

EXPLORE WRIGHT

VOLUME 01 • NUMBER 01



Welcome to the inaugural issue of EXPLORE WRIGHT, a new publication from the folks behind Wright Society. We started this bi-monthly publication as a way to not only delve deeper into the almost endless topics related to Frank Lloyd Wright's life and work, but also as a tangible way to give something extra to our supporters. Without your moral support and financial help we would not be able to continue to bring you new insights and fresh perspectives into the Architect that has so profoundly impacted our world.

We launch this new publication by turning the spotlight on one of Frank Lloyd Wright's most beloved and respected works of architecture

in Los Angeles: The George D. and Selma Sturges Residence (1939). This modestly-sized home is often sadly overshadowed when the topic of Wright's L.A. work is discussed and debated. However, very good things come in small packages and as this issue will explore, this axiom is especially true with respect to the Sturges House. We hope this issue will provide you some insight into what makes this brick and wood wonder so special.

We hope to bring you many more Wright-related topics like this in the EXPLORE WRIGHT publication over the coming months. Let us know what you think and if you have suggestions for future topics, contact us at mail@wrightsociety.com and let us know. ■

ABOVE: The defining feature of Wright's Sturges House is the gravity-defying cantilevered terrace with distinctive overhanging trellised roof line. Photograph © 2017, Lisa Kelly.



SIMPLEST AND BEST

THE STORY OF THE STURGES HOUSE

“Herewith sketches for the Sturges. I think it is self explanatory. Take it to them for their reaction. It is one of the simplest things we have done and one of the best.”

With this concise statement sent to Taliesin apprentice John Lautner on February 11, 1939, Frank Lloyd Wright summed-up one of his most successful and dramatic organic architectural creations: The Selma and George D. Sturges House. But this modest Usonian home has lingered too long in the shadow of Wright’s other more epic and complex Los Angeles creations like Hollyhock House or the myriad “Textile Block” houses dotted throughout the city. Yet, this compact brick and wood creation located in the Brentwood district of L.A. represents an amalgamation of Frank Lloyd Wright’s ideas from the apex of his career during the latter half of the 1930s. As such, it shares much in common with three other contemporaneous and iconic Wright buildings.

The Sturgeses were ideal clients for the 71-year old architect when they contacted Wright to design them a small and simple home in 1938. They were open to modern ideas and had long been impressed with Wright’s work. George was an engineer at the Lockheed Martin Aircraft Corporation, which made him technically savvy, interested in design, and willing to embrace the new and bold. The couple was also looking for a small cottage of a home to be built on a steeply hilly site—two design challenges Frank Lloyd Wright would have undoubtedly relished tackling.

After George had drawn out the site plan and sent it to Taliesin in the fall of 1938 for review, Wright responded a few months later in January 1939 with a dramatic home design worthy of an engineer at an aerospace company. The 1200 square foot, 2 bedroom, 1 bathroom house is comprised of a strong brick-veneered concrete core integrated firmly into the hillside that has a dynamic wood-sided structure growing forth and cantilevering with startling fashion into space. The overall impression is one of a structure on the verge of taking flight from the steep perch it has suddenly emerged from.

Angelenos have long since grown accustomed to seeing sleek modern homes dot the hills and streets of their city. But it is hard to overstate how shocking the Sturges’s almost otherworldly flat-roofed home must have been for people passing by in the late 1930s. Yet, the Sturges House perfectly represents the spirit of the era in which it was built. It’s also a perfect distillation of ideas Wright was experimenting with in three of his major architectural touchstones of the 1930s: The First Jacobs House, The S.C. Johnson Wax Administration Building, and his most famous building of all time, Fallingwater.

Like its Madison, Wisconsin cousin, Jacobs I, the Sturges House’s design is quintessentially Usonian: A limited palette of natural materials used inside and out; flat roofs and strong horizontal lines to wed the home to the earth; built-in furnishings and shelving to economize

ABOVE: View of the rear of the house, including the drive up to the multi-stall covered carport. Photograph © 2017, Lisa Kelly.

OPPOSITE TOP: A view looking up at the underside support of the cantilevered terrace. Photograph © 2017, Lisa Kelly.

OPPOSITE MIDDLE: Section drawing of the Sturges House.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Plan drawing of the Sturges House.

Both drawings via Frank Lloyd Wright’s Usonian Houses: The Case for Organic Architecture by John Sergant, pg 53.

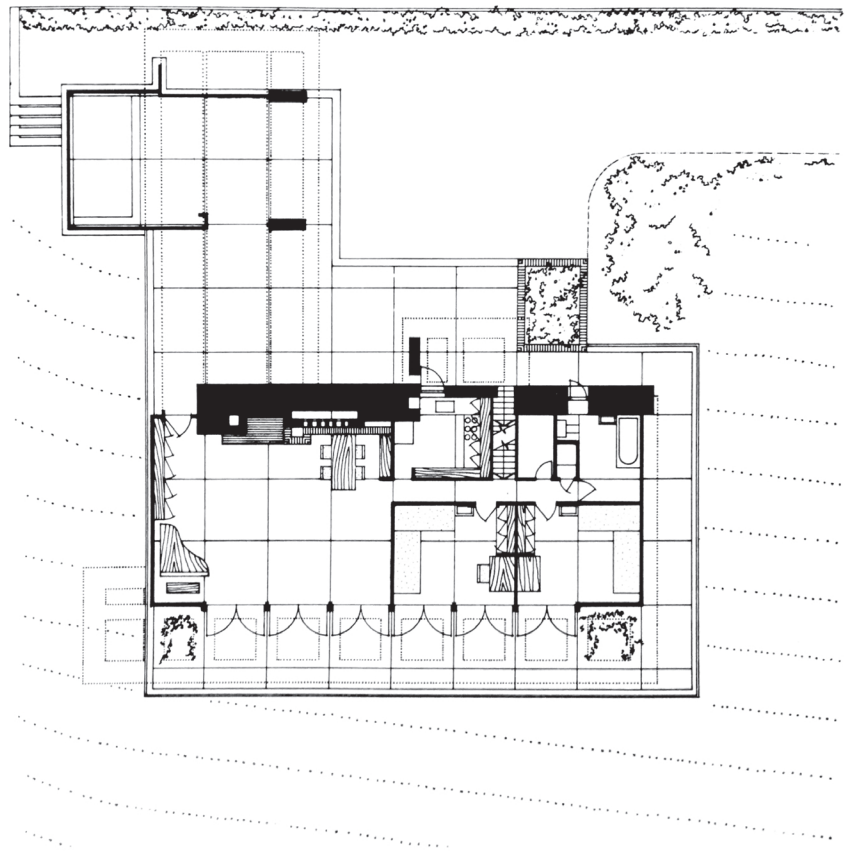
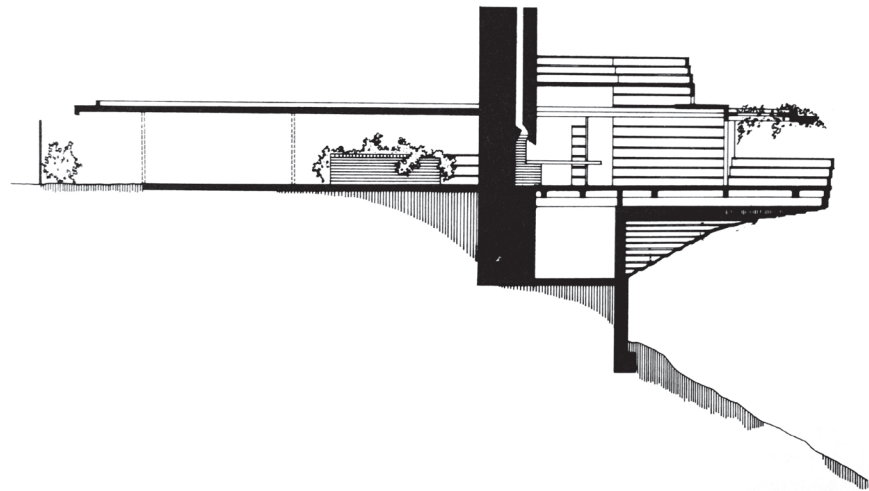
space and maximize function; compact yet open floor plans suited to the individuals that lived there; and always long bands of glass doors and windows to let the outside in along with plenty of natural sunlight.

1939 was an auspicious year because it also happened to be the same year that the two other buildings that share a common bond with the Sturges House were completed: The S.C. Johnson Administration Building in Racine, Wisconsin and the Kaufmann House (better known as Fallingwater.)

The 1930s was a decade made notable by America's love affair with machines and speed. Large chromed cars, globe-trotting airplanes, and massive ocean-going steam ships we're made to look even faster through styling. Frank Lloyd Wright dabbled in this streamlining craze by incorporating sleekly rounded features into the S.C. Johnson Administration Building. The Sturges House, although smaller and with a different mix of materials, still shares the same Machine Age spirit as its streamlined Wisconsin cousin. Perhaps it was the unique hilly location coupled with the client's profession as an aerospace engineer that lead to Wright designing a futuristic-looking home that appears as if its speeding off of its site and taking off into the wild blue yonder. In this way, both Wright-designed structures celebrate America's speed-loving design.

Fallingwater is the unequalled residential masterpiece of Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural career. The growing influence of the "International Style" architects from across the Atlantic were doing their best to relegate Wright and his architecture to the past. Frank Lloyd Wright beat them at their own ideological game by creating Fallingwater for Pittsburgh department store magnate, Edgar J. Kaufmann. The iconic "home over the waterfall" was indelibly branded in the minds of the public thanks to its impossible gravity-defying cantilevered terraces and appearance of growing naturally out of its site. Although on a much more modest scale, the Sturges House recalls the visual daring of Fallingwater with its own cantilevered terrace. Meant not only to add visual drama to the design, the 54 foot long terrace also extends the functional living space of the compact cottage to the sunny outdoor environment. The overhanging trellis above the terrace adds another cantilevered motif to the home, as well as adds some geometric shade from the sun to those enjoying the view.

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ABOVE: This higher street side vantage allows a better sense of the dramatic cantilever and a view of the windowed doors leading from the living room to the terrace and the geometric wooden trellis overhang. Photograph © 2017, Lisa Kelly.

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Although the Sturges House shares many similar ideas as other contemporary Wright works, it is far from an also-ran. Wright saw an opportunity with a special site and a special client couple to further explore ideas expressed in Jacobs I, SC Johnson Wax, and Fallingwater—but do it in a wholly unique way.

The home has had several subsequent owners after the Sturgeses sold it in 1951. Television actor Jack Larson and film director James Bridges eventually became the stewards of the home in the late 1960s and had it sensitively restored. Larson and Bridges took excellent care of the house for decades and after Jack's passing in 2015, the home was offered, along with several of its artworks and furnishings, at a February 2016 auction to benefit the Bridges/Larson Foundation.

Today, the home can still be seen audaciously flying off its hillside to the wonder and delight of passers by. It's no wonder that this special house was held in special regard by its creator, Frank Lloyd Wright, who stated in one his final letters to the Sturgeses: *"Your house is a remarkable aristocrat among houses."* ■