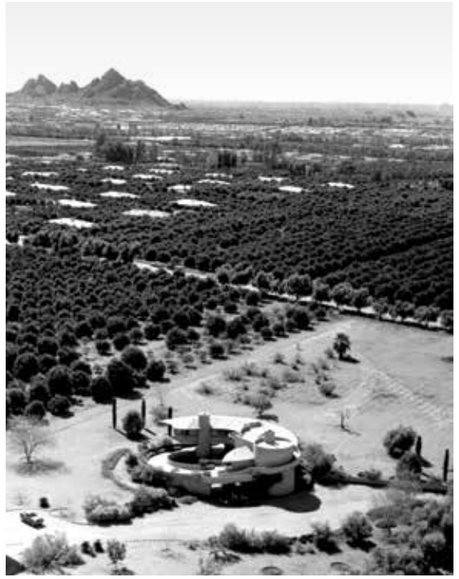
DESERT VISION

Frank Lloyd Wright first came to Arizona in 1927 and soon found inspiration in the Sonoran Desert. The architect set up a winter camp that evolved into a beacon for progressive Southwestern design. **Steven Beschloss** retraces his journey

NICE DIGS
Frank Lloyd Wright's design for Taliesin West embraced the home's Arizona setting, using building materials straight from the desert floor and blending indoor and outdoor spaces.

CAROL M. HIGHSMITH/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



DESERT DWELLER

Clockwise from top left: **Surrounded by Phoenix citrus groves, the Wright House was designed by the architect for his son David; Wright at home; apprentices were expected to help design and build projects; the Rose Pauson House, which burned down in 1943; Wright and family survey the "Ocatilla" Desert Camp.**

TOP LEFT, BOTTOM ROW (2), © 2016 PEDRO E. GUERRERO ARCHIVES; COURTESY THE FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT FOUNDATION (2)

ANDREW PIELAGE

When I was moving to the Phoenix area nearly a decade ago, I knew I needed an anchor, some way to connect with this spread-out place and imagine myself staying. Then I visited Taliesin West, Frank Lloyd Wright's winter retreat in Scottsdale, tucked up against the McDowell Mountains and replete with saguaro cactus. It all began to make sense.

My calculation was simple: If this spot was good enough for one of the world's great architects back in the 1930s when he began building here, surely I could find a humble abode that would remind me how special this place is. Lucky for me, I did, barely a minute away; every day I traverse Frank Lloyd Wright Boulevard, Taliesin Drive and a 500-acre desert preserve right next to Frank's place.

This has led me to explore Wright's rich history and imprint throughout the Phoenix area. This includes the David and Gladys Wright House, the Arizona Biltmore resort, Arizona State University's Gammage theater, and an overall design aesthetic and environmental philosophy — what he named "organic architecture" — that reveres and responds to the indigenous nature by using local materials and creating humanistic structures that resonate with the surrounding landscape.

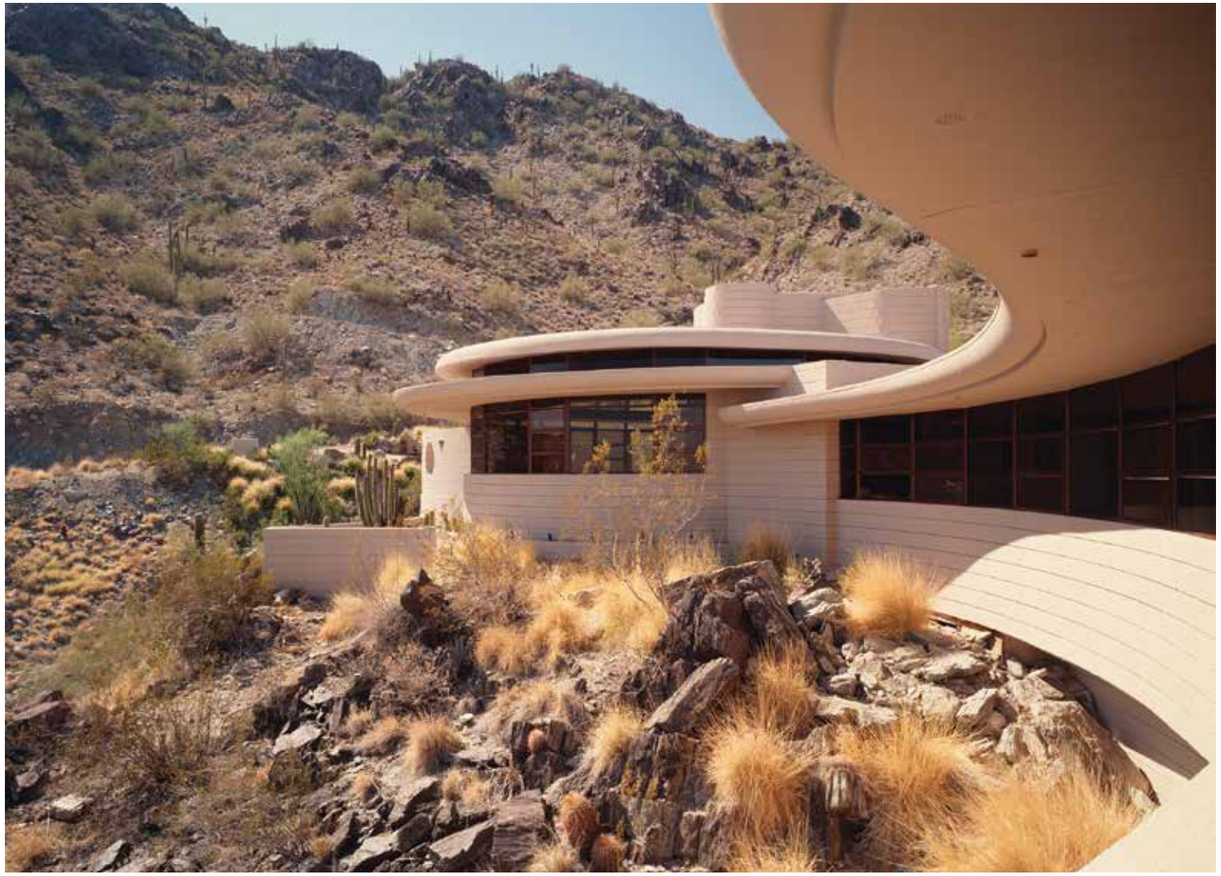
Wright's inspiration here was clear from the beginning. While consulting on the construction and design of the Biltmore in 1928 (Albert Chase McArthur, a former student, was the architect of record), he bypassed a rented apartment and created a makeshift desert camp for his family and staff using white canvas and wood frames — what he named "Ocatilla" and described as an "ephemera" looking like "ships balanced in the breeze." He wrote about this winter project with great pride: "We have met the desert, love it and lived with it, and the desert is ours."

This was in stark contrast to the rising Biltmore, which relied on concrete blocks, including "Biltmore Blocks," a variation of a textile block he used in private homes, precast from desert sand and incorporating one of 34 geometric patterns inspired by palm trees. Opened in 1929, just on the cusp of the Great Depression, the Biltmore has continued to be a luxurious artistic expression and time-honored getaway. The only thing that remains of Wright's commission to design and build another resort, San Marcos-in-the-Desert, are the drawings; that dream was crushed by the stock market collapse in October 1929.

But a serious, indeed delirious, bout of pneumonia in 1936 reignited Wright's desire to come again to the Arizona desert, heeding the advice of his doctor that drier, sunnier climes would extend his life by 20 years. On the heels of his success with the house Fallingwater in western Pennsylvania, he acquired some 600 acres in Scottsdale in 1937, bringing his "fellowship" of apprentices and family and starting construction on the landmark retreat that would be his winter home until his death in 1959. At the spry age of 71, "this was the start of another renaissance for him," says Fred Prozzillo, director of preservation for the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, based at Taliesin West.

IN THE FAMILY

Above: **The Wright House is now home to the architect's 33-year-old great-great-granddaughter, Sarah Levi, who was invited to be its first scholar in residence.**



FINE LINES
Clockwise from top left: **The last home Wright designed, the Norman Lykes House, hit the market this year for $3.6 million; a geometric bell tower at Taliesin West; concrete "Biltmore Blocks" served as the design foundation for the Arizona Biltmore resort.**

What did the master architect himself have to say about Taliesin West and his site selection tucked up to the McDowell Mountains? "I was struck by the beauty of the desert, by the dry, clear sun-drenched air, by the stark geometry of the mountains; the entire region was an inspiration in strong contrast to the lush, pastoral landscape of my native Wisconsin. And out of that experience, a revelation is what I guess you might call it, came the design for these buildings."

Visitors today can still experience the singular beauty and harmonious way these low-slung structures nestle into the environment. "There is pure geometry everywhere you look," Prozzillo says. Native American petroglyphs found (and preserved) here from the Hohokam people only added to the sense of importance. "He felt the history of the site."

The collection of buildings — including living quarters, offices and work studios, a dining hall, library, theaters and other gathering places — made use of desert stone, sand, wood and other found materials that deepen the connection with the landscape. He also constructed calm-inducing interior spaces, something rarely felt in more typical box-like structures. "Wright was great about creating space for people to inhabit — what he called the space within," Prozzillo explains. Often, as you move into the rooms, it can feel tight, even cramped, with narrow passages and low ceilings, but then you enter into a larger open space — a powerful, purposefully created experience that Prozzillo describes as "compression and release."

While Wright treated Taliesin West as a laboratory, trying out new ideas and frequently making changes over the years, he also found time for many other projects. In the Arcadia section of Phoenix that was densely populated with citrus groves, he completed in 1952 (at the age of 86) a concrete block house for his son David and his wife, Gladys. This intensely expressive spiral structure with a curving ramp, rising in the air to experience the treetops and views of Phoenix's iconic Camelback Mountain, provides a creative precursor to Wright's 1959 masterpiece, the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

The David and Gladys Wright House almost faced the wrecking ball after 104-year-old Gladys died in 2008 and a subsequent owner envisioned turning the romantic 6-acre site into a multihouse development. But the acquisition by local lawyer and architecture enthusiast Zach Rawling and his family — along with ongoing efforts to secure landmark status and renovate the private residence into a living museum — is solidifying its place in the community with tours, cultural events, performances and school visits. One nice touch: Sarah Levi, Wright's 33-year-old great-great-granddaughter, was invited to be the first scholar in residence and currently lives in one of the bedrooms.

"It's a dream project … an opportunity to reinvigorate this Wright legacy," says Rawling, who lived nearby and was fascinated by it as a child. As we move through the curved rooms and halls that explode the boxy forms of traditional architecture, past the carefully choreographed built-ins and perfectly preserved (and round) '50s-era kitchen, Rawlings says, "This was Wright announcing the future."

Wright fans also may be intrigued by the circular, salmon-colored ASU Gammage theater on the campus of Arizona State University in Tempe — a 3,000-seat auditorium based on a design originally intended to be an opera house in Baghdad, Iraq, completed in 1964 after Wright's death. One day, enthusiasts might be able to visit the curvaceous Norman Lykes House, Wright's last design, built in 1967, which came up for sale a few months ago. The Phoenix mountainside home was listed for $3.6 million.

But Taliesin West remains the most complete and comprehensive realization of Wright's ideas and ambitions. More than 75 years after Wright and his fellowship first began building, it continues as a functioning, accredited architecture school — requiring its graduate students to live in shelters they create to learn firsthand how their designs and use of materials function in the demanding desert environment. (Tours of the nearly two dozen habitable shelters provide a fund for students to buy materials and, in years past, travel to Greece, Turkey and Japan.)

In the coming months, Taliesin West and Wright's historical legacy may well begin a new chapter. A National Historic Landmark since 1982, it is one of 10 Wright masterworks being given final consideration as a joint UNESCO World Heritage List addition. The list is a collection of natural and cultural sites based on their "outstanding universal value" and such factors as representing "a masterpiece of creative genius."

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Currently, there are 22 World Heritage sites in the U.S., but the Wright works — including Taliesin West, Taliesin in Wisconsin, the Guggenheim, Fallingwater and the Marin County Civic Center in northern California — are the first U.S. nominations for modern architecture.

Wright was rarely modest about his achievements, calling himself the greatest architect of the 20th century. His inclusion on this honored list would not only expand international tourism and exposure to his buildings — it would add fresh credence to his own estimation.

Whether he is the world's greatest or one of the greats, I remain indebted to Wright's eye in choosing this desert location. Every day I am moved by its rugged beauty and the magnetic way the landscape inspires and calms.

TIM STREET-PORTER/OTTO. OPPOSITE PAGE: SCOTTSDALE CVB (TOP); ALBERT MACARTHUR