

An inspiring tale
of two Detroit
high-school
teachers and
their quest for a
Frank Lloyd
Wright home.

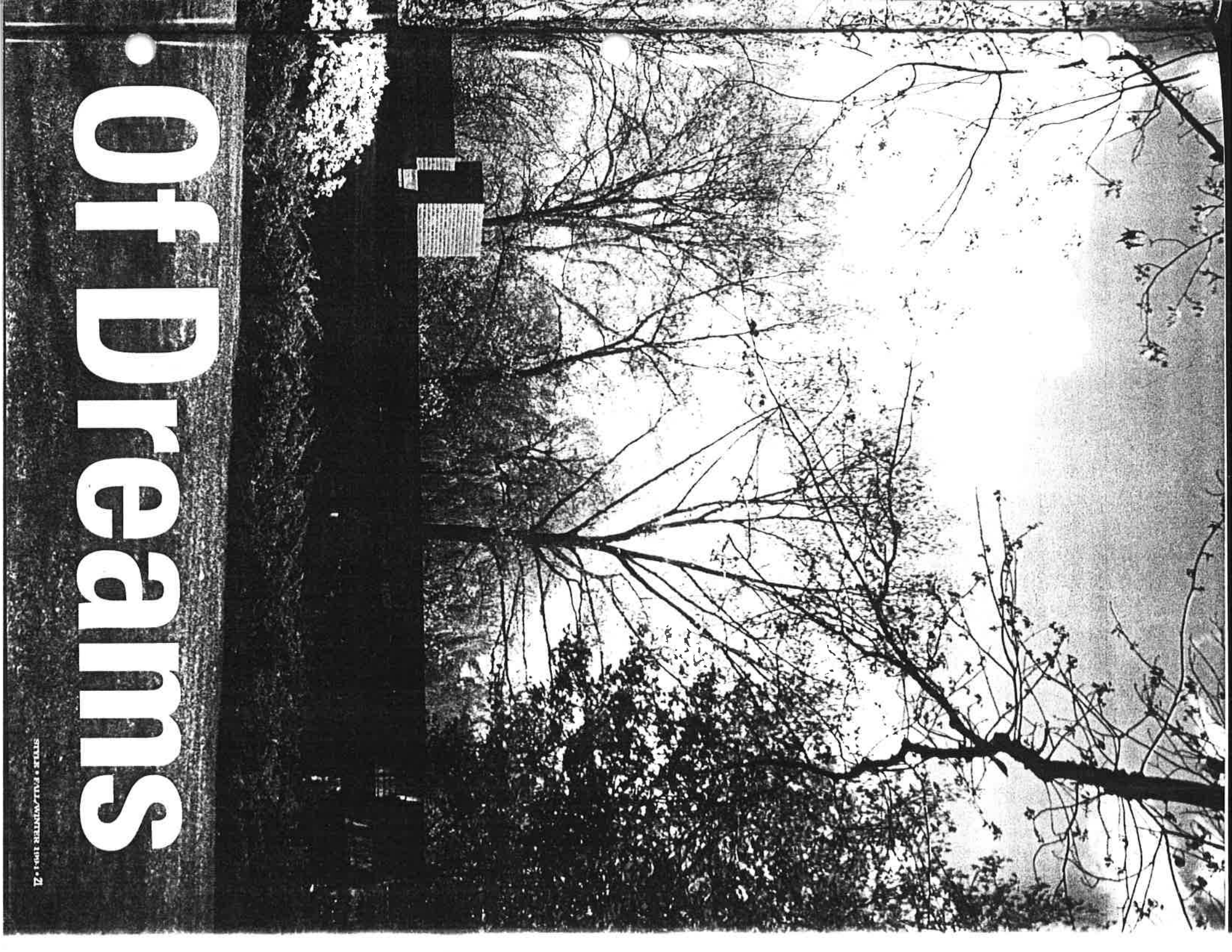
BY GAIL ZIMMERMAN
PHOTOGRAPHED BY RALPHAZAR KORAB

House

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Wright House



• Of Dreams

IHAD NOTHING TO DO WITH IT," says Sara Smith. "It was all Smithy," she says, referring to her late husband, Melvyn Maxwell Smith, by the nickname by which he was popularly known. The *it* is a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home nestled into a hillock on a winding road in Bloomfield Hills. The couple shared the home from 1950 until Smithy's death in 1984. Sara still lives there. How two Detroit high-school teachers came to build a Wright home on 3 1/3 acres of prime property is a story of hope, perseverance, coincidence and luck.

The year was 1932 and Melvyn Maxwell Smith wanted to be an architect. He had been accepted by the University of Michigan and hoped to join his older brother who was in dental school in Ann Arbor. The Depression intervened.

"Smithy's family couldn't afford to send both brothers away to school," says Sara, "so it was decided that for the time being, Smithy would attend college at Wayne University in Detroit."

A first-semester English course forever changed his plans. This is where Smithy became enamored of transcendentalism, the philosophy embraced by Emerson and Thoreau, with its emphasis on individualism and the spirituality of man and nature. He gave up his plans to be an architect, and became an English teacher instead.

In 1936, Smithy began work on his doctorate. During a course in the humanities, the professor showed slides of famous buildings designed by famous architects. A slide of a home — designed by Frank Lloyd Wright — flashed on the screen.

"Smithy jumped out of his seat," says Sara, "and announced to the class: 'One day, I'm going to own a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright!'"

The class laughed. Smithy was earning \$7 a day.

"They didn't know Smithy," says Sara. "When he had a goal, nothing would stop him." Smithy began to read everything he could about Wright, including the architect's own writings — which were filled with quotations by Thoreau and other transcendentalists.

In Wright, Smithy had found a soul mate. He was about to find a mate for life, a teacher like him, and a woman of determination and strong spirit. Though modest about her contribution, Sara would provide the faith and support that encouraged Smithy on the path to achieving what became a shared dream. They were married in 1940.

Melvyn Maxwell Smith first met his idol in the summer of 1941. It was serendipity. Smithy and Sara planned a motor trip to Banff and Lake Louise in Canada. Driving through the Dells in Wisconsin, they saw a sign: Detour to Taliesin. "We had no idea we were near Taliesin, Wright's home and studio in Spring Green," recalls Sara. "We took the detour to Taliesin and stopped in front of the drafting room.

"Smithy got out of the car and declared, 'Sara, we will have our house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.'"

As he spoke, a young man approached the car.

"Would you like to meet Mr. Wright?" the young apprentice asked.

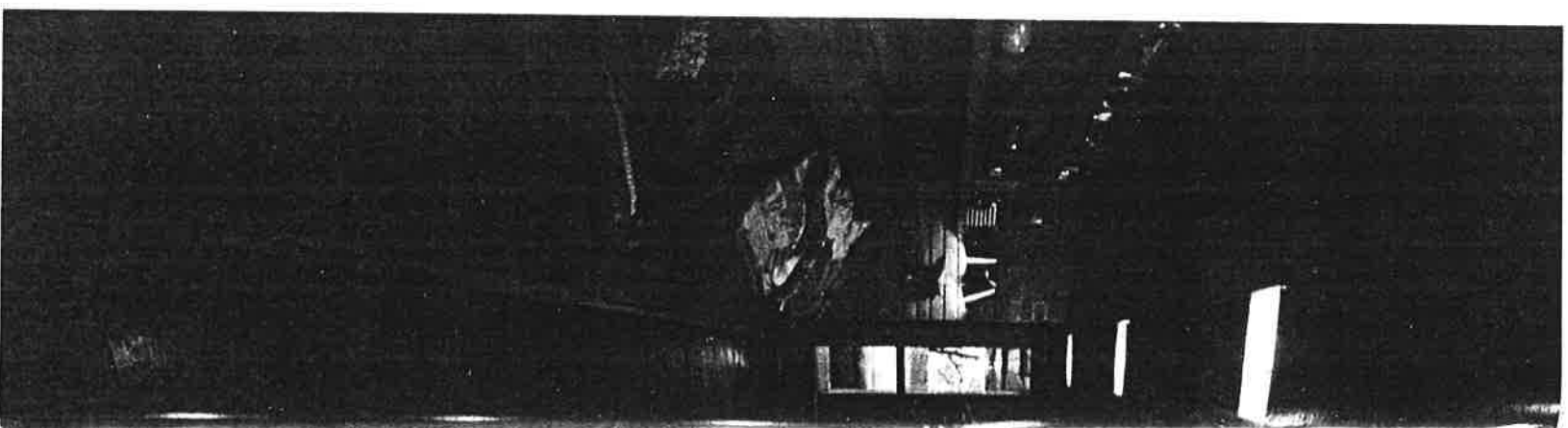
"Mr. Wright agreed to see us," says Sara. "Imagine how overcome we were to meet this genius. He was dressed all in white from the top of his head to the tips of his toes. With his arms outstretched, he looked at me and said, 'Do you have any babies?'"

"I answered no, that we'd just been married, but hoped one day to have a child. I was so awed, I couldn't say another word and just listened as Smithy spoke to Mr. Wright."

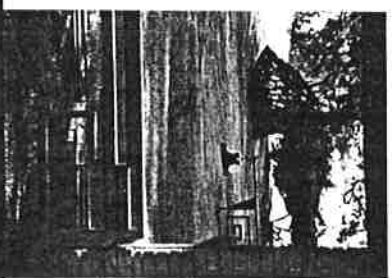
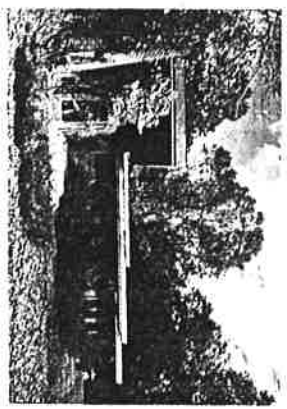
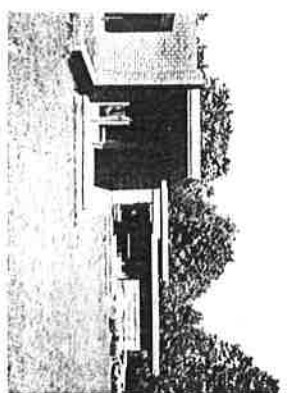
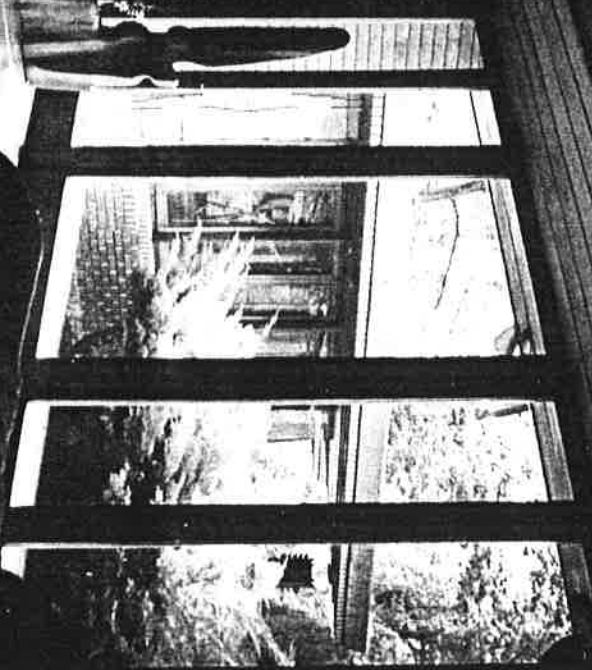
"Could you design a house for us costing \$5,000, like you did for Herbert Jacobs, the journalist?" asked Smithy.

The Herbert Jacobs house in Madison, Wisconsin, was Wright's first so-called "Usonian house," conceived when Jacobs, in 1936, challenged Wright to design a home for him costing \$5,000.

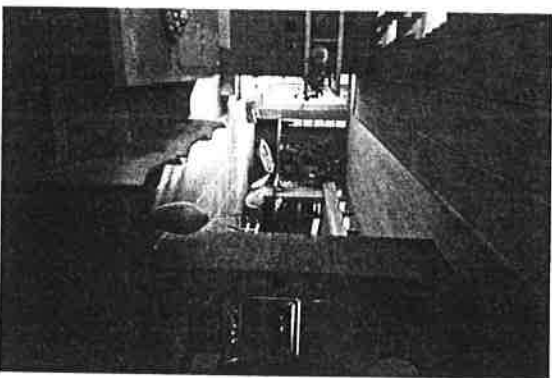
The Usonian house was Wright's solution to achieving "the moderate house for the citizen in moderate circumstances." It utilized low-cost construction techniques, including concrete floors with



Above: Entering off the carport through the tunnel-like entrance, the visitor encounters an exploding volume of space. Expanses of glass unite the outside with the interior. At right: An early view of the house on its site; mature landscaping complements the addition of a garden room and expanded terrace; breathtaking views include a pond and outdoor sculpture.



Right: The public "rooms" were designed as one big area divided into living, dining and kitchen spaces by jutting partitions of brick and cypress. Below: In 1968, the original terrace was enclosed to create the garden room, separated from the rest of the house by intricately carved folding screens. Far right: The one-of-a-kind Wright designed table and chairs sit under a patterned lighted ceiling in the dining area. A mosaic screen by Cranbrook artist Glen Michaels closes off the kitchen from public view. The living area features a Wright-designed, 36-foot built-in lounge and ample display space for the Smiths' art collection.



pipes laid underneath for radiant heat; a grid-module plan extending out from a central fireplace and utility core; built-in furniture; and the use of inexpensive building materials assembled on site to defray costs.

In conjunction with Wright's belief in an "organic" architecture, the Usonian house also was a building in harmony with nature, using horizontal lines, warm textures and earthy colors to link the structure to its landscape.

To Smithy's question, the then-74-year-old Wright replied, "I doubt it."

"How about \$8,000?" countered Smithy.

"Let's not talk about money," said Wright to Smithy. "Let's talk about you."

So began a friendship that lasted until Wright's death at the age of 91, in 1959. Smithy and Wright had much in common: a love of music and the arts, an abiding interest in the writings of Thoreau, a desire to share with others their passionately held beliefs.

"As their conversation drew to a close," says Sara, "Mr. Wright said: 'You find a piece of property no one else wants. Get a topographical sketch made, and I'll design your home for you.'"

"We walked out on cloud nine," says Sara.

When the Smiths returned home, they immediately began looking for land, but Pearl Harbor put their search on hold. "There goes our Frank Lloyd Wright house," said Smithy. He was soon drafted.

Smithy returned to civilian life in 1946, and the couple again began their pursuit of a site. Working with a real estate company, Smithy found a piece of property he admired. He put down a \$500 deposit. His check was returned a few days later when the sellers discovered he was Jewish.

Sara found a realtor who agreed to help them. The realtor took Smithy out to a street off Lone Pine Road in Bloomfield Hills.

They passed a piece of land that was for sale. It looked like a wilderness. Much of it was swampland. "I can see a Frank Lloyd Wright house here," said Smithy. "I'm going to bring my wife back to see it, and if she likes it, I'll buy it," he said.

Sara shared Smithy's enthusiasm for the 3 1/3 acres, but the asking price was \$4,700. Thirty-six hundred dollars was all the Smiths could afford. The owners, who had amassed quite a bit of acreage in the area, sold enough each year to pay their taxes. Their tax bill in 1946: \$3,600. They agreed to accept the Smiths' offer.

Smithy immediately had a topographical sketch made. It was just before Labor Day. A phone call to Taliesin garnered an invitation for Smithy to visit for the weekend.

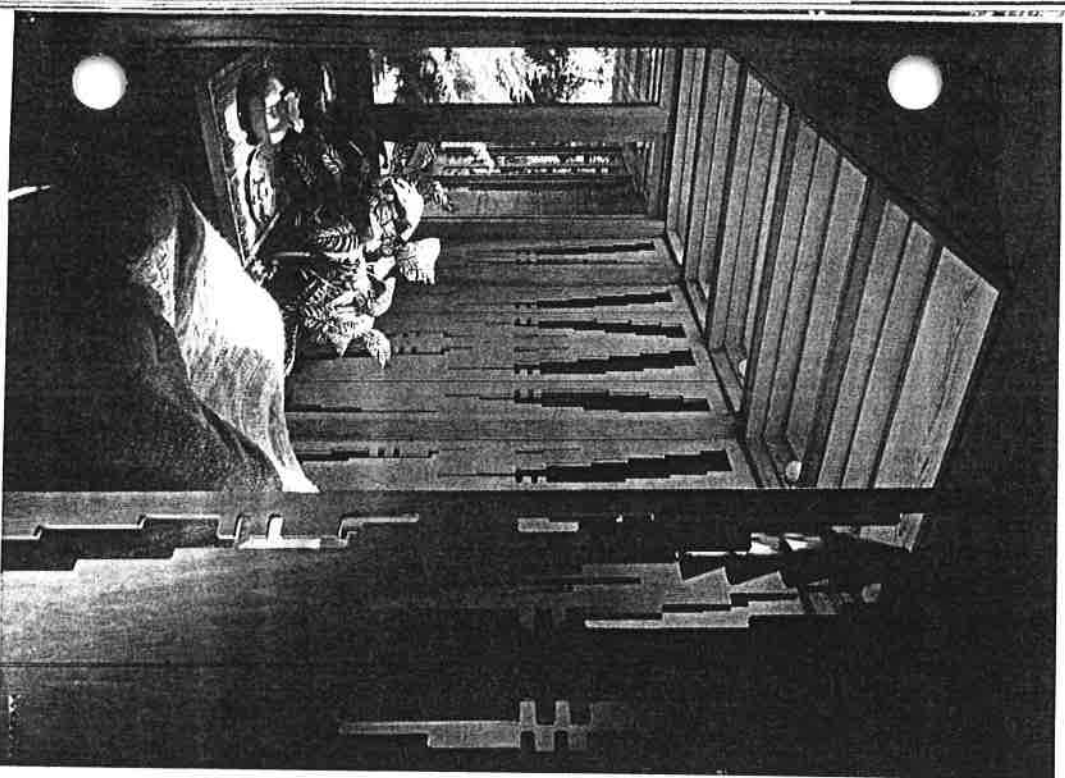
The long weekend at Taliesin was filled with many activities which Smithy thoroughly enjoyed. But Wright never even mentioned the sketch. Finally, on Monday morning, Wright called a meeting in the drafting room. "Mr. Smith has given us a challenge," he said as he threw the sketch on the table.

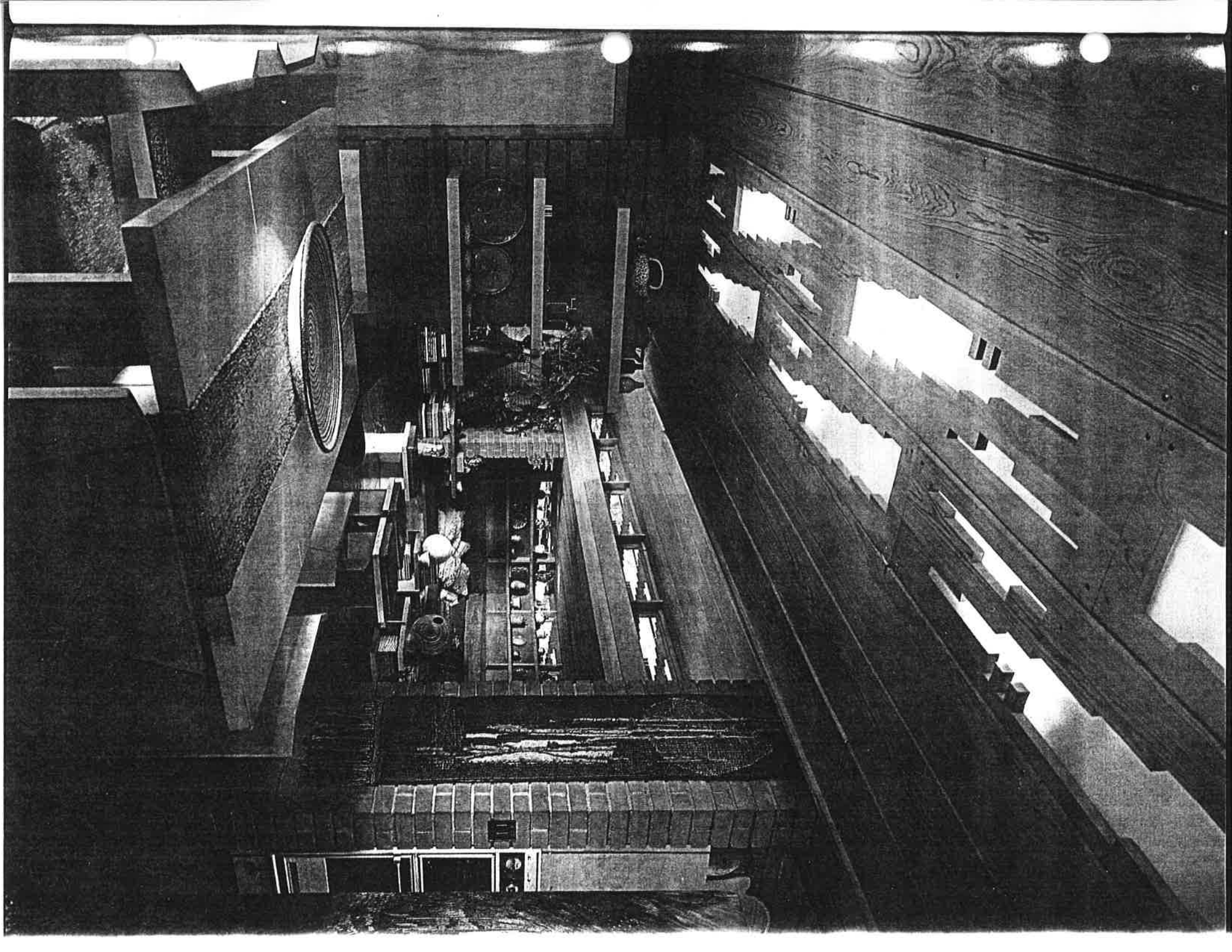
"When will I receive my plans?" asked Smithy.

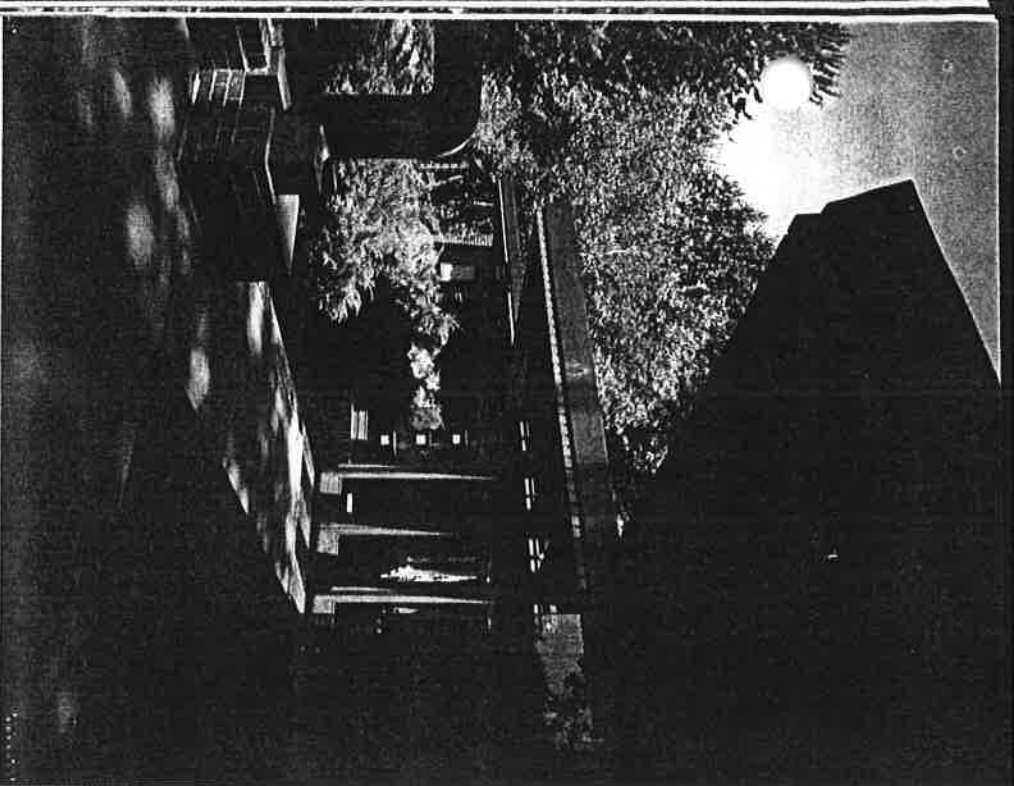
"When the spirit moves me," answered the master.

Several months passed with no word from Taliesin. "We couldn't just call up and ask where our plans were," says Sara. "We had to wait until the spirit moved Mr. Wright."

In the meantime, the Smiths decided to go by and see the Frank







The composition of the rear elevation incorporates dynamic zigzags, intricate overhangs and the play of shadows. Inside, a Wright-designed lightbox hangs in a corner of the garden room.

Lloyd Wright-designed Gregor Affleck house, situated on Woodward Avenue in Bloomfield Hills. "As we parked the car on Woodward, Smithy looked out and saw a man coming toward us," recalls Sara.

"Hello. I'm Gregor Affleck," the man said. Smithy introduced himself. Gregor Affleck appeared to be astonished, says Sara. "He said to Smithy: 'Melvyn Maxwell Smith! I've been trying to find you for the longest time. Taliesin lost your address and imagine trying to find a Smith. I have your plans for you.'"

"We became like family with the Afflecks," says Sara. "Their house was like magic when we saw it that day. We had so much in common with them."

But it didn't look like the Smiths would be able to join the Afflecks in that special society of Frank Lloyd Wright homeowners. After Smithy got building estimates, he told Sara they did not have enough money to build the house. It would cost at least two to three times what Wright had projected.

"Smithy called Mr. Wright and explained the problem," says Sara. "To me, Smithy was a genius. And Mr. Wright had gotten to know him at Taliesin."

"He said to Smithy, 'You can build it. Study the plans so you know them backward and forward. Buy your own materials and hire your own subcontractors. People will work dirt-cheap to be able to work on one of my houses.'"

Smithy studied the plans for over two years. He went to Taliesin, this time with Sara, and told Wright he was ready. "If you don't

mind," said Smithy to Wright. "I made some changes in your plans." Smithy had suggested extending a second level of clerestory windows on the front elevation through the utility core, rather than stopping them at the core as Wright had designed. He also modified the overhang outside the living area, says Sara.

"Mr. Wright didn't say a word. He tapped his pencil," says Sara, "looked at me and said, 'Your husband would have made a fine architect.' Smithy told me he felt he had received his degree in architecture."

Construction began in March 1949. Smithy was able to obtain the best cypress for the house, at minimal cost, through a friend in the sawdust business. The Smiths' brother-in-law, who had a cabinet-making company, cut all the cypress to size and practically gave Smithy all the necessary hardware. He also made the wood furniture for the home, most using Wright's designs, as a housewarming gift.

"We had bricklayers who were willing to work for \$2 per hour and a woodworker for \$3 per hour, just to work on a Frank Lloyd Wright house," says Sara. They in turn had relatives and friends in the various trades who came to work on the house after their regular day-time jobs.

Through it all, there was Smithy, demanding perfection from all his craftsmen. He was there seven days a week. On school days, he'd be there from 7 o'clock in the evening until midnight.

After school one day, he came to inspect the day's work and discovered that a brick wall, while perfectly executed, was 2 inches off. The bricklayers threatened to quit if they had to redo it. Smithy explained the difference 2 inches would make. It was redone to perfection.

When he ran out of money, he told his workmen, "You can quit or I'll pay you \$100 per month until you're paid off." The workmen stayed.

In May of 1950 the masonry and woodwork were finished to Smithy's exacting standards. "The house today is known as the horizontal-screw house," says Sara. "All the screws are perfectly horizontal."

There was a setback, however. Smithy had only \$500 left for windows, not nearly enough to provide the amount of glass necessary, and he couldn't raise a penny more.

On a Sunday, he went to the house to figure out how to board it up. "He was sitting at the end of the lounge, feeling dejected," says Sara, when there was a knock at the door.

A young man entered. "I'm building a plaza in Pontiac and someone told me there was a Frank Lloyd Wright house being built in Bloomfield Hills," the young man said. "I'm a devotee of Frank Lloyd Wright. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

Smithy explained his predicament. The young man told him not to worry. Pittsburgh Plate Glass would be there the following week to put in the windows, he said. The bill for the glass arrived. What was valued at thousands of dollars cost Smithy \$500!

The young man went on to become a successful builder and developer. His name: A. Alfred Taubman.

In May 1950, the Smiths moved in. While he never came during construction, Wright soon paid a visit. When Wright approved of a home, explains Sara, he would present a plaque with his initials. "We received one," says Sara. It is embedded in the brick near the front door.

The Wright House For The Right People

The house Frank Lloyd Wright designed for Melvyn Maxwell and Sara Smith was a modest three-bedroom L-shaped structure modeled after the Herbert Jacobs house so admired by Smith.

This Usonian house ("Usonia" was a term Wright adopted from the English novelist Samuel Butler, who gave the name to America when he thought it might represent a Utopian ideal place), which is nestled into the landscape, is barely visible from the street. The living and bedroom wings are based on a rectangular grid module extending out from a utility core.

Entering off the carport, and through the tunnel-like entrance, the visitor encounters an exploding volume of space. Except for a small library (studio), three bedrooms and two bathrooms, the house was originally designed as one big area divided into living, dining and kitchen spaces by jutting partitions of brick and cypress.

Surprising areas of glass unite the outside with the interior. Large expanses of glass in the living area are coupled with a double bank of clerestory windows punctuated by patterned, perforated boards.

The living area, with its central fireplace, has a Wright-designed, 36-foot built-in lounge that wraps around two walls and offers the possibility of large-scale entertaining. Shelves above provide ample display space for books and art.

Built-ins also grace the dining area, which features a Wright-designed table and chairs and an intricately patterned lighted ceiling and soffit.

The kitchen work area is small, but efficient. The high ceiling and skylight increase the feeling of space. A mosaic-tiled screen by Cranbrook artist Glen Michaels allows the kitchen area to be closed off from public view.

In 1968, with plans drawn up at Taliesin, the original terrace was enclosed to create a garden room. It is separated from the other living spaces, not by traditional walls, but by intricately carved folding screens which open up to the rest of the house. The master bedroom was transformed into a terrace room (family room) with access to the newly created outdoor terrace.

There is no basement, no attic. Yet storage is sufficient with built-ins, including those in the two remaining small bedrooms, the bathrooms and the skylighted library.

There is no plaster or paint; the interior cypress walls have never needed any maintenance. There are no window coverings; nothing interrupts the immediate connection one feels with the out-of-doors.

There is no carpeting; the floor throughout consists of 2 x 4-foot cement rectangles with radiant heating. There is no air conditioning.

Despite its simplicity, there is great attention to quality and inventiveness of design. All the doors are piano-hinged. The corner butt-glazed windows never leak. The design of the rear elevation and much of the interior living space is rich in detail.

Balthazar Korab first photographed the Smith house in 1960 to commemorate Wright in a publication for the Michigan Society of Architects. "Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings are very photogenic," he says. "You have the drama of space and the contrast of light and dark."

He has photographed a number of the Usonian houses, "but this is my favorite," says Korab. "This one is more complex and interesting, more dynamic in composition." He points to the zigzags of the rear elevation, to the intricate shape of the overhangs and the play of shadows.

But is living in a Frank Lloyd Wright house for everyone?

"People who go for a touch of genius are a different kind of people," says Korab. "They are the kind of people for whom quality values prevail over the conventional notions of comfort."

"Wright created visual delights in a basically inexpensive house using inexpensive building materials. The small square footage in the bedrooms and service areas is compensated for in the living spaces and openness to the outdoors." — G.Z.

There was still the landscaping to tackle. Just as Smithy had wanted whom he considered to be the foremost architect in the country, he would settle for no less than the nation's best landscape architect: Thomas Church of San Francisco.

He hadn't yet figured out how he would fulfill his wish when a group from Dow Chemical in Midland, Michigan, came through the house for a tour. Smithy apologized for the grounds, explaining he was waiting for Thomas Church to do the landscaping. The visitors smiled. Thomas Church was in Midland at their company's headquarters.

"Smithy called up Mr. Church, who agreed to come visit. I stayed home from school that day to prepare dinner," says Sara, "and as we enjoyed our meal, Smithy told Mr. Church all about the house and how we'd come to get it. I went to bed, but Smithy and Mr. Church stayed up and talked all night."

In the morning, the landscape architect stalked the grounds. "I'm going to create a swale," he said, and suggested the Smiths take down an oak tree in the area. Smithy declined. "This is Sara's tree," he said. "Today, it's one of the prettiest trees on the property and gives wonderful shade," says Sara.

Church went inside to the dining table and drafted the plans. "What do I owe you?" asked Smithy. "You know, I was a guest in your home," replied Church. He gave us a bill for a very minuscule amount, says Sara.

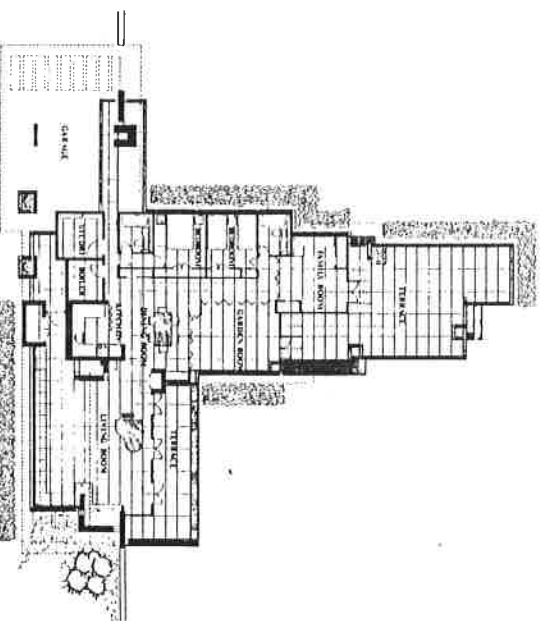
Today, the views from the house are breathtaking. The living area overlooks a huge stagnant pond, lined with cattails and surrounded by weeping willows. The setting is serene, but not too often solitary.

The Smith home has welcomed thousands of visitors over the years, from all corners of the world. Smithy relished giving tours. Sara has never turned away anyone who wanted a personal glimpse of a Frank Lloyd Wright design.

"Our house was a home of constant entertainment," says Sarah. A Detroit Symphony Orchestra violist marveled at the acoustics, and the Smiths began hosting chamber groups from the DSO to play for audiences of 70 or more.

Smithy was as fond of the fine arts as he was of architecture.

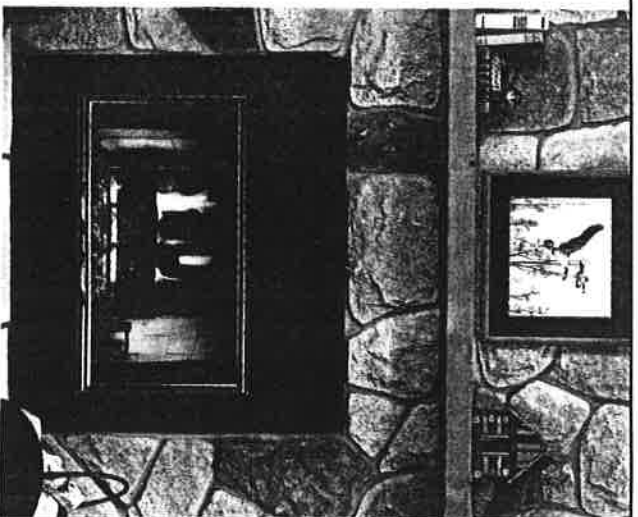
(continued on page 28)



The house is designed as an L-shaped structure based on a rectangular grid module. Rendering from Frank Lloyd Wright in Michigan by A. Dale Northup.

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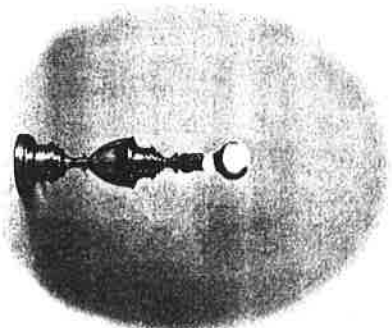
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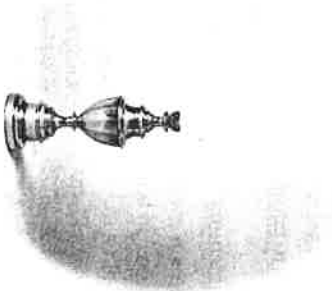
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House Of Dreams

(continued from page 27)

"My husband would champion those up-and-coming artists who needed exposure," says Sara. "He'd invite them to show their work to invited guests in our home. We never thought we could afford fine art," she says, "but then we discovered artists were willing to let people buy on the installment plan."

Today, the works of dozens of artists are on display. But, except for several pieces done by the Smiths' son, Robert, there are no paintings to compete with the outdoor views.

The collection comprises the works of many local ceramists, sculptors, glass artists and weavers. Many come from nearby Cranbrook; among the outstanding pieces are the ceramics of Maija Grotell; the ceramic tile sculpture of Gaija Michaels; the wood sculpture of Faye Eileen Auvil; and the wood sculpture of Sam Apple.

Barbara Wirtenberg is the weaver whose runners and chair cushions decorate the Wright-designed dining table and chairs. The table and chairs are unique to the Smith home and have never been duplicated.

The house today is exactly as Smithy left it," says Sara. "To me, everything in this house is Smithy." And while she has not changed a thing, the house is ever-changing: Sunlight filters through the wood grillwork indoors, shafts of light skip through multi-leveled windows, and at night, Wright's carved ceiling and suspended boxes of light cast a magical glow.

"I especially remember one of Mr. Wright's visits," says Sara. "He was here for lunch with about 25 guests. He was asked to go to the buffet table first. He sat on the lounge and no one went near him. Finally, he blurted out, 'Isn't anyone going to sit near me?'"

"I left the kitchen and went to sit with him. He talked about shadows on the wall, how he could tell the time of the day, the time of the year. He could be very outspoken," says Sara, "but he was really a very spiritual man." This would not be Sara's last conversation with the architect.

Shortly before his death, on his last visit to the Smith house, Frank Lloyd Wright told Sara: "My dear, your delights are just beginning."

For any visitor, time spent in the house Smithy built is just that — pure delight.

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