

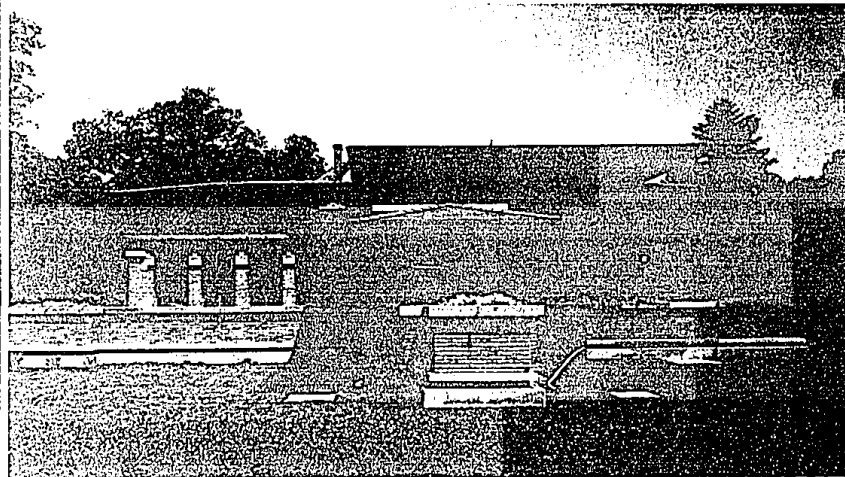
Creative Living

Lorraine McClish editor/477-5450



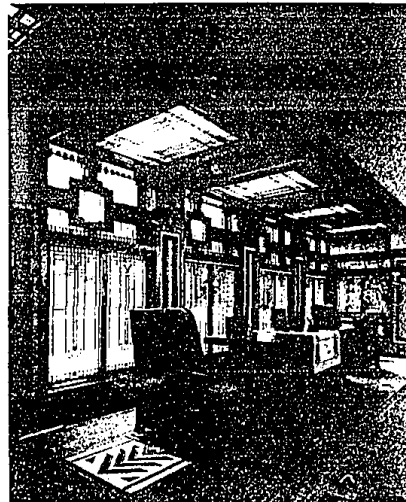
Thursday, January 7, 1988 O&E

(F1E)



The Meyer May House of Grand Rapids was Frank Lloyd Wright's first major commission in Michigan. It is a classic example of the Prairie style. Steelcase Inc. completed the total

restoration of the house in two years. At right is the May house living room, illustrating how Wright used windows and limited walls so interior space has a feeling of flow and freedom.



Restoring Wright's architecture

By Dale Northup
special writer

TWENTY-NINE YEARS after his death, the architectural legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright continues to make itself felt on the American scene. The numerous newspaper and magazine articles about him

have aroused public interest and inspired a third generation of Wright conscious architects.

Auction prices of his works of art have skyrocketed, due in part to pizza king Tom Monaghan's acquisitions and interest in Wright. Michigan holds a unique place in Wright's legacy. He designed 68 works in the state, 31 of these were

built, rating it third after Illinois, where he practiced architecture in his early years, and his home state of Wisconsin.

Now receiving national attention are the Meyer May house in Grand Rapids (1908) and the Gregor Affleck house in Bloomfield Hills (1941). The latter is on the National Register of Historic Places and the former will probably follow suit. Both have been restored to their original pristine condition — the May house by Steelcase of Grand Rapids and the Affleck house by Lawrence Institute of Technology of Southfield.

Meyer May, a Grand Rapids clothier, was a visionary much like Wright. In Wright's designs, he saw something new, something different, something that might appeal in the fashion industry. Consequently, he commissioned Wright to design a house for him in 1908. The house also included furnishings designed by Wright because the architect felt that by controlling every part of the environment he could achieve harmony and unity.

THE HOUSE WAS COMPLETED in 1909. However, after three-quarters of a century, it had suffered the ravages of neglect. Steelcase initiated a restoration project after purchasing the house in 1985. It was a civic gesture to the city of Grand Rapids marking Steelcase's ties with Wright. As manufacturers of office furniture, their first big project was the production of furniture for the new headquarters of Johnson Wax in Racine, Wis. (1938) which was designed by Wright as a "total" environment. The May house project was undertaken by Carls Lind former director of the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation in Oak Park, Ill. Original details were

lost with time.

But after perusal of 4,000 to 5,000 photographs the past was resurrected. Information was also found at the Frank Lloyd Wright and Prairie School Collection of the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Wright's May house had an atmosphere of the prairie with horizontal flow of the landscape echoed in the lines of the house. The large overhanging eaves sagged with age much like someone's face. The facelift involved 19 tons of structural steel with trusses and four vertical posts set into the house to withstand the cantilevered load of the roof extension.

Many of the original furnishings in the house were reclaimed from local sources in Grand Rapids. The original design of the carpeting was found in the Milwaukee archives as well as thread samples. The carpeting was reweoven by hand. It is considered one of the most perfect reproductions of floor covering in a Wright house. The refurbished warm ochre and light green colors of the interior, complemented by the golden oak molding, literally brought back to life a great work of art.

IN 1940 GREGOR AFFLECK, a chemical engineer, commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design his home in Bloomfield Hills. Affleck's ties with Wright go back to his boyhood home in Spring Green, Wis., where his aunt was a secretary to Wright. Being somewhat of an innovator himself, Affleck was enamored of the uniqueness of Wright's designs.

The house Wright designed for the Affleck family is L-shaped with a bedroom wing adjoining the living area, all of which extends out over the side of a ravine.

Mr. and Mrs. Affleck saw draw-

ings and renderings of Wright's famous "Fallingwater" in Pennsylvania and fell in love with its soaring decks and oneness with the surroundings. Consequently, their house has a cantilevered deck atop a brick pier. The house is clad in brick and highland cypress. Wright referred to the latter as the wood eternal.

Affleck and his wife lived in the house until their deaths in the early 1970s. The house was rented until 1979 when the Affleck children donated it to Lawrence Institute of Technology. In those intervening years the house had fallen into a state of disrepair. The concrete deck developed scaling and hairline cracks which water seeped through causing the soffit below to rot. Part of the living room extended out over the ravine exposing the radiant heating pipes which were not adequately insulated, further adding to condensation in the soffit area.

The fascia boards also had considerable weathering and didn't prove to be the wood eternal.

Restoration was begun by the LIT staff and a group of "Friends" chaired by Ivabell Harlan in October of 1986. David Conlin of Birmingham was chosen as the architectural restorer.

Phase one involved replacing the soffit areas of the carport on north side of the house and the deck on the south side. One problem, however, involved the availability of highland cypress which the restoration team thought would be hard to find.

CARPENTER DON Louiselle meticulously took down and numbered each board with the expectation of sanding and reinstalling all of them.

In the meantime a supply of

cypress was found in Arkansas and milled in Tennessee. It was of the same density as the original cypress and would serve to replace many of the boards that had rotted.

Phase one which involved replacing four thousand lineal feet, was completed in February of 1987. Phase two, began in June of 1987, was the replacement of the fascia boards and the wood on the parapets of the deck. This involved 2,000 lineal feet. When the wood was removed on the parapets, diagonal steel bracing was exposed and deemed not sturdy enough. Vertical steel rods were welded every four feet to the 12-inch steel beams which support the deck. The wood was replaced covering up the underlying superstructure.

What was left of the original wood was sawed by LIT students. The wood was then coated with Thompson water seal permitting it to weather a natural glow from within.

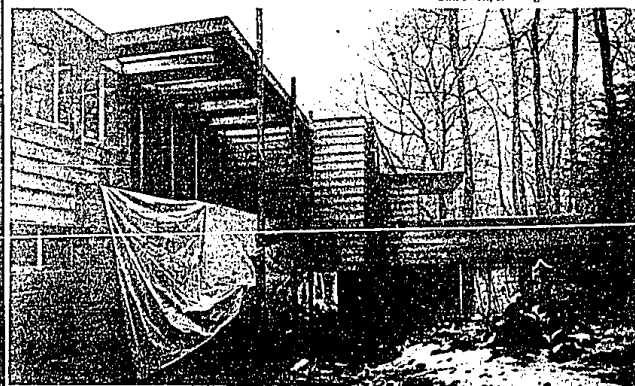
Now the wood and the Affleck house will become eternal for future generations to enjoy. When asked what was going to become of the original replaced cypress, restorer Conlin responded in jest, "We're going to sell it to Tom Monaghan." Monaghan is a devotee of Wright architecture.

The Meyer May house is open to the public for tours 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. every Tuesday and Thursday and 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Sundays. For more information on the Affleck house, call LIT at 356-0200, Ext. 2800, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

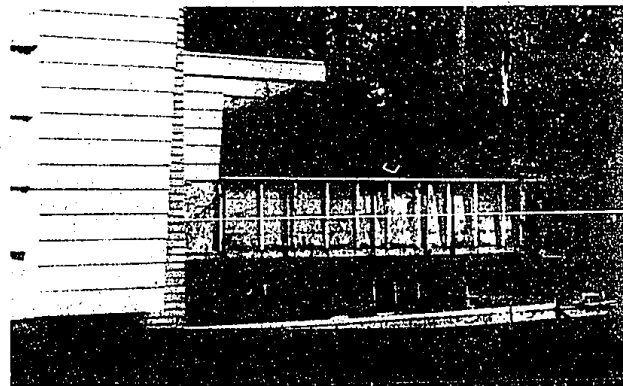
Dale Northup is an architectural historian and professor of art/art history at St. Clair County Community College and adjunct assistant professor of art at the College of Art and Design, Center for Creative Studies.



Gregor Affleck commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design a family home in Bloomfield Hills. This photograph taken in 1969 shows how the architect adapted the building to the terrain.



Affleck House repairs have been going on for several years. In this picture taken two years ago, the deck at right in the photograph had not yet been repaired and a source of new cypress had not yet been found.



When the wood was removed along the parapet of the Affleck House deck, vertical rods were welded every four feet to strengthen the deck. What was left of the wood was either replaced or carefully treated by Lawrence Institute of Technology students so it would be weatherproof and permanent.