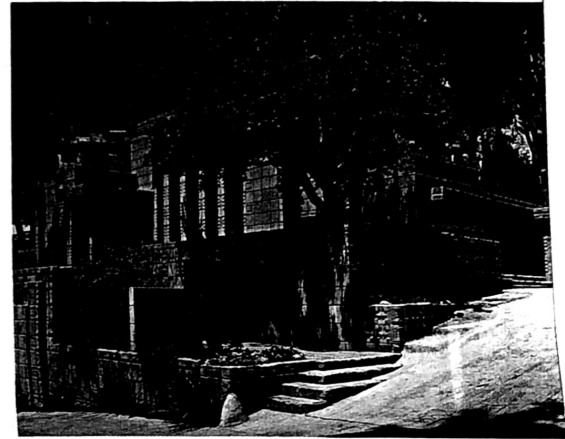


The Wright Stuff



Lloyd Wright enthusiast Joel Silver and his car.

"There are strong parallels between architecture and making movies," says film producer Joel Silver. "You begin with a drawing on paper, or a script, go through the same kind of complicated building process with egos, clients, and tradespeople, and you finish with something that lasts forever. They are both the culmination of contributions by many people." ☞ Silver, 32, is leaning with a proprietary air against a wall on the terrace of his new house, a 1923 Frank Lloyd Wright structure known as the "John Storer residence." The producer of *48 Hours*, *Streets of Fire*, and the remake of *Brewster's Millions* has been an ardent admirer of Wright's architecture since his youth. Raised in South Orange, N.J., Silver came to L.A. in 1975 with a degree from the film department of New York University. He would drive longingly past the eight Wright buildings in the area such as La Miniatura in Pasadena, or the Hollyhock House in Barnsdall Park. And he particularly appreciated the grace of the Storer home, off Hollywood Boulevard just west of Laurel Canyon, only a few blocks from where the great architect opened a studio in 1923. The house is influenced by Mayan motifs and Japanese proportions, more baroque than Wright's earlier Prairie House. But ideas developed here can be seen in his famous Midway Gardens and the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. The house rises in wafers of warm gray stone and redwood blending agreeably with the verdant hills. ☞ Silver bought this national landmark last July for \$790,000 and spent \$200,000 over the next six months restoring it with guidance from Wright's grandson, architect Eric Wright, restoration architect Martin Eli Weil, and decorator Linda Marder. "It's more than [loving] architecture. I'm obsessed by Wright himself, by his artistry, by the way he was a visionary, a genius of our time. He's an inspiration to me. He was a controversial figure, always attempting new projects with insurmountable odds. Yet all those projects exist today! Others were great theorists, but he *did* it." Silver even named his new puppy "Frankie"—a bouncy, mop-shaped Portuguese Water Dog, "one of 900 in the country," who swims in the reflecting pool on the terrace. ☞ Wright came to Los Angeles in 1919 to plan Hollyhock House, a Hollywood estate for the oil heiress Aline Barnsdall. The architect, then 50, was eager to come West to escape personal and professional pressures plaguing him in the Midwest. He had a stormy romantic life during a time when Victorian morality still prevailed, having left his first wife and six children for a mistress who died in a freak fire at his Wisconsin studio, Taliesin East. His relationship with



Frank Lloyd Wright's 1923 textile block house.



Eucalyptus trees shade the deco patio furniture.

Structure is ornament in these houses. They were designed so unskilled labor could create the blocks from the site. Wright thought the style would catch on in Los Angeles because they were affordable, simple to maintain, and pleasing to the eye.

artist Miriam Noel, whom he married in 1923, was also volatile. And he had begun to feel confined by his reputation as architect of the Prairie homes, which had earned him acclaim for 15 years with their strong horizontal lines and minimum of applied ornament. In 1923, he began La Miniatura for Mrs. George Madison Millard, the first of four textile block houses which include the Storer residence, the Freeman residence at 1962 Glencoe Way, and the Charles Ennis residence at 2607 Glendower Avenue. All these homes have interior and exterior walls made of precast hollow concrete blocks, some with plain surfaces, others coffered with typically Wrightian geometric reliefs or perforated to allow the passage of light and air. They were called "textile" because, with the exception of La Miniatura, the blocks were supported by a weave of steel tie rods so the walls could survive compression and tension forces...and earthquakes. The hollow core of the block insulated the house and prevented moisture from seeping to the interior. These houses were the forerunners of what Wright called the "Usonia Automatic Style" in the 1950s. Wright adopted the term from Samuel Butler's book, *Usonia*, about an idealized society patterned after the United States. Silver, who has become something of an authority on his favorite architect, says, "Wright thought shelter was important, that everybody in the United States had the right and need for intelligently designed and beautifully appointed homes. The Usonia Automatic was an attempt to create affordable, reasonably priced homes." "Structure is ornament in these," he continues. "They were designed so unskilled labor could create the blocks from the site (or buy them in a yard). An owner/builder could adapt the form to meet the needs of his family. Wright thought the style would catch on in L.A. because they were affordable, simple to maintain, and pleasing to the eye. But the first ones were over-budget (approximately \$25,000), then the Depression came and that was the end." The Storer House is equipped with many of the trademark novelties that made Wright's houses so charming. The façade is made of two stories of glass—tall, narrow, vertical windows to capture the view of the city to the south—supported by trim, muscular columns of patterned block. On the lower level, fronted by the terrace, five glass-and-redwood doors lead straight into the dining room, pivoted around a gray block Wrightian fireplace. Wright's houses often have ceiling heights that vary from room to room: eight feet, eight inches in the dining room and bedrooms on the lower level, but eleven feet, four inches in the living room upstairs, on the third level. While the dining room is intimate, the living room is majestic, with another large fireplace, the windows divided by a redwood geometric motif that is echoed in the bands of patterned block. A drawing in the dining room shows that Wright indicated where every single block should go. Like the dining room, the living room



Table and chairs designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.



Perforated stone block keeps the bedroom cool.



That's why restoration is so important: to see these buildings the way they should be seen. Wright was one of the first to understand the concept of "organic." The concept that something is *of* the hill, not *on* the hill, natural and close to the soil.

opens onto a patio to the east through a pair of massive glass doors. A Guy Dill sculpture of concrete wedges is there, the only work of contemporary art. On the west side of the room, a modest mezzanine leads to another patio shaded by mammoth eucalyptus trees planted by Frank Lloyd Wright, Jr., known as Lloyd Wright, a landscape architect and architect. ☞ Silver settles with visible pleasure onto a light green, angular sofa, one of four pieces of furniture he had reproduced from Wright's drawings at Hollyhock House. "Making movies is very hard work," he insists. "There's a tremendous pressure. It's very comforting to me to come here and enjoy this beauty, sense of scale, and design so right for a person. Wright wasn't interested in scale to impress, but to please. ☞ "Every time a Wright home is restored, you can see what he was doing. It's like when you go to a museum and see a period dress on a mannequin and the gilt is fading and the fabric is worn out, then you see a movie and the dress has been recreated, it's alive and beautiful. That's why restoration is so important: to see these buildings the way they should be seen. Once you see the richness of the redwood, the block color in the right tones, it's a harmony. Wright was one of the first people to understand the concept of 'organic.' The idea that something is *of* the hill, not *on* the hill, natural and close to the soil. That's what Wright was saying in 1900. Everything worked together: fabrics, furniture, textures, all trying to work as a whole. It's an idea and attitude I apply to making movies. Everything works with everything else so there's a harmony. Without that, you have chaos." ☞ Silver is the fifth owner of the house, and a few of his predecessors did not feel as strongly about the integrity of Wright's work. One had all the block and wood painted yellow. A subsequent one had sandblasted the paint away, leaving the surfaces pocked and desiccated. Silver had every surface in the building refinished and had the house replumbed and rewired. The wood was sanded and oiled and the block was steamcleaned and patched. In some areas, block was replaced. A fellow Wright enthusiast sent Silver the architect's original recipe for the block made of cement and decomposed granite. Wright always wanted to make use of a material that would be thrown away otherwise and thought that by adding stone from the lot to the cement, a structure would appear to have grown from its environs. ☞ The only Wright-designed furniture left with the house are six frosted glass boxes standing on thin bronze pedestals over six feet tall, and three hanging lamps. They are being reconditioned by Buffalo Studios. Wright was consumed with details, even designing the tin covers for the wall heaters that Marder had refurbished. She had distressed brass plates made for all of the wall switches and advised Silver on the furniture for the house. Temporarily, Silver's collection of Moderne furniture occupies the house, but it is slowly being replaced with pieces by Wright and his



Motif painted under eaves echoes redwood trim.

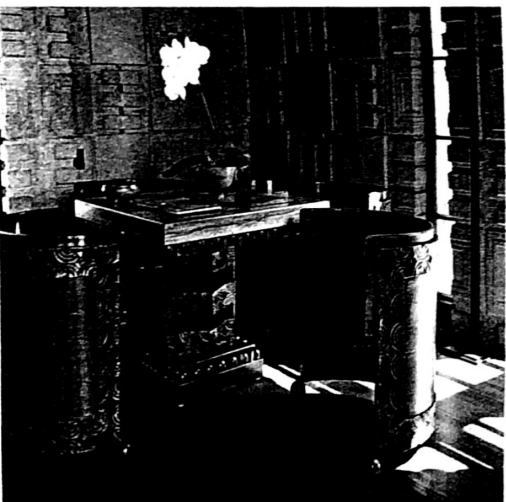


Table and chairs designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.



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contemporaries. For example, the living room coffee table—a green slate circle atop a wooden, X-shaped pedestal—is a design Wright produced in the early '50s. Also in the living room is one of Wright's angular plywood chairs with triangular cut-outs in its back, from the 1956 Trier House in Des Moines—a present from Richard Pryor.

In the dining room stands Silver's latest acquisition: a Wright-designed table from the 1908 Isabel Roberts house in Riverforest, Ill. Silver shakes

from any inclement weather. There are no curtains on any windows of the house, but redwood Levolor blinds have been installed in the bedroom and other strategic locations. The oak floor is covered with a light green area rug Silver had copied from Pasadena's Gamble House, and in the corner, there stands a rectilinear Schindler lamp made of redwood and frosted glass.

The low ceilings and narrow corridors of this level are a reminder that Wright often liked to design for his

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his head at it and apologizes for the chairs, which were designed by Gustav Stickley and look a little puritanical by comparison. “Museums love chairs,” he sighs. “They can store them and display them. So most of the great chairs are in museums, but you can still find tables and other pieces of furniture [by Wright].” As if to prove his point, he nods toward a bookcase with gilt edging that Wright designed for La Miniatura, now holding books on the architect and on film.

To the east of the dining room, there is a small kitchen, which Marder had redone by Pogen Pohl of Germany. The floors here are concrete block, the cabinets redwood, but Marder put in the dark green marble counters and a built-in gas range. The refrigerator is camouflaged in red-stained larch. She and Silver also put in a glass back door and designed redwood sliding doors in the coffee pattern of the brick for the garage.

To the west of the dining room, a perforated wall screens a few steps leading up to the bedroom, bath, and dressing room. Wright, like many of his contemporaries, believed it was healthy to sleep in the night air, and the south wall of the bedroom is made of partially perforated brick. A sliding glass door with redwood trim pulls along the wall to protect Silver

own five-foot-five-and-a-half-inch stature. And unlike the airy, light-filtered rooms upstairs, here the ambience is meditative and dim. Down a few more steps there is a den, which Silver claims is one of his favorite rooms. It is below grade, cool, and dark, with built-in redwood shelves displaying his collection of Futura pottery. Created in 1928, the vases and dishes are streamlined or stretched into outlandish organic shapes and colored in hot yellow, peach, aqua, or chartreuse. “I bought the pottery because it looked Wrightian at a time when I couldn't afford the house,” he explains.

Surface is the ornament in Wright's residences, so Silver has few pictures on his walls, just a few architectural drawings by Wright and a painting by John Montgomery Flagg. And Wright did not design basements or attics in these houses. “He felt you didn't need that much,” says Silver. “He collected art but kept it in a vault, changing a piece now and then, putting it on an easel. If people would let him, he would design everything: linens, silver, china. Moving in with all your *chotchkes* upset him.” So Silver stores his knickknacks. “I like the notion of collecting architecture,” he confides with a smile. “Unfortunately, you have to be very wealthy to do that. I'll have to produce more movies.” □