homeowners about issues of preservation and valuation. As a result of these initiatives, we have a very good national perspective on the issues affecting the selling of houses designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. And this perspective now extends over 20 years of sale activity.

Recent Wright Home Sales

Leo Koonmen is a board member and serves on the executive committee as the Conservancy’s treasurer. He is a commercial real estate investment manager and consultant. He received his undergraduate degree from Columbia University and his MBA from the University of Chicago. A resident of Chicago, Leo is also a long-time active docent at Frank Lloyd Wright’s Robie House.

In considering the sales of Wright-designed houses, we have noticed some interesting, but related, recent trends: 1) Issues concerning the valuation of Wright-designed houses are beginning to arise more often; 2) Wright-designed properties tend to remain on the market for longer periods of time; and 3) The appetites of prospective buyers to take on large-scale restorations are diminishing. These three issues are, of course, all directly related to the state of the national economy, and particularly, continued weakness in virtually all residential real estate markets. And the majority of Wright-designed houses currently on the market are priced in the luxury segment of the market, i.e., at asking prices of $1 million or higher, a category that has been particularly hard hit in this recent real estate downturn. However, if we put the national economic and larger market conditions aside for the purpose of this discussion, we think there are still some fundamental and relevant observations that can be shared that might be helpful to those who are considering the sale of their Wright-designed properties.

**The Wright House Relative to the Market: Establishing a Premium**

Every buyer would like to secure premium pricing when selling property. Qualitatively, it is certainly not difficult to attribute a premium to living in a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. The many attributes that make living in a Wright house a special experience can surely be appreciated by homeowners on a day-to-day basis. Indeed, many homeowners will confirm the notion that living in a Wright-designed house enhances their lives and even their physical health, and they have the longevity to prove it! And with minimal guidance, prospective buyers can appreciate these same attributes when touring the houses. Wright's houses tend to be located in some of the most desirable neighborhoods and dramatic physical environments in the United States. Then too, there is also the cachet of being among the small group of homeowners who possess a work of architecture designed by America's premier name architect.

It is for these legitimate qualitative reasons that Wright homeowners often introduce their properties for sale at pricing that represents a significant premium to the local market.

But it is more challenging to demonstrate a quantitative premium in pricing and selling a Wright-designed house. By demonstrate, we mean to confirm, via actual completed sales (not asking prices or anecdotes), that premium pricing was achieved for a Wright house relative to local market pricing for a comparable house in terms of location, house size, land area and condition. It is these quantifiable attributes of location, size, land area, and condition that truly dictate the market value of a house. And ultimately the value of the house must be confirmed via an appraisal.

**The Importance of the Appraisal**

The initial step in the sale process is for the seller and buyer to agree on price and execute a contract of sale for the property. But there remain some important steps necessary to the closing of the sale. Virtually all properties sold today will be financed, with a lender providing a loan for 80 percent to 90 percent of the purchase price (with the balance of the purchase price being equity provided by the buyer). To provide the financing, the lender will require an appraisal of the property to confirm its market value. It is important that this valuation appraise out at the agreed sale price, or there could be implications for how the sale proceeds, including the potential for re-pricing the transaction at a lower sale price. In the current environment of restricted access to financing, the appraisal is thus becoming an important arbiter of value in the
sale, and not merely a step to be checked off as part of the transaction process. It might be helpful to look at the basics of a residential appraisal.

The need for appraisals arises from the fact that no two properties are exactly alike, and the differences between properties create differences in value.

So far, this is all potentially good news for the owner of a distinctive house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. But the goal of the appraisal process is to determine, quantitatively, the value of the property via three independent approaches.

The appraiser will then reconcile the three estimates generated by these three approaches to reach a final appraised value. The outcome of this appraisal process is market value.

Differing Perspectives of Sellers and Buyers

As is clear above, the appraiser has unfortunately very little latitude to directly account for the qualitative attributes of a given property. Further, there is limited scope to take into account the investment a homeowner may have made in the form of additional restoration or renovation beyond the original purchase price.

Given the various approaches employed by appraisers, the determination of market value is not simply driven by original purchase price plus restoration cost. Put another way, it is not a build-up equation that reflects original basis plus subsequent investment plus carrying costs during ownership. Yet this is a concept of valuation and pricing we have seen employed by sellers in the pricing of Wright-designed houses.

On the other hand, the buyer will approach the transaction using a residual type of equation that begins with what is the property’s achievable price on the market today (market value) and then subtracts any additional costs necessary to bring that house up to a market standard (for repairs, renovations, restorations). The remaining difference is what the buyer can logically spend to acquire the house today. It is therefore critical, from the buyer’s perspective, to acquire the house at a basis appropriately low enough.
to support the cost of the additional restoration work, while ending up at a total investment that relates to the house’s current market value.

One solution, from the seller’s perspective, is to commission an independent appraisal prior to placing the home on the market. (We often make this recommendation to Wright homeowners). This is a different exercise, and is a more formal process than requesting sale price estimates from local real estate brokers. It might also be helpful to have estimates for any additional work the house requires, prior to engaging the buyer in a discussion of these same costs, as the buyer will be approaching these costs as deductions from the sale price. It is important to have estimated these costs in advance.

Of course, offering a fully restored house to the market simplifies this discussion dramatically. But offering a fully restored house is important for another reason. It is in line with what today’s buyer is consistently seeking: a completed or finished house, not a project that will require years of restoration.

**Market Value vs. Sale Price**

It is important to recognize the difference between market value and price. Simply put, the former is more objective than the latter, which may be subjective in its determination. There can be many reasons why a prospective buyer places a higher price on a given property than its market value calls for. It is up to the seller (and his/her selling agent) to identify those attributes most likely to generate this premium, and to then identify a buyer who appreciates those same attributes.

**How can the Wright homeowner maximize sale price in the current environment?**

1. Commission an independent appraisal of the house prior to placing the house on the market. Become familiar with the sale prices for homes that have sold in the immediate area. Be realistic on initial pricing, with a strong grasp of prices for houses of similar size, location and condition in the immediate area. All real estate is ultimately local; the guiding rule for pricing is to gather and review actual sale comparables of similar houses located in the same area.

2. If the house is appropriately priced, then it should remain on the market for a period of time consistent with that of appropriately priced homes in the same area. The goal is to avoid protracted listing periods, which are time-consuming for all involved, and almost always work to the detriment of the seller in the final price that is achieved. If a house is mispriced by more than 20 percent (i.e., higher) relative to its market value, it may take a long time (a period increasingly measured in years) for the house to sell.

3. In today’s market, the condition of the home is very important. Not only will a fully restored home limit the negotiations with the buyer over the costs of restoration required, it also will greatly simplify and speed the sale. And in today’s market, prospective buyers have little patience (or available capital) to take on projects requiring major restoration.

We hope these observations are helpful to homeowners. Our objective is to demonstrate to prospective owners of Wright houses, via a steady volume of successfully completed sales posted on WRIGHT ON THE MARKET, that owning a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright can be as financially rewarding as it is aesthetically appealing.
Selling a Frank Lloyd Wright House: My Experience with the Brandes House

BY DEBORAH VICK

I enjoyed the experience of living in the Brandes House in Issaquah, Washington, for more than 25 years. Frank Lloyd Wright designed the house in 1952 for Ray Brandes, my father-in-law, a general contractor, who also built the house.

I confess that I did not know who Wright was when I was introduced to the house (my background was in mathematics and tax law). During the intervening years I had the opportunity to begin sorting through the facts and the legends about the genius architect; stories about leaking roofs and Wright’s tendency to lead a wayward life. Some or all of the stories may be true, to one extent or another. But the life-changing elements extend far beyond such trivia. Fielding the many queries we received about the man and his reputation actually added to the delight of sharing the house with many, many visitors. The queries also played a role in marketing the building.

We had to learn how to anticipate questions and inform and educate realtors and potential purchasers. It became important to acknowledge the well-known impressions and to put them in perspective for realtors and potential buyers. Marketing a Wright house is not like marketing any other house, nor, I suspect, like marketing any other historic house. Our house was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and we had chosen to place a preservation and conservation easement—one of the first given to the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy—on the house a number of years previously. The consequences of this will be discussed later.

Many people believe that educating a realtor, especially one with considerable experience, to appreciate an historic building is a simple task. We found that not to be the case. We spent a great deal of time explaining the ins and outs of the Wright mystique to our realtor. But we still found immensely valuable the assistance of a local person...
who could speak independently with serious prospects about the intricate details of the house, the architect and the easement. We were fortunate to have a well-informed member of the Conservancy, familiar with the house, who was willing to meet with prospective buyers and serve as an independent source to verify information and act as an impartial interpreter of these complexities.

In choosing a realtor, our initial steps and concerns were not unique. We interviewed prospective realtors with an eye to finding someone who had national and international market presence, experience with historic and/or architecturally significant buildings, and experience with and access to buyers in the appropriate economic sphere.

We were also particular about assuring the listing agent’s willingness and ability to be accountable regarding marketing efforts, both national and international, and to report on the feedback that was received. Because the Brandes House was the first Wright house to go on the market in Washington State, we found there was interest from the media. This resulted in several newspaper articles and one television piece that was replayed a number of times. An effective realtor should know that the media may be interested and possess the appropriate media connections.

We also chose to create a website devoted to the house and its history. This brought additional attention to the house and allowed us to provide more information than is usually available on a real estate website. We chose to include photos, a detailed house history and a bibliography of all the publications that had discussed the house. This added substance to the listing and was a helpful additional resource for the realtors.

From the beginning, the Brandes House was listed on the Conservancy’s website under WRIGHT ON THE MARKET. Although we insisted that our realtor advertise the house thoroughly, our listing agreement stated that that if the buyer came via WRIGHT ON THE MARKET, the agent’s fee would be reduced. In the end, two of the three most serious potential buyers—including the final purchaser—learned of the house through the Conservancy’s website! We believe that WRIGHT ON THE MARKET may well be a far underappreciated asset of the Conservancy.

Setting the price for one of these houses is a challenge, and establishing a realistic value can be an emotional process.

Setting the price for one of these houses is a challenge, and establishing a realistic value can be an emotional process. We all treasure these beautiful buildings and believe that Wright was indeed a unique genius. The challenge is how to put a price tag on that genius while also accounting for the age of the building, its location and condition. There is a tendency to over-value the Wright factor. We were tempted to do this ourselves and, in the end, reduced the price twice before finding the correct one. Once we found that price, we had several offers in a matter of weeks.

Many people fear that being on the National Register or having a preservation and conservation easement
will, somehow, reduce the value of the house and/or make it more difficult to sell. We found this to be completely untrue! To some extent the reverse may have been true. Why? I believe that the historic listing and the easement provided evidence that the building was held in high regard and considered an important example of the architect’s work. The realtor understood this, and yet I think it possible that buyers may have believed, somewhat logically, that looking after the seller’s interests required the realtor to minimize the potential impact of these listings. They may well have taken the same view of our explanation; we were, after all, trying to sell the building. This was an opportunity for our Conservancy member friend to talk about these aspects of the property, as well as the excitement of being part of the Conservancy and the overall Wright community, in a manner that was independent. Our realtor later acknowledged the value of the Conservancy member’s contribution to the process. Because our friend was intimately familiar with our home, he was also able to effectively communicate the value of the experience of living in a work of art. He was also able to point out features and perspectives that the realtors—despite all of the time taken to educate them, simply did not have an innate feel for.

We also had an extensive collection of client letters, construction photos, copies of original plans and copies of various articles about the house that made for a small, but nonetheless, impressive archive of information. This was valuable to the new owner, as was our list of contractors, maintenance people and consultants to whom they could turn as they contemplated learning their way around the intricacies of owning and maintaining an important Wright building. I am happy to report we found a sensitive buyer who we believe will love, respect and protect our treasure into the future and who I believe will become an enthusiastic participant in Conservancy functions. As a result of these initiatives, we have a very good national perspective on the issues affecting the selling of houses designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. And this perspective now extends over 20 years of sale activity.
The Conservancy As a Resource for Homeowners

BY EDITH PAYNE AND JOHN THORPE

Since its founding, the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy has been dedicated to preventing the destruction of Wright’s architecture and to assisting Wright homeowners in rehabilitating and conserving their Wright structures.

In that connection, numerous articles have been published in the Conservancy’s BULLETIN* that address various preservation and rehabilitation concerns. An index of those articles is available on the Conservancy’s website (www.savewright.org), and back issues may be purchased from the Conservancy. Individual articles can be provided electronically to Wright homeowners who are members upon request.

The Conservancy has also established a Homeowners’ Committee that will actively work to offer its support, advice and expertise to those who have purchased or are contemplating the purchase of a Wright home. News and information will be posted on the Conservancy’s website and meetings are held at the yearly Conservancy conference.

In addition, the Conservancy has formed an Architectural Advisory Committee, currently chaired by restoration architect John G. Thorpe and Patrick J. Mahoney, AIA. Thorpe has long been involved in the rehabilitation of Wright structures in the Midwest; Mahoney centers his activities in the Buffalo, New York, area.

When an inquiry is made to the Conservancy office, staff members can frequently provide an immediate response. A more complex or technical inquiry will be referred to the co-chairs of the Architectural Advisory Committee, who will conduct brief research on the building in question and either answer the inquiry directly or refer it to committee members with known expertise in the matter at issue for advice or for referral to a local architect. The committee is comprised of members with extensive architectural experience with the various styles of Wright houses; with knowledge of housing exterior and interior finishes and elements such as floors, heating and roofs; and with knowledge of furnishings and textiles.

*Editor’s note: The BULLETIN is no longer published by the Conservancy. SaveWright is the successor publication.
In answering questions, committee members utilize their experience as well as references such as the Conservancy’s “Guidelines for the Conservation of Frank Lloyd Wright Properties,” which is based on the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, and its “Guidelines for the Conservation of Frank Lloyd Wright Decorative Arts.” The Conservancy also recommends the Preservation Briefs and Local Preservation Briefs published by the National Park Service and available through the Oklahoma Historical Society/State Historical Preservation Office at www.okhistory.org/shpo/presbriefs.htm.

Most questions are resolved through an exchange of telephone calls and emails. If necessary, committee members request photographs or additional information to resolve the issue presented. However, a homeowner should keep in mind that the committee members act in an advisory capacity only, and not as substitutes for local architects or contractors with whom the homeowner may establish professional contractual relationships. For that reason, committee members generally do not conduct site visits and they usually do not take on inquiring homeowners as clients. Instead, they attempt to refer the homeowner to a local architect known to have experience with Wright or other preservation work, or to the Historic Resources Committee of the closest chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

While the committee is equipped to offer valuable advice to homeowners, individuals may also wish to utilize the resources of the Wright Archives at Taliesin West, individual state historic preservation offices, the regional offices of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, state and local preservation groups such as Preservation Chicago or Landmarks Illinois, local historic preservation commissions, the Historic Resources Committee of the nearest chapter of the AIA, and owners of nearby or similar Wright structures. The Conservancy always recommends seeking out a nearby restoration architect who is knowledgeable about local codes, contractors, suppliers, and building officials.
Achieving the mission to preserve the remaining structures of Frank Lloyd Wright would not be possible without the stewardship provided by the owners of Wright-designed houses. According to calculations by Conservancy board member and restoration architect John Thorpe, of the approximately 380 remaining Wright buildings, 70 percent or 268 are privately owned and still function with the purpose for which they were designed—as private residences. The owners who restore, maintain and preserve these structures with care, sensitivity, and often with very significant financial investments, have our admiration and encouragement. Houses whose current owners are either unwilling or physically or financially unable to take care of their distinctive houses are a great concern. Neglected structures that deteriorate greatly become targets for demolition.

Happily, it seems that many Wright houses have found owners who deeply appreciate their very special qualities and who shoulder the responsibility to maintain and protect them. Many but not all Wright homeowners are Conservancy members, and we invite all of them to join us! The collective preservation motivation, the insights and the individual experiences of Wright building owners are invaluable ingredients in our mix of resources. Beyond our educational programs for all types of members, homeowners have access to preliminary technical services consultations and referrals, and the Conservancy offers Wright homeowners a framework for camaraderie and communication with other owners who share their passion and understand their challenges.

Over a glass of wine at a homeowners-only gathering during our last annual conference in Cincinnati, we discussed how communications among them might be enhanced to be of greater benefit to the owners. We also discussed how owners can help the Conservancy. A few owners described their response when they answer a knock at the door or when approached by groups requesting a tour: the price of admission is a donation to the Conservancy or a commitment to become a member.

We are grateful that many Wright homeowners, while treasuring their special private spaces, generously share those spaces, from time to time, with us and with others. Bravo and thank you!

Janet Halstead
Executive Director,
Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy
Cleveland and Northeast Ohio
Saturday, April 9, 2011

COME TO CLEVELAND and experience Frank Lloyd Wright’s lasting legacy in Northeast Ohio. Highlights of the spring Out and About Wright will include three Usonian/mid-century gems:

Dobkins House (1953)
Penfield House (1953)
Staley House (1950)

There will also be a special reception for Leadership Circle members at the Weltzheimer-Johnson House (1948) on Friday, April 8, 2011.

Out and About participants receive a special rate at the Hyatt Regency Cleveland, set within one of Cleveland’s National Historic Landmarks—The Arcade, a Victorian era five-story iron and glass shopping court.


Frank Lloyd Wright’s work is sometimes viewed in stalwart opposition to that of his East Coast contemporaries, who are cast variously as conservatives resisting modernity or as Europhiles dazzled by the latest fashions crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Philadelphia, with its rich history in progressive American architecture and design, provides a splendid vantage point for the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy to reconsider that view at its 2011 annual meeting.

Conference participants will spend their mornings discussing the works of Frank Lloyd Wright in the shadow of Independence Hall before boarding buses for afternoon tours of some of the region’s most exceptional architectural works of the 20th century. Highlights of the three days of touring will include the magnificent Beth Sholom Synagogue (1953-1959) and the Suntop Homes (1938-1939), a grouping of four Usonians intended to provide a model of affordable suburban housing throughout the country, largely based on the Broadacre City Project (1929-1935). Pre- and post-conference tour options will also be offered.

This year’s conference will be headquartered at the Sheraton Society Hill, situated in one of Philadelphia’s most historic neighborhoods and steps away from Independence Hall and Center City.