Making Nature Present: Frank Lloyd Wright’s Magazine House in Iowa

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Abstract
In 1945, as the war in Europe came to an end, popular press journals throughout America featured designs for houses to be built rapidly and inexpensively for returning soldier and their future families. Frank Lloyd Wright, at the time seventy-eight years old, understood this need as an opportunity to populate the nation with his novel design for what he called "the little American house". Wright believed the domestic environment should be "organic" and "natural" and that each house, no matter how small, should be custom-fitted to its site. But the great demand for houses suggested they not be custom-fitted to a unique site, but that they should be closely packed on flat, monotonous parcels of land with no natural amenities, and that they be built quickly in the easiest way possible. What to do?

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In 1945, as the war in Europe came to an end, popular press journals throughout America featured designs for houses to be built rapidly and inexpensively for returning soldiers and their future families. Frank Lloyd Wright, at the time seventy-eight years old, understood this need as an opportunity to populate the nation with his novel design for what he called “the little American house.” Wright believed the domestic environment should be “organic” and “natural” and that each house, no matter how small, should be custom-fitted to its site. But the great demand for houses suggested they not be custom-fitted to a unique site, but that they should be closely packed on flat, monotonous parcels of land with no natural amenities, and that they be built quickly in the easiest way possible. What to do?
The Ladies' Home Journal, “The Magazine Women Believe In,” anticipated the postwar building boom. Beginning in January 1944, the Journal published “a dozen new [. . .] designs by the country’s outstanding architects—houses that point the way to better, less expensive living after the war.” The series concluded in June 1945 with Frank Lloyd Wright’s design for a moderately sized, single-level, three-bedroom house. The Journal described Wright as “the world’s most distinguished architect” and noted that this 1945 design was a “continuation of a series of houses he designed for this magazine in the early 1900s.” Illustrated with a plan drawing and several photographs of a model, the Wright design was titled Opus 497 and billed as a “crystal house for town or country.”

Wright might well have been “the world’s most distinguished architect” in 1945, but his fame rested not on generic, affordable house designs for anonymous clients and unknown sites but, more often than not, on expensive, site-specific houses designed for the wealthy, including himself. His best-known work was Fallingwater, a $150,000 vacation house built over a waterfall for the Pittsburgh merchant prince Edgar Kaufmann Sr. and featured in the January 17, 1938, issue of Life magazine. At seventy-eight, however, Wright was very interested in designing a house for the middle-class family, a house that could “point the way to better, less expensive living,” a house that would “have far-reaching effects on future living for all of us,” as the Ladies’ Home Journal claimed. And though it was not where his fame resided, from time to time for more than forty-five years, he had designed speculative houses for anonymous clients and anonymous sites. Some of these houses had been published in popular press journals including Life and House and Home, and as early as 1900 (and then again in 1901 and 1907) Wright’s designs had appeared in the Ladies’ Home Journal. Most famously and influentially, his Usonian homes, begun in the 1930s, promised affordable-yet-bespoke design from the master, which often achieved the second value at the expense of the first.

For Wright, the house-of-moderate-cost problem was not only one of how to build inexpensively, but also one of what to build. He believed that a house could teach people how to live—and his notion of “how to live” was far from conventional. His own life and residences in Wisconsin and Arizona were essays in bespoke design endlessly responsive to their sites, which Wright could consistently mine for endless material and motif variation. For each of his many clients, for nearly half a century, he had made proposals for houses that declared their singular authorship loud and upfront. Throughout, there was a sense of polemical zeal, for not just what people should live in, but for how they should live. “Every house is a missionary,” he once remarked. “I don’t build a house without predicting the end to the present social order.”

In the summer of 1945, it was entirely reasonable to think that a different way of life, a new social order,
might be desirable in the US. The long, seemingly endless war was over. The economy was recovering from a Depression that had begun some fifteen years earlier. And an optimism of possibility, of dream-building, prevailed.

Many were intrigued by Opus 497, but only one person built it. In January 1945, at the age of forty-six, Lowell Walter, a Des Moines road contractor who had recently become wealthy when he patented something like blacktop, and who knew of Fallingwater from the January 17, 1938 issue of Life, wrote a letter addressed to “Frank Lloyd Wright’s Architectural Company.” In it, he asked Wright if he would “possibly be interested in drawing plans” for an all-season house for himself and his wife. The house was to be located in remote northeast Iowa near Walter’s hometown, Quasqueton, less than seventy miles from Wright’s home in Spring Green, Wisconsin. The site was 3,500 acres of farmland. Walter noted in his letter that the house should be about 1,800 square feet, with an additional two-car garage, perhaps a basement, and should open to the south and the west with extensive views of the nearby Wapsipinicon River. “Regarding costs,” he wrote, “I would like something quite nice, but of course, not extravagant.” Walter imagined that $10,000–$15,000 would be sufficient, and with the letter he included a snapshot of the site and single-line plan drawings that he himself, had made. Nine days after Walter mailed the letter, Wright telegraphed a twenty-two-word reply: “My dear Mr. Walter: We will design a dwelling for you. Send further details. There will be no basement nor any attic.”

In the months that followed, the busy architect did little to advance Walter’s project. Impatient, Walter increased to $20,000 the intended cost and purchased idyllic hillside acreage that joined his farmland to the Wapsipinicon River. In early summer, Walter and his wife Agnes saw Wright’s Opus 497 in the June 1945 Ladies’ Home Journal. Finding the design both fitting and not unlike his own schematic, Walter asked Wright to build it in Quasqueton and Wright agreed.

Construction on the house did not begin until July 1948. Seventeen months into construction, in December 1949, it seemed to Lowell Walter that the house might never be finished. By then, the cost had escalated to nearly seven times what Walter had set out to pay, in part because he had added extensively to the initial program, but also because finding a residential contractor to build a Wright house in the small, remote town was extremely difficult, more so because Wright insisted the house be built in “fireproof, vermin proof” concrete and few residential contractors knew how to build in that medium. The exasperated Walter wrote Wright a long letter expressing his concerns about the protracted house-building process and the ever-escalating costs. Wright’s reply was sympathetic, thoughtful, and brief: “We were brave men to try to set up
the last work in heaven way off on the midwestern prairie—miles from anywhere?" 20

The house was completed in August 1950 and is available to tour today during the warmer months. At Wright’s request, America’s premier architectural photographer, Ezra Stoller, photographed the house, and color photographs appeared in both professional and popular press literature throughout the country. The house quickly became nationally renowned. It cost approximately $150,000, a price that included a boathouse, entry gate, fire pit, extensive landscaping, Wright-designed furniture, and Wright’s fees (10% of the cost of construction). Walter named the house Cedar Rock and on the first and second Sundays in July 1950, shortly before construction was completed, the house and grounds were opened to busloads of curious Iowans (4,178 in all) and featured in the state’s most prominent newspapers. 21 In his opening day speech, Walter compared his house to Wright’s Fallingwater, Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, and George Washington’s Mount Vernon.

The beauty and elegance of the Lowell Walter estate are overwhelming. Clearly, though, it was not Fallingwater, Monticello, nor Mount Vernon; nor was it an affordable house for the middle-class and its origins as a magazine house for mass consumption, were seldom mentioned. Indeed, only five years after its completion, it was lauded not for its affordability or for its resolution to the issue of “how we should live.” Instead, it was celebrated for its ideal fit with the special site on which it was built when

John DeKoven Hill, Wright’s apprentice who had supervised the construction of the house, featured it in the November 1955 issue of House Beautiful as a prime example of Wright’s belief that “The Character of the Site is the Beginning of Architecture.” Wright fervently believed that the successful marriage of site to house was essential, yet as originally conceived the house had not been designed with Walter’s Quasqueton site in mind. Rather, it was conceived as an ideal house—not designed for any specific site, but cleverly construed to adapt to many diverse sites. To this end it was composed of parts easily modified or displaced so that it might readily be adapted to a variety of unique sites. This was not for practical matters only. Adaptation—“holding,” “cradling”—enlarged the presence and importance of “nature.”

“I put a capital ‘N’ on Nature,” Wright once declared, “and call that my church.”

How did Wright do it? How did he take a standard Wright design and modify it so subtly yet so fittingly that its stock origins are forgotten and it is praised as the near-perfect paradigm for site-specific building? The answer is not obvious.

The Walter house, the single built manifestation of Opus 497, was not a two-story, compact box with a basement as was typical of houses at the time, but rather long and low and stretched to maximize its
interface with the exterior. Wright compared its floor plan to the shape of a tadpole. The tail of the tadpole contained two bedrooms and two baths accessed by a long corridor of closets and open shelving that Wright called a “Gallery.” The head of the tadpole was a large, square room at a forty-five-degree angle to the tail. Wright labeled it the “Garden Room” and designed its furniture for informal living, dining, and recreation.

Important elements of Opus 497 were made malleable and could be pushed and pulled, opened up and closed down, shaped not ideally but as need be. Wright used a concrete slab roof with seventeen tons of steel reinforcing, for instance, allowing for the possibility of pushing the roof back and forth without the need to consider structural beam directions. Thus, the roof could be extended on one side or shifted from this side to that as a means of modifying light and controlling solar heat without affecting other aspects of the construction. The kitchen gave the house a pivot point. It joined the private to the public realms, the tail to the head of the tadpole. Unlike the bedrooms, gallery corridor, and Garden Room, it was not a preconceived entity but could assume any shape necessary to accommodate the angle between the two. This joint—mostly kitchen, but also mechanical closet and entrance ‘throat’—worked in both plan and section, allowing the massing to vary with the land. In plan, it could open or close like a jackknife. In section, it could rise up or step down or project out. Because in plan and section the design accommodated the land, there was no need to level the site. Wright valued the site’s uniqueness and designed a house to reinforce it, giving presence to both simultaneously.

This weave extends to the interior as well. “Land” in the Walter house is not just “out there,” it is also “in here.” The Garden Room is half of the house and in the middle of the room its floor opens directly to the earth. It has no interior walls. Instead, it has “plants, growing in earth panels at floor level, [that] form a flower-and-foliage partition.” Its ceiling is low and flowing, with a sense of centrality established where it rises in the middle of the room to form a clerestory punctuated by nine skylights. The skylights provide light for the plants, which grow out of the floor, across the ceiling, and into skylight cavities. The ceiling/roof has no obvious means of support and stretches across the room uninterrupted, ultimately extending visually through the glass walls out into the yard where it dissolves into upturned eaves. In this way, Wright united inside and outside while reinforcing the openness of the Garden Room, the essence of the house. This focal point is a landscaped pavilion as much as it’s the room of a house, and it demonstrates Wright moonlighting as a landscape architect, orienting space around living matter as much as brick and mortar.

The beauty and seclusion of Walter’s wondrous site allowed for this openness. But the Walter house is only one realization of the Ladies’ Home Journal house. The Journal design was intended for both “town and country.” But how to open the inside to the outside
in a denser, suburban setting without compromising privacy? Wright created privacy with nature. Outside of the glass walls, in a radius defining a yard, he placed a second partition of vegetal material, thus providing the three open sides of the Garden Room with a high wall of greenery, what the *Journal* described as “a surrounding view . . . the circular planting of flowering shrubs and trees.”

I don’t build a house without predicting the end to the present social order.” Opus 497 was a critique of the suburban dwelling, of the way we Americans had come to live. It entered the public realm—quite importantly—directly through the popular press. Couched as a kind of competition in which the winner would be the house design most built, the *Ladies’ Home Journal’s* eighteen-month probe into postwar house possibilities was not a competition that Frank Lloyd Wright could have expected to win. Yet his entry, without predicting the end of the social order, made apparent what the order neglected to consider. “Land”—including the sky, the sun, the stars and the moon; views, breezes, smells, and the immediate built environment—was of great importance to Wright. The houses that he built were of the land, not objects dominating it. A house, he said, should grace its site, not disgrace it. Instead of taking up land, his buildings made the land visible, valuing and bringing forth the unique qualities of the site. And this—site, weave, atmosphere—is exactly what the other entries in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* competition neglected to address.

The Lowell Walter house is of great importance in Wright’s œuvre, but not so much as a unique house. Unquestionably wonderful and a rare recipient of the Wright-initialed red tile of approval, the Walter house is most important as the sole, built manifestation of a highly theoretical project: an essay in would-be affordable elegance. As such it is a kind of permanent exhibition. It shows how we Americans might live.