

Home and Away

On a reunion trip to Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, Andrew Sessa and his brother find surprises—and a surprising sense of familiarity—inside the building's iconic walls.

YOU HEAR Fallingwater long before you see it. This should come as little surprise, given the house's name and its position over the cascade of a rushing stream, but it surprised me nonetheless. I had traveled to the Pennsylvania home designed by Frank Lloyd Wright with my architect brother

Ben. As Wright followers, we'd dreamed of making this pilgrimage since we were kids.

When the two of us approached the house, the sound of the brook bubbled up the curving, tree-shrouded driveway that preceded our first glimpse of the building—just as Wright intended. This slow reveal is exactly what his client, the retail tycoon Edgar J. Kaufmann, would have seen when the home was completed in 1937.

When the building eventually came into view, at the end of the long path, it was almost unrecognizable—even for a Wright obsessive like me. Ben and I found ourselves more than a bit disoriented by the masterpiece we thought we knew so well from photographs. In images of the house—starting with a cover of *Time* magazine in 1938, where a drawing of it was shown in the background of a portrait of Wright—the building appears to teeter and tower over the falls, its terraces pinwheeling out from a four-story column. But seen through the trees, Fallingwater at first looked long and low. Its stacked-sandstone walls and the wings of its impressively cantilevered concrete terraces all extended outward. It felt hunkered down in the hillside—reaching horizontally, rather than stretching skyward.

Wright was too smart to give away the perfect view that early, as are the curators who maintain the home today (and have since 1964, when it became the first house from the Modernist movement to open as a museum). This surprising sleight of hand, Ben and I learned on our tour, was just the first of many tricks Wright deployed in his design.

WE HAD LONG PLANNED to make this trip, but between our weddings, the birth of three children (two for Ben, one for me), and the pandemic, we had

delayed going to this relatively remote corner of southwestern Pennsylvania multiple times. When we finally met at the Pittsburgh airport—Ben having flown in from New York City, me from Boston—it occurred to me that we'd barely seen each other since the pandemic began. I'd nearly forgotten that my kid brother wasn't really a kid anymore.

Hopping in a rental car, we drove an hour and a half south through rolling hills and forests. Following a cathartic conversation about the challenges of parenthood, we talked about the origins of our interest in Wright. Was it a visit to his spiraling Guggenheim Museum, on Manhattan's Upper East Side, or to the nearby Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the living room of Wright's Francis W. Little House is preserved? Ben suggested it could have been the stained-glass windows emblazoned on mouse pads and mugs from museum-shop catalogues.

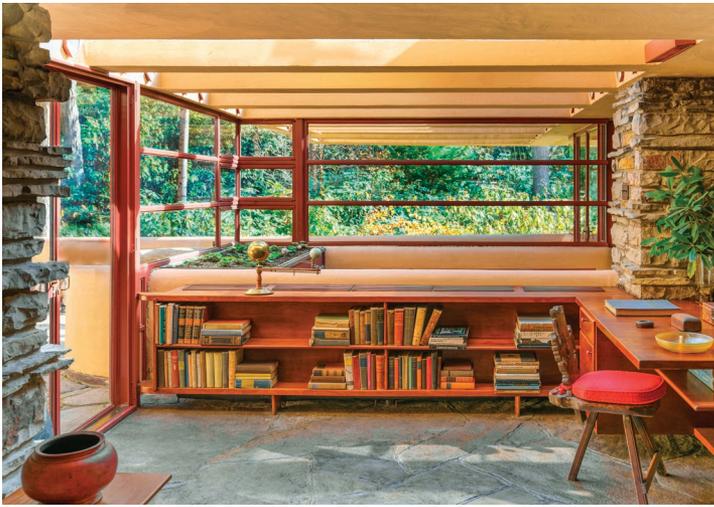
The conversation made me realize that representations of the architect's designs are ubiquitous. Our appreciation of their genius—the way each building combines organic and industrial elements, contemporary and classical notes, form and function—seems absorbed almost by osmosis. We'd seen that iconic image of the house over the falls so many times that we almost felt as if we'd been there, even though we'd never even come close.

AFTER OUR ANTICLIMACTIC first view, we followed our guide, Galen Miller, to the main entrance, which Wright built into what appears to be the back of the house. After walking through ▶

Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, in southwestern Pennsylvania, is one of the architect's most celebrated works.



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► the door, I felt an immediate sense of compression. One of Wright's typically cavellike foyers greeted us: stone walls, low ceilings, minimal square footage, and dim lighting.

Up three stairs, in the open-plan living and dining room, there was more space, but the ceilings remained surprisingly low. As with the foyer, Miller told us, this was also by design: "It forces you to look out, not up." We couldn't help gazing into the woods through the windows that wrap each corner, looking at the native rhododendrons and trees beyond, despite the wonders inside—the boulder that rises out of the ground to become the hearthstone, and, above it, the Kaufmanns' orange-red, spherical cast-iron kettle.

The architecture seemed to pull my entire body outside. Glass doors opened to terraces that overlook the waterfall, and a hatch yielded to a stairway that led down to a platform over the stream.

Miller took us to the family's former bedrooms. These spaces felt more cocoon-like than compressed, offering intimacy, privacy, and protection from the wilds of nature when standing on the gravity-defying terraces. Ben and I marveled not only at the way Wright blended indoors and out but at other aspects of the architecture and interior design, too: window muntins became display shelves, a railing morphed into a planter. In each corner of the building, everything fits together like the pieces of a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle.

Appreciating these details reminded me how much Ben and I loved the house museums we toured with our parents as kids. There was always something

▲ The interior architecture of Fallingwater draws visitors' eyes to the surrounding woods.

voyeuristic about visiting the mansions of Astors and Rockefellers and Vanderbilts—but something soulful, too. Their homes reminded us that even the most famous of figures were human, and more like us than we may have thought.

The tours also helped us appreciate the connections between how people decorated and how they lived. Those relationships—between home and homeowner, style and lifestyle—fascinated us so much, they eventually led us to our careers: my brother, the architect; me, the design and travel writer. By the front door, we smiled at the collection of walking sticks and the small fountain footbath—requested by the Kaufmanns for washing up after their walks in the woods. Miller noted the white wisteria Lillian Kaufmann, Edgar's wife, selected for the guesthouse trellis, and I was reminded of the fruit trees our grandfather planted to remind him of his native Italy.

Following the tour, Ben and I walked downstream to a hidden overlook that

In each corner of the building, everything fits together like the pieces of a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle.



▲ Cantilevered terraces extend out in every direction.

provided the glamour shot, the view we'd been imagining. We wound our way down a forest path, turned around and saw the home from the base of the falls—the way we've always known it. Set above the stream, it seemed as precarious as a Jenga tower.

I understood why Wright didn't want visitors to have this vantage right away. Only by occupying the house—spiraling up its stairs and through its rooms—can you understand it. After you've been inside, it becomes a living organism, imbued not only with the dynamism of Wright's design but also with the personality of the family who called it home.

NOT LONG BEFORE the pandemic, our parents sold the house where Ben and I spent our childhoods. Looking back up at Fallingwater, I wished that our home could have been preserved as a museum, where my son could come to better understand his dad's life in a way that can only be gleaned by seeing the house someone grew up in.

Simultaneously, I remembered that as much as that house mattered to us, the strong, durable, and—perhaps most importantly—mobile relationships forged within it matter even more. Those live on, wherever we go. As we drove back to the airport, I asked Ben what his favorite part of the trip was, and he didn't miss a beat: "Spending time with you." 🌐

fallingwater.org; tours from \$32.