

Frank Lloyd Wright Houses – Taliesin, Fallingwater and Kentuck Knob

Frances Folsom

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, February 2011

“America’s other great artists – our best painters, sculptors, composers – don’t really rank with the tops of all time. They’re just not Rembrandt, or Michelangelo or Beethoven. Frank Lloyd Wright alone had that kind of standing. By common consent of those qualified to judge, he’s among the greatest architects who ever practiced.” Robert Campbell, Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic



To say that Frank Lloyd Wright pushed the outside of the envelope when it came to architecture is putting it mildly. The man was a genius far ahead of his time with his designs. He believed in integrating nature and architecture. During his long career Wright designed over 1,100 houses, office buildings, schools, churches, synagogues and museums. His most famous works are the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, the Johnson Wax Administration Building in Racine, Wisconsin and the Marin County Civic Center in San Rafael California.

Here are three Wright houses (he designed five hundred and fifty) that are open for tours: Taliesin in Spring Green Wisconsin, and Fallingwater and Kentuck Knob both located in

the Laurel Highlands of western Pennsylvania. Each one is strikingly different but definitely Frank Lloyd Wright in design.

Taliesin

Nancy Horan’s recent best-seller Loving Frank has revived the story of the love that Frank Lloyd Wright and Mamah Borthwick Cheney had for each other. Taliesin, in Spring Green, was their home, an escape from the outside world.

Wright and Cheney created a scandal in 1909 when they left their families to live together in Europe, first in France then Italy and Germany then settling in Spring Green where Wright had spent his boyhood summers.

In 1912 Wright designed Taliesin to resemble the villas that Mamah had fallen in love with during their time in Italy.

From its perch atop a hill Taliesin dominates six hundred acres of land. Wisconsin yellow limestone makes up the thirty-seven thousand square feet of Taliesin and its five outer buildings. The inside walls of the house are trimmed with cypress, the massive fireplaces were crafted with stones quarried from the property, all the furnishings were designed by Wright.

After Mamah’s death in a fire at Taliesin in 1915 Wright re-built the destroyed wing and lived there until his death in 1959.

In 2011 Taliesin will mark its one hundredth anniversary. Today, this stunning home that Frank Lloyd Wright built for Mamah Borthwick Cheney, comes under the auspices of Taliesin Preservation, Inc. Plans are in the works for a six-month tribute to mark its centennial; “Celebrating the Work of a Lifetime” will honor Taliesin and the legacy of Wright’s work with concerts, lectures, workshops, and exhibits.

Taliesin is open for tours daily from May 1st until October 31st. www.taliesinpreservation.org

Fallingwater

Completed in 1936 Fallingwater is nestled into the Bear Run Nature Preserve, ninety minutes from Pittsburgh. Wright designed Fallingwater for Edgar and Liliame Kaufman and their son Edgar Jr.

The Kaufmans were strong conservationists, patrons of the arts, lovers of architecture and nature. After graduating from Harvard with a degree in architecture Edgar Jr. completed a six-month apprenticeship under Wright at Taliesin and introduced his parents to him.

In designing Fallingwater Wright took into consideration the Kaufman's love of nature setting the house into the side of a mountain directly over Bear Run stream. From the living room steps lead down to the stream, the sound of cascading water can be heard throughout the house.

He faced the house south to take advantage of natural light, and constructed it of Pottsville sandstone, for the walls and windows he used hundreds of feet of glass from the Pittsburgh Glass Company.

Fallingwater measures five thousand three hundred square feet, half of that is terraces overlooking woods. As in many of Wright's houses the hearth, made from massive stones taken from the property, is the focal point here. The interior wood is black walnut from North Carolina, the walls are Cherokee red a color that Wright developed. Sprinkled throughout are original Audubon prints, Picassos, Tiffany lamps and furnishings designed by Wright.

The cost of the house was \$155,000, equal to \$2.3 million today. One hundred and sixty thousand people visit each year.

To preserve Fallingwater Edgar Kaufman Jr. deeded it over to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy in 1964.

Frank Lloyd Wright was seventy years old when he designed Fallingwater. He wanted to prove that he was not at the end of his career; he succeeded. Fallingwater has become one of his most revered masterpieces.

Fallingwater is open for tours daily, except Wednesdays, from March 15th until late November.

www.fallingwater.org

Kentuck Knob

A twenty-minute drive down Rte. 381 South leads to Kentuck Knob the "quiet sister" to Fallingwater. Built in 1956 for I.N. and Bernadine Hagan, Kentuck Knob, a small one level house, is one of Wright's Usonian houses, meaning it was affordable for the average person. The cost was \$96,000.

Wright placed the house two thousand fifty feet above sea level and blended it seamlessly into the side of a mountain with the porch pointing outward like the bow of a ship. The eight hundred tons of sandstone used in the base of the house were excavated from the property. He placed cantilevers on the exterior to make it look as if the house is reaching out to the woods that surround it.

The interior and exterior wood is tidewater red cypress, the heating system was revolutionary for 1956, it is twenty-two hundred feet of copper piping running underneath the floors. The walls are double stoned with two inches of space in between, all the built in furniture was designed by Wright.

The current owners, Lord and Lady Palumbo, have filled the house with Frank Lloyd Wright furniture they purchased at auctions: two club chairs (1938), a child's chair (1912), an ottoman (1937) and a Prairie-style recliner (1902).

The Sculpture Garden holds forty-three works by artists including Sir Anthony Caro, Richard Serra, Harry Bertoia, Michael Warren, Ray Smith, and Andy Goldsworthy as well as a piece of the Berlin wall.

Kentuck Knob is open for tours year round, weather permitting, with the exception of Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day. Ticket reservations are strongly recommended.

www.kentuckknob.com