

STANLEY ROSENBAUM
P. O. BOX 406
FLORENCE ALABAMA

May 26, 1948.

Mr. Henry R. Hope,
Indiana University,
Bloomington, Indiana.

Dear Mr. Hope:

In reply to your letter, I will be glad to give you all the information you wish concerning my Frank Lloyd Wright house, but I must avail myself of your offer to keep it confidential, other than to your faculty group.

You ask about priorities. There weren't any in 1940, when we built the house. I can think of nothing else in the way of difficulty and tribulation that we missed out on, however.

Mr. Wright has never seen the house and we have never seen Mr. Wright. We wrote him in 1939, asking him to design us a house, something on the order of the Jacobs house, and the furniture to go in it. We mentioned \$7500 as the amount we felt we could afford.

Six months later, after considerable prodding from us, the plans arrived. We understand that this is something of a record for Mr. Wright. We had sent him a considerable amount of data during the process: a map showing the various levels of our lot, photographs of the view, a statement of our tastes and interests, and a small list of features we would like to see included in the house. (This last was entirely disregarded)

The plans arrived, beautiful and somewhat puzzling. The question was now what we could do with them. Getting a bid out of one of the local contractors was unthinkable: they looked at the plans but they didn't really believe what they saw. We wrote Mr. Wright, requesting that he send us down some one from Taliesin. We would pay his expenses and a small salary. He would let sub-contracts and superintend the entire construction. This plan was gradually evolved in correspondence between Mr. Wright and ourselves. It was the only way that seemed practical to get the "Usonian Home for Stanley and Mildred Rosenbaum" built.

The young man from Taliesin arrived in December. Because my further references to him will not be all complimentary, I prefer to use a pseudonym in talking about him. Let's call him Jack.

Jack took bids and let out contracts for the concrete work; bricklaying; mill work; plumbing and heating; and electrical work. Adding to this the probable cost of the carpenter labor and the other matters on which no contracts were let, the cost of the house was re-estimated at \$9,000. This was something of a blow, but we comforted ourselves with the thought that we were using only cypress throughout the house, instead of the fir which Wright had originally specified. (As a matter of fact, fir is as expensive here as cypress. Wright was delighted with the substitution. The only wood we could have used whose cost would have compared with the cost of fir in Wisconsin, would have been pine).

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Wright had estimated that it would take Jack ten weeks in Florence to complete the house. It took him eight months.

You see, Jack was a hero-worshipper. It took me quite a while to realize (in my ignorance of construction and my own reverence for Wright) to what extent this was true. If there was something in the Master's plans which obviously wouldn't work, the thing to do was to follow the blueprints exactly with a sublime faith in some sort of transubstantiation taking place in the process which would infallibly make it work after all. After all, no one had believed that the pillars in the Johnson Wax Building would work, either.

Therefore, without consulting us or any one else, Jack would pursue impossibilities in the plans, things which afterwards had to be done all over again at great additional expense, or things which were not worth the expense of correcting and so remain wrong until this day.

For instance, the ceiling of the living room, 27 feet long, did not have enough support. It sagged alarmingly. The carpenters and every one else around that knew anything of construction had pointed out in advance that this would necessarily happen, but Jack had gone blithely ahead. After it was completed, Jack occupied the carpenters for six solid weeks in inventing and trying expedients to keep the ceiling up. Whenever the props were removed, the ceiling immediately sagged again. A couple of I-beams were the obvious necessity, but Jack felt that their absence from the plans precluded the possibility of such a radical step. I finally forced him to wire an account of the situation to Wright. Wright immediately telegraphed back that I-beams had been intended all the time and that some one had stupidly left them off the plans by error.

This same situation was duplicated all over the house. Parts of the ceiling sagged here and there and necessitated changing certain invisible features of the construction. Walls gave for six inches or so when you leaned on them and inconspicuous props had to be devised. The house was situated on the lowest portion of the lot, and when it rained, the water flowed halfway up the carpenters' knees in the living-room. A complicated drainage system was devised and laid down. It was later supplemented several times as it proved insufficient.

Because Mr. Wright had not specified waterproof plywood for outside use, ordinary plywood was used for the eaves and under the carport. Most of it was ruined during the first hard rain. By the time that happened we felt too discouraged and bankrupt to replace any of it except the pieces actually hanging down in shreds. As time went on we replaced the pieces which became intolerable but most of it is still the original plywood today, corrugated by moisture but still passable. We have departed from our high ideals and use fir plywood instead of cypress. (All the original cypress plywood had to be made up specially and cost three times as much as the fir; the fir plywood is practically undistinguishable from the cypress)

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Radical changes had to be made in some of the chairs. The easy chairs, for instance, were not merely not easy--it was almost impossible to keep seated in them at all, the portion of one's anatomy which they supported was so small. Expensive changes had to be made again. We went through great tribulations in having the upholstery made.

Mr. Wright fumed at the unconscionable delay and frequently demanded that Jack return at once. We pled that he be allowed to remain. We already knew that he was ruining us, but we knew no way of finishing the house at all without him--and that had become the one fixed object of our tormented lives. Jack had been at Taliesin for five years before we had seen him. He had been in the drafting department, but this was the first time he had been out on an actual job. He was a wonderful designer, incidentally.

The workmen worried us a good deal. They were depressed by our lack of progress. The carpenter foreman used to get drunk on week-ends and visit our friends and relatives to warn them that the entire structure would collapse shortly after completion or even earlier. He found wide credence.

Jack finally deteriorated to the point where he allowed us to do a few things that he hoped the Master would never hear of. Wright, for instance, has a novel and pleasant manner of laying bricks, highly effective in theory but difficult to carry out in a satisfactory manner. White mortar is used for the horizontal joints and is scratched out to the depth of perhaps a half-inch. Red mortar (as close to the color of the bricks as possible) is used for the vertical joints and is made level with the bricks. You are supposed to get a sort of striped effect by this means, which is quite striking. In practice, the bricklayers were driven frantic (and were constantly quitting the job) by the impossibility of keeping the two color mortars from running into and spoiling each other. There was a lot of reddish smudge in almost all the white mortar. Solution: we painted the white mortar white. The effect was thus achieved with complete success, but Jack trembled lest Wright (to whom paint and plaster are anathema) ever hear.

We couldn't move Jack to use a slight grade on the terrace and roof. Mr. Wright had said that they were to be flat and Jack was going to make them as flat as possible. Jack pointed out that water wouldn't remain on a flat surface. We argued in vain that a mathematically exact plane was not to be attained by us, and that depressions would be left in which puddles of water would remain. This is what happened. The slightest, most imperceptible pitch would have avoided this, but it wasn't in the plans.

The house cost us \$14,000 by the day we moved in, and we stopped counting then, though corrections to original mistakes went on for months. This recital of our woes has still a little way to run, so I would like to parenthesize the remark here, to be amplified later, that we are

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really, strange as it may seem, despite everything, greatly attached to our ~~house~~ home and completely spoiled for ever living in a conventional house again.

We had engaged Mr. Wright at his customary fee of 10%. He asked us for 10% of the \$14,000, feeling that this was the amount he was entitled to. We vigorously dissented from this view in a long letter which explained how the great additional expense had been incurred partly by errors and omissions in the plans, and even more by Jack's misjudgments and blind hero-worship. We hadn't complained about Jack to Mr. Wright until the house was finished and the question of the fee came up. We hated to do it then (he was a nice, sincere boy and enormously well-intentioned) but there was no way to give Mr. Wright a clear view of the case otherwise. Mr. Wright never wrote again about the fee. We had paid him \$600 in advance for the plans, and that was the last we gave him. (Remember we had supported Jack for 8 months, though, which came to quite a tidy sum)

The house was finished, but not our troubles. In fact, they have never ceased, though the tempo has slowed considerably during the last year or so.

To begin with, there was the roof. It consisted of layers of felt and asphalt topped off with a special mixture of concrete, asphalt and fibre which had been invented by one of Mr. Wright's sons. It started cracking immediately, and was in thousands of pieces within a few months. Of course, it leaked considerably. Also, since there were no gutters or downspouts, matter from the roof constantly washed over the facia, discoloring them badly. We had a complete new roofing job done, and a little strip of copper put all around the roof so the water could drip off it and the facia would be protected. The new roofing was put over the old "Wearcoat", and as the latter continued to crack, it ruined the new job too. Our roof has been leaking for several months now again. We have a new job ordered, but with the present labor shortage we have been unable to get anything done.

The problem of the outside wood constantly getting dirty was solved by a good sandpapering and then a coat of varnish, renewed annually. Jack told us that Wright frowned on varnish. We found it not only necessary for a clean appearance, but parts of the wood were ~~actually~~ beginning to rot before we applied it.

All our leakage trouble did not come from the roof. Water seeped through the walls, both the brick and the wooden ones, until we finally managed to get local remedies applied at each point.

We had two beautiful fireplaces--one in the living-room and one in the study. Both of them smoked execrably every time we lit a fire. We wrote Mr. Wright. He sent us drawings of suggested changes in the chimneys. We spent some money making these changes, and lit more

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log fires hopefully. They smoked worse than before, if anything. We don't use them any more.

We have radiant heating. We are strongly in favor of it. In our case, however, it has been accompanied by a severe financial headache. The A. M. Byers Co. wrote me a letter a few weeks ago, stating that they were much interested in my radiant heating system as it was one of the only two in the world which used electricity as fuel, which is the most completely automatic method. I don't know who the other one of the two is, but I would like to meet him and compare notes. Mr. Wright had specified oil heating, but oil heating is not customary here, and the oil is difficult and expensive to obtain. Jack assembled figures (purely theoretical) to prove that electricity would be as cheap. Despite the cheapness of the electric rate here (it averages less than 1¢ a kilowatt ~~hour~~ hour for me) and the mildness of the weather, my electric bill runs \$70 a month during the winter months. The average household hereabout uses coal and spends around \$50 per annum for fuel. Our heating has been a very pleasant and satisfactory thing, except for the expense. Our house was extremely draughty the first winter, but weatherstripping later took care of that.

The storage space in the house appeared unusually ample on the plans and it really is--but it's all small storage space. There is no attic, no basement, no back-porch, none of those unfunctional but sometimes convenient appendages that most houses have. There is no place to put a washing machine or a bicycle, a trunk or a dog. Consequently we can have none of these things.

The main fault of the furniture is that it's tippable. You must sit in the exact center of gravity on the dining room chairs or they will dump you unceremoniously. Guests must be cautioned. The tables have no support at the corners, unlike the tables that most people are accustomed to. Some one is always apt to lean a careless elbow on a corner and capsize a table with its contents. The ~~xxxxxxx~~ easy chairs have broad flat arms which look approximately horizontal--but they're not. Every one has a tendency to set any glass of liquid he may be drinking on that deceptive arm. It may promptly disappear over the edge.

The floor consists of concrete sections, two by four feet (everything in the house is based on this unit; consequently the doors are only two feet wide) with expansion joints between. Since the floor of the house is continuous with the floor of the terrace, many of the expansion joints run under the threshold from the outside to the inside, thus providing a safe, comfortable and apparently irresistible passageway for the many kinds of insects which luxuriate in our climate here.

But enough of complaints! I have covered all the major ones, anyway, and a good many of the minor. Before turning to the advantages, I would like to devote a paragraph to the impression the house made on our fellow townspeople.

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All the other houses here were of strictly conventional designs: not another one was even slightly tinged with modernism. During construction our house looked like nothing they had ever imagined to our fellow citizens. A large crowd came every day to look; on Sundays, the crowd was so thick that it was really difficult to elbow one's way through the house. It was nothing unusual to have a dozen or more cars lined up in a row by the curb of our house in our quiet subdivision, while the occupants strolled marvellingly around the premises.

The house did look almost incomprehensible (unless you knew the plans) while it was being built. After the concrete floor and the brickwork had been laid down, the roof was done next--on temporary supports--and the walls supplied later. The public received its greatest shock, however (one from which it has never entirely recovered), when the front wall went up. The plain expanse of cypress boards and battens (only slightly relieved by the transoms and carport) which fronts on the street, is simply incredible to the people here. It is not at all unpleasant to my eyes or my wife's and at Taliesin they speak of it admiringly as having "swish", but it seems to bring a feeling of positive pain to the untutored.

My wife and I were apprehensive that the deluge of visitors would continue after we had moved in. The device of the Jacobs--charging admission--was unthinkable in a town of this size where most people knew us. Our fears proved unfounded, however; visitors come to view the house perhaps twice a week and we are left undisturbed the rest of the time. Except for the front, the house makes quite a favorable impression. They like the other side--almost completely composed of glass doors looking down on the river, the ample terrace and grounds, the consistency of the furnishings, the convenient closets, etc. They do not object to the tiny, functional ~~kitchen~~ kitchen (Wright dislikes that word; he calls it "work space") and they always remark that the house is much more spacious than you would have thought from the outside. Its functionalism and trimness strikes them pleasantly: many have said that it reminds them of the interior of a ship.

Strangers still stop in front, stare open-mouthed and ask the first passer-by, "What is it?" When they are told it is a house, they find it difficult to believe. During construction, many thought that the front was a piece of siding put up temporarily to shield the house from curious eyes and that it of course would be taken down as soon as we moved in. People still slow up and stare as they drive by. Friends of ours who have out-of-town guests usually phone and ask if they can bring them through; it has ~~many~~ entered the staid ranks of the "local points of interest".

The architectural photographer, Kidder Smith, came down and took a few shots shortly after we moved in. Some of these were used in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of Wright's work in ~~the~~ December, 1931, but we never saw one of these pictures ourselves until they appeared in Thorndike's book. We were never able to get prints of them from anybody.

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The pictures in Thorndike give a fairly good idea of the exterior, though our landscaping and terrace furniture have added a good bit since, but the view of the interior is inadequate. The living room and the study are lovely. Continuous book-shelves traverse the entrance hall (which is at a right angle as you enter), the living room, and then make a circuit of the study. The furniture is consistent: even our RCA radio-phonograph has been encased in a plywood chassis. A running curtain frees the view and lets in great quantities of light during the daytime. You feel that there is no boundary between the outside and inside. At night, when the long curtain is drawn, there is a cozy sense of privacy. The terrace is wonderful for sunbaths, for outdoor eating during the summer, and for pleasant moonlight conversations. Every room in the house (except the kitchen) opens directly on the outside. We have two sons, one of them old enough to be highly mobile. If he is playing in the "back yard" (I don't like the expression, but it's clearer than any other I can think of just now), he is clearly visible from any room in the house.

The master bedroom is very attractive. We found the functional kitchen or "work space" eminently satisfactory, though we were a little sceptical of this point at first. Dozens of people have been served from it many times without difficulty; over 50 on at least five occasions.

I like the sense of freedom gained by running the living room, study, dining area, etc. into one unit instead of making them "little boxes in a big box", but there is one disadvantage: complete privacy and freedom from noise are difficult to achieve. The concrete floors (carpeted, of course) have spoiled me for wooden-floor houses, which now annoy me by their creakiness. Walking across a rug-covered concrete floor makes practically no sound whatever. Every one likes the lighting fixtures: perforated boards are set in the ceiling in long lines; the perforations, set in a pleasant pattern, give forth the light through frosted glass. The frosted glass was our own idea; Mr. Wright didn't mind the naked bulbs showing through the perforations, but we thought it would be annoying.

I could go on for quite a bit more concerning the things I like about our house, but this letter is far too long already. Suffice it to add that we are very happy in it. We don't think of it as pure functionalism; Wright has too strong a sense of design. I would like also to add that a friend at Taliesin has warmly and sincerely assured me that the difficulties I experienced are unique, that none of the other Usonian houses so greatly overran their estimates or encountered such difficulties or took so long to build.

Trusting that this letter, which I have written at odd times over a period of three days, contains information which will be of interest to you, I am

Yours very sincerely,

Stanley Rosenbaum