TRAVEL

2 Wright homes are spectacular

BY ANNETTE KINGSBURY
STAFF WRITER
akingsbury@oe.homecomm.net

When you ask an artist to build you a house, you can probably expect a few quirks and a few arguments over which takes precedence, artistic vision or livability.

And when the artist was architect Frank Lloyd Wright, clients didn't win those arguments very often. If two Pennsylvania homes are any clue, clients might not have expected much of a kitchen, spacious bedrooms or convenient storage space. They could expect to pour a fortune into the materials, a few structural problems—and a home unlike anyplace else on earth.

In the countryside of western Pennsylvania, just seven miles apart, fans of the late (1867—1959) icon of American architecture can tour two homes created at very different times in Wright's long career. Fallingwater, located in Mill Run and completed during the Depression when Wright had little work, has been owned since 1963 by the Western Pennsylvania Land Conservancy. Kentuck Knob, completed in 1956 in Chalk Hill, has been owned since 1986 by Lord Peter Palumbo, an English businessman and art dealer.

Both houses are built into hillsides back into the woods with spectacular views. Touring them invites the question: What must it have been like to live here? It's a pleasant question to consider.

Fallingwater was created as a weekend retreat for Pittsburgh department store magnate Edgar Kaufmann and his wife Liliane.

If you go...

Getting there: Fallingwater and Kentuck Knob are about 1.5 hours southeast of Pittsburgh. Both are open to the public daily April through November and less frequently in winter. Reservations are strongly suggested (required in winter).

Information: Call Kentuck Knob at (724) 329-1901 or Fallingwater at (724) 329-8501 for reservations or more information, or visit www.paconserve.org and kentuckknob.com.

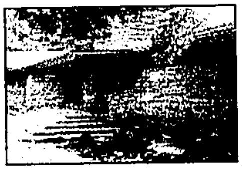
Their son, Edgar Jr., donated it to the Conservancy after their deaths.

Fallingwater is considered the realization of Wright's dream of building a house where man would live entirely in harmony with his natural surroundings, rather than altering the surroundings to accommodate him. Edgar Kaufmann Sr. discovered the site while horseback-riding and asked Wright to build a house that would allow the family a view of the waterfall. Instead, Wright built the house over the waterfall, including a suspended staircase that descends to the water via a "hatch" window, as well as several cantilevered "ledges" that thrust you out into the trees.

Back story

The story goes that Wright visited the site, then designed the house —literally— to sit upon five huge boulders, left where they were found. The boulders provide the support that allows for a three-story glass corner wall and a house that still seems to hover above the stream. The house was flooded in 1956 but survived structurally intact.

It's an engineering marvel stacked over five levels that, though considered Wright's masterpiece, has been controversial right from the beginning. Wright and Kaufmann traded insults over the amount of reinforcing required for the cantilevered concrete "trays." The trays have been plagued with cracking and sagging, but latter-day critics have said that Wright was just so far ahead of his time that the technology just wasn't there yet to accommodate his genius.


Entry: *Kentuck Knob's entry is cocoon-like.*

Even if you accept that it's technically flawed, Fallingwater is stunning. Wright himself said of it, "You listen to Fallingwater the way you listen to the quiet of the country."

Kentuck Knob was built nearly 20 years later, near the end of Wright's long career. It was built for Bernardino and Isaac Newton Hagen, who owned a dairy business in nearby Uniontown and were seeking a retreat from city life.

Hagen had business connections with Kaufmann and visited Fallingwater when it was still a private residence. Those visits led him and his wife to ask Wright to build them a house, but on a much more modest budget. Kaufmann initially contacted Wright for the Hagens, and Kentuck Knob is sometimes referred to as a child of Fallingwater.

Kentuck Knob's living spaces are all on one floor and of a much more human scale than Fallingwater, though it's constructed in a hexagonal rather than square form, creating many oddly shaped rooms. Wright considered the house the "deluxe" model of his budget-conscious Usonian homes, homes designed for middle-class Americans. It's small but jewel-like, with all the interiors in red cypress.

Here again there were structural disagreements. Wright was said to be furious when he was told by a workman on the site that he hadn't incorporated enough support for the asymmetrical roof. But he agreed to the change.

Wright situated both houses so that you can begin to appreciate his work even before you set foot inside. Long, tree-lined, sloping approaches deliberately bring the visitor in slowly, the better to build the excitement and appreciation for the master.

"I went, I saw and I was conquered," Palumbo said of his first sight of Kentuck Knob.

Both homes also have in common their use of natural materials, quarried on site, and Wright's ability to bring the outdoors in through low sight lines and extensive windows. Both also employ narrow passageways and small kitchens and bedrooms. (At Kentuck Knob, beds had to be installed before the master bedroom was completed, it's that tight.)

Though he considered every detail, including furnishings, Wright concentrated the pizzazz into the common spaces, such as living rooms, and exteriors.

For lovers of great homes, visiting Fallingwater and Kentuck Knob is inspiring. You'll never look at your own surroundings the same way again.

Because of the number of levels it occupies, Fallingwater is not handicap accessible. It includes a lot of steps and visitors are advised to wear comfortable shoes. It's also a bit of a hike from the entrance to the house, and can be crowded. An on-site visitors center, including a lunch room and gift shop, provides a few amenities.


Falling water: *Though five stories tall with an even taller central chimney, Fallingwater has a decidedly horizontal feel. This is the view from downstream.*