

# OWNER BUILT WRIGHT HOUSES: THE ROBERT BERGER HOUSE, 1950-1973

by Bernard Pyron

THE IDEA OF FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT, THE INTERNATIONALLY FAMOUS PERSONALITY AND MASTER ARCHITECT, DESIGNING AN ORGANIC HOUSE IN THE 1950S FOR THE AVERAGE PERSON TO BUILD THEMSELVES WAS AN INSPIRING, YET LARGELY UNFULFILLED, DREAM.

Wright, greatly influenced in his beliefs by Wisconsin populism, tried several times over his long career to design homes for the person of modest means. He called these home designs “Usonian,” his word to describe a new and democratic American architecture. The first completely realized Usonian design was the First Herbert Jacobs House of Madison, Wisconsin in 1937. A modest, yet strikingly unique home designed for a newspaper reporter and his family for the sum of \$5500. Wright continued to refine his Usonian designs in order to make them more accessible to the common person, incorporating more standardized materials, and simplifying the building techniques; even developing an “Automatic” version using his concrete block system. All of this was done to streamline the process and in Wright’s mind, make it possible for average people to build their own home.

Although some Usonian homeowners did execute a part of the construction work, it was uncommon for anyone to undertake the majority of building project themselves. With the lengths that Wright went to make home construction accessible, why didn’t more people undertake the dream of building their own Frank Lloyd Wright designed home? To understand that question we must examine the many obstacles that conspired against such a dream being realized.

1. Frank Lloyd Wright was in his second “Golden Age” during the 1950s, considered by many to be his most productive period. Many of his larger projects were built or were under construction, such as the Price

Tower in Oklahoma and the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Wright’s fame worked against many average people considering him as a source for a simple home design. It was perceived as unlikely that an architect busy with fifty \$35,000 to \$500,000 houses and several large projects would find it profitable to design a home that would cost no more than \$15,000 if planned to be completely built by the owners.

2. If Wright’s fame didn’t put people off, his infamy might. Wright was no stranger to controversy in either his professional or private life. His colorful lifestyle, his atypical designs and his outspoken ideas were often a source of many raised eyebrows. It was common for his detractors to circulate the notion that Wright designed only for the rich or that he did not consider costs at all. An average person might “lose their shirt” if they employed the eccentric master architect.

3. It is a prevalent notion that house construction requires the expert: the contractor, the subcontractor, the mason, the carpenter, the plumber and the electrician. It is true that many suburban areas have extensive zoning laws to protect public safety. But the idea that only an expert can properly follow these rules is often furthered out of professional self-interest than fact. The “Do-It-Yourself” method was often thwarted by these feelings of technical helplessness or bureaucratic zoning red tape.

4. Most of the people who developed an architectural appreciation to the point of wanting a Frank Lloyd Wright house were professionals who usually had



For a definitive look at the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, check out *The Frank Lloyd Wright Companion*, by William Allin Storrer or visit <http://www.franklloydwrightinfo.com/> for more details.

minimal experience with manual labor or saw that type of work as beneath them. Many could not stand the physical strain of building a house or feel that they would not enjoy building a house themselves in their leisure time. However, some people realize that when creative physical labor is left out of their lives they feel a sense of inadequacy. It's often an epiphany to many that creative physical labor improves their physical, as well as, their psychological health.

5. The average person does not wish to live in a house that remains unfinished for several years and cannot tolerate the mess and other lifestyle disadvantages. It's assumed that only someone who really enjoys the process of building would desire such an arduous undertaking. Otherwise, a person would be better off to buy standard track housing.

6. Lending agencies at the time were already fearful of lending money on a Frank Lloyd Wright house, and would likely be doubly skeptical of a "non-expert" owner undertaking the building of the home.

These obstacles were enough to put many off from the prospect of building any home, let alone one designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Yet one man approached Wright in 1950 with the request that the architect not only design him a house, but one he could build himself. Robert Berger was an engineering teacher of modest means. Having found a lot in Marin County, California, he recounted in the late 1960s about how he originally started to design his own home:

*"I was a trained engineer. Of course, like any engineer, since they can draw lines and can compute, everyone thinks they can design a home. And a lot of people do. However, it's been my experience that most engineers essentially end up designing a box. I was dissatisfied with the box. Every time I would start with the design, I'd end up with a box."*<sup>1</sup>

Frustrated with his designs, Berger turned to architectural magazines for inspiration. He happened upon the

January 1948 issue of *Architectural Forum*, dedicated entirely to the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. Berger recounted, "I just fell head over heels in love with the type of housing he was designing."<sup>2</sup> Over a cup of coffee at lunch one day, Robert told his wife that he was going to ask Frank Lloyd Wright to design their house. Berger sent a handwritten letter to Taliesin West, asking Wright for a house design that Robert could build himself. It was a shot in the dark, but if nothing came of the request, he would only be out the cost of a stamp.

Robert received a reply from Eugene Masselink, Mr. Wright's secretary, stating Berger was to send a prospectus and a topographical map of the proposed site. Frank Lloyd Wright would design his house!

Unfortunately, the outbreak of the Korean War and Robert's duty in the armed forces forced an intermission in progress on the house design. On his way back to California after the conclusion of his service duties, Robert Berger met with Wright in Spring Green, Wisconsin. Upon confirming that Wright would design his house and it would cost no more than \$15,000, Berger proceeded to finish the home site's topographical map and send it to Taliesin in 1950. Robert Berger shares the story of starting to build his house in a letter sent to the author:

*"...it has taken me 5 years to build enough to move into. I started building in 1953 (the plans were obtained in 1951) and we moved into the uncompleted first unit July 1957. My house is probably unusual in several respects for Mr. Wright. First, the house was to be built completely by the owner and second, the house was designed originally to be expanded from one bedroom to three by adding a wing...Incidentally, one of my requirements was that the house be easy to build. This requirement was forgotten by Mr. Wright since I probably have the heaviest house in Marin County. I figured that I have lifted more than a million pounds in the last five years in the building. Actually, the house has presented no great difficulties to me though I have never built a house before. I hadn't even*

1. Page 104, *Frank Lloyd Wright Remembered*, Patrick J. Meehan, 1991

2. Page 106, *Frank Lloyd Wright Remembered*, Patrick J. Meehan, 1991

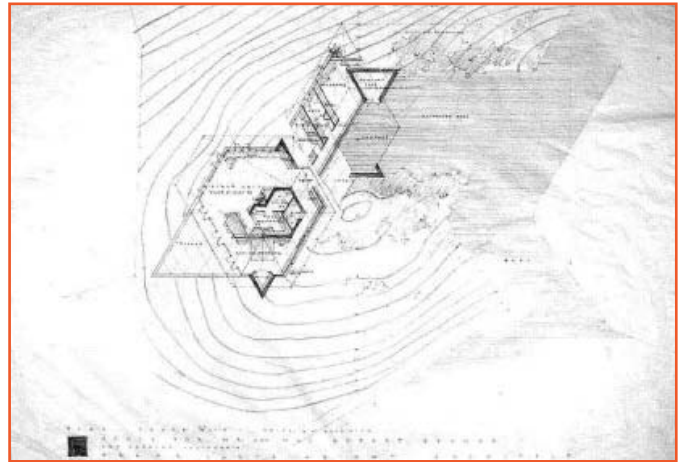
paid the lot off when Mr. Wright designed the house. I earned the house myself...I'm probably the poorest client Mr. Wright ever had...I did not do the radiant heat installation because it was put in two days whereas it would have taken me a couple of weeks, The concrete floor was the only job in the house I could not do myself since it required about 8 men at once to pour and steel trowel the large floor area before it began to set.

It has amazed me the number of so-called technical jobs such as plumbing, wiring, etc that I have been able to do. They are not so difficult. Many people could do them if they wanted to. I keep reading of people who supposedly have built their own homes and in most cases they contracted out these jobs. They poured their money down the drain. The house is extra beautiful to my wife and I since we built it with blood, sweat and tears and not with a pen and check.”<sup>3</sup>



(figure a. Photo copyright Scot Zimmerman)

The Robert and Gloria Berger Residence (S.330)<sup>4</sup>, well placed on its three-quarter of an acre hill site, overlooks a valley inside the city limits of San Anselmo (figure a). As seen in the preliminary floor-plan, Wright designed the home using the 60 and 120-degree angled unit, commonly referred to as the “diamond module,” which yields a variety of shapes including triangles, parallelograms, and hexagons (figure b).



(figure b. Drawing photographed by author with permission)

The home’s exterior is made primarily of local stone and concrete, mixed together in a fashion Wright dubbed “desert masonry.” A newspaper article at the time described the following process Robert used to make the walls of his home:

“The walls are made by use of wooden forms. Thin slices of Sonoma candy rock, which Berger must split from larger chunks himself, are faced against both sides of the form. In the center between the two wooded forms, Berger pours a mixture of rocks and concrete. The concrete seeps through the Sonoma stone facing edges and adds to the texture of the wall.”<sup>5</sup>

The reddish-brown stones of the Berger house were not laid on top of one another and held by mortar as in more conventional stonework. Instead, forms were placed so that a space was left for the width of the wall and rocks were placed against the forms so that they would show when the concrete was poured in to hold them in place. Probably, steel rods were placed at intervals within the walls and, most likely, the walls were built in vertical sections, and not created in their full height at one time. Working with vertical sections, each of a few feet in height, would have enabled Berger to more easily select the rocks he wanted to show on the outside of the finished walls (figure c). To achieve

3. Personal letter from Robert Berger to author, 1957

5. *Marin Independent Journal*, 1958

4. Number assigned to the Berger residence in *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, a complete catalog*, by William Allin Storrer (University of Chicago Press).





(figure c. Photograph by Bruce Radde circa 1958)

the desired effect, Berger had to cut a lot of rock. This is the system Wright worked out for the bottom part of the walls of Taliesin West, in Arizona.

The overall result of utilizing the “desert masonry” effect is one of permanence. Described as “...a veritable fortress of a house...Its solidness is obvious at once. But its simplicity of line and rugged design are compatible with the wild rough terrain. ‘It’ll sit there a thousand years,’ a friend observed to the builder.”<sup>6</sup>



(figure d. Photograph by Robert Berger circa 1953)

With the rugged San Anselmo hills as an inspiring backdrop, Berger started construction in 1953 and used a tent to live in during the first phase of the building (figure d). The house was designed to be in two units, with the home’s main entry at the spot where the two units join together. The first unit is a lop-sided hexagonal shape built around a hexagonal solid rock core. The core rises above the roof and contains a bath, the fireplace, the utility room and the kitchen (or “work space” as Wright referred to it.) The dining room area flows naturally off the kitchen and into the larger living room.



(figure e. Photos copyright Scot Zimmerman)

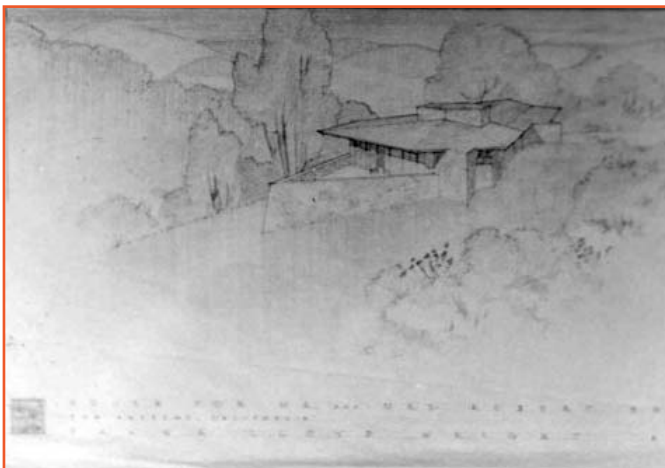
The living area encompasses three sides of the central kitchen and is made up of 120-degree corners, unlike the 90-degree corners typically found in most houses. A large, built in seating area follows the contour of two of the exterior living room walls and faces an imposing stone fireplace. The fireplace is made up of the same “desert masonry” technique as the rest of the exterior walls and is an integral part of the central core in the first hexagonal unit (figure e). All exposed wood in the Berger House is of Philippine mahogany, and can be found in the cabinets, the ceiling paneling and Wright designed furniture.

6. *Marin Independent Journal*, 1957



(figure f. Photo by Robert Berger, circa 1957)

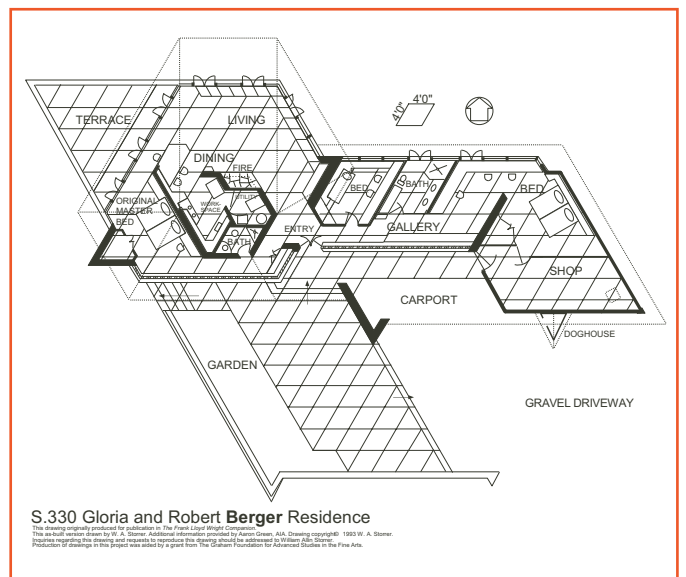
14 inch-thick desert masonry walls extend out from the side of the first unit in a line to form a dramatic triangular terrace (figure f). The terrace is open off the living area and part of the original master bedroom and rides the slope of the hill. Just as Mr. Wright intended, the home sits on the side of the hill, not on the hill-crown. As seen in the building's perspective drawing, the terrace extends out from the central kitchen/living area (figure g), which adds to the “fortress” looking quality of the house. The house appears as if it was built to withstand calamities of nature as well as attacks from any would-be intruders (figure h).



(figure g. Drawing photographed by the author with permission)

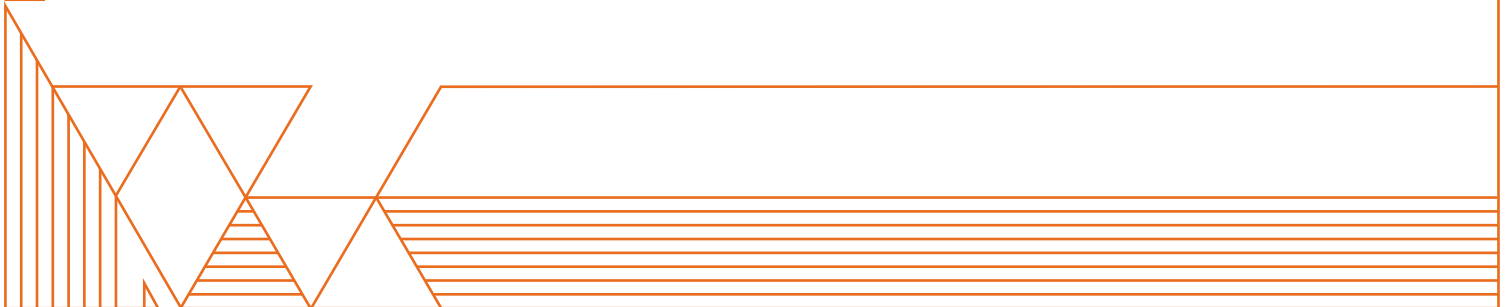


(figure h. Photo copyright William Allin Storrer)



(figure i. Schematic copyright William Allin Storrer)

The second unit, known as the bedroom wing, is built off of the side of the first lop-sided hexagon unit (figure i). The bedroom wing consists of two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a workshop. A carport extends off of the workshop and is anchored next to the garden patio (figure j). The famous Wright designed doghouse, commissioned by Robert's son, is also located off of the second unit and makes use of the same module design as the main house (figure k).







(figure j. Photo copyright William Allin Storrer)



(figure k. Photo copyright William Allin Storrer)

By 1957 the main living area was finished and Robert, his wife Gloria and their four children could move in. The family camped in sleeping bags until the bedroom wing was completed two years later. Throughout this period, Berger did most of the work himself. Unfortunately, Roberts did not live to see the final details finished in his living work of art. Berger fell ill in 1969, and died in 1973. After Robert's death, Gloria Berger hired a professional carpenter to finish

the job, including the construction of the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed furniture.

At one point before his death, Robert Berger reflected upon the process of building and living in his Frank Lloyd Wright designed/owner-built home:

*"I, of course, when I started the house, had a dream. I wanted something that was beautiful first and utilitarian second. I found that the utility followed right along with the beauty, but to get to the beauty... it's hard to talk about it. It's a very emotional thing. I'm absolutely crazy about the house. It's almost like my own child. I've seen those rocks in the fireplace probably for the last fifteen years—I've lived in the house for about twelve years—and every time I look at them they look different. It's just a constant—the constant idea of beauty in the house. I feel as if I am surrounded by it. Sometimes [I] wake up at night and I'll walk around; sometimes I'll go out onto the terrace and look back at the house. I just can't walk around the house without seeing beauty. I really feel sorry for people who live in a house they use strictly as a shelter from the elements. It's such a thrill to be feeling a work of art; actually living it. It's almost like a living thing. I'm just overjoyed with the place."<sup>7</sup>*