A Crystal House for Town and Country

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Abstract
Impeccably built of brick, concrete and walnut, the Lowell Walter House was initially conceived by Wright as a magazine prototype for a modest, modern, post-World War II crystal house.

Disciplines
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A Crystal House for Town and Country

"CEDAR ROCK" (LOWELL WALTER HOUSE) | QUASQUETON | FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

1950

Impenetrably built, the Lowell Walter House, built of brick, concrete and walnut, was designed by Wright in the mid-40s. A glass-walled house by Mies might have been a logical extension of that architect’s interest, a glass-walled house by Frank Lloyd Wright would certainly have been a curiosity, anathema as it was to his notion of “natural house.” Yet in the June 1945 issue of Ladies’ Home Journal, under the title “Opus 497,” one finds Wright’s prototype design for just such a house, complete with a plan for suburban lot and captioned: “... a crystal house for town or country ...” Thirty months later, in the now-famous January 1948 issue of Architectural Forum dedicated to Wright’s work, a similar plan is offered together with a perspective of the Lowell Walter house carrying the headline: “Usonian Dwelling at Quasqueton, Iowa. Glass Walls. Planned on a Unit System September 1946.”

The Walter floor plan is similar to that of a Usonian—a moderately priced American dwelling conceived by Wright during the Depression for clients of average income. Like a tadpole, the house features a tail of bedrooms, baths, carpent, and maid’s quarters. Its square “head”—the dining/living room here labeled “Garden Room”—is rotated at a 45-degree angle to this tail, the rotation hinged by the work space or kitchen. The Unit System, a 5'-3” module, is a square grid clearly articulated in the Cherokee Red precast concrete floor tiles. Walls are not hollow and of conventional stud-framing, but comprised of either specially ordered red brick or of non-load-bearing walnut 1-x’s fixed to plywood panels. The materials of the Walter House are undoubtably far finer than Wright’s earlier Usonians, but the design and construction is similar. Craft, not labor, was employed to wire and plumb the cavity-less construction, a method of “honest” building to which even the reinforced concrete roof subscribed.

It is this roof, conjoined with the all-glass walls of the Garden Room, that is the true innovation of the Lowell Walter House. The caption in the Architectural Forum piece reads, “This masonry-type Usonian glass house has concrete slab roofs with turned up eaves. No wood is used in the construction, exterior or interior. Partitions are of solid plaster, doors and sash are metal, floors usual precast tiles. Gravity heat.” The statement—issued before construction began—does not describe the house as built, but suggests a design intention largely lost in execution. Pragmatically, materials were to be incombustible and maintenance free, perhaps because of the house’s remote location—an 11-acre parcel of the Walter’s 3800 acre ‘farm’ on the Wapsipinicon River—but also because, in the past, Wright houses had been plagued by fire and maintenance problems. In addition, theoretically, after World War II and with a strong economy, Wright’s construction and American architecture in general became more systemic and of a larger scale, necessitating the use of man-made materials. Yet Wright believed in the ‘natural.’ How might organic building come from inorganic material?

The Walter House begins to answer this question. Whereas its marvelous 1948 “River Pavilion” stands defiantly above the beauty of the oft-flooded Wapsipinicon, the house itself graces the top of a rather undistinguished hill, an extension of flat prairie land as it meets the river basin. How to anchor a house to this site? At Quasqueton, Wright rooted the house with outcroppings: a wondrous gate with a one-ton urn; a fountain with hemispherical pool; a council fire pit for outdoor gatherings; and in the other direction, the river.
pavilion. He veiled it with 135 newly planted evergreens and swaddled it with low-growing Hawthorns and shrubs. House and site were massaged together.

One imagines, however, that in 1946 Wright intended to unify site and house in a far more dramatic manner. As with his contemporary designs for other buildings—the cliff-side V. C. Morris house in San Francisco, the Carmel ocean-front Haldorn house nicknamed "the wave," the Huntington Hartford Country Club for Hollywood Hills—the Walter roof was to be covered in black earth and peat moss and heavily planted with grass, flowers and shrubs. As executed, the concrete roof is 146' long with upturned eaves and 17 tons of reinforcing rods—capable of supporting earth and vegetation, but ultimately without it. Had the roof been bermed as intended, its apparent weight would have catalyzed the wonder of its glass-walled Garden Room, for the roof appears to levitate, supported as it is by minimal steel Ts couched within the glass walls. Inside, the floor gives way to tropical plants. As vegetation engulfs the house, man-made and natural become one and a new sense of the organic is manifested. Light, filtered through leaves and contorted into geometric rays, would have pierced the interior through square perforations found in the concrete and hovering clerestory roofs.

Though this surreal drama was never realized, the Walter house—named "Cedar Rock"—remains one of the architectural wonders of the Midwest prairie. It is the realization of Wright's Glass House prototype, and this explains the highly private and guarded entry sequence not necessary on the Walter's sumptuous lot. The same house was offered both to T. L. McDonald in Washington, D.C. and to Vito Grieco in Andover, Massachusetts in 1945, but neither built it. However, the reproducible nature of the design does not detract from the richness and wonder of the house as built. Rather it enhances these qualities. Meticulously constructed and beautifully preserved, the Walter House features Wright-designed furniture and draperies as well as a unique three-fixtures-in-one bathroom pre-made by the Railcar Steel Press Company of Chicago. The house is open to the public, owned and operated by the Department of Natural Resources.

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