

Preservation

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Tulsa? TULSA!

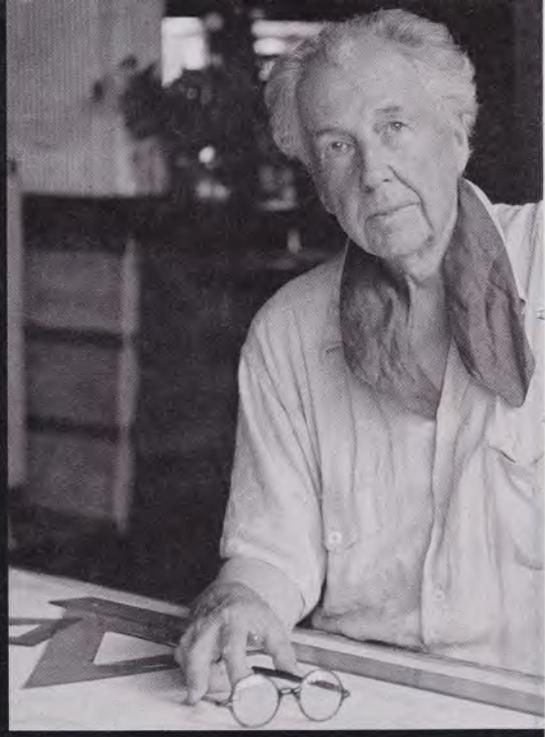
the city's deco
treasures

Frank Lloyd Wright
in Alabama

plus

The 11 Most
Endangered Historic
Places 2008





The Rosenbaum House today, and as it appeared in 1948 (above). Wright completed his design for the house just months after this portrait was taken.



In a remarkable effort, an Alabama city purchased, restored, and preserved a dilapidated Frank Lloyd Wright house, then opened it to the public.

BY JAMES H. SCHWARTZ



WRIGHT

Where You'd Least Expect It

IF you spend any time in Florence, Ala., you know the Rosenbaum House. With those dark walls and flat roofs, it just looks different from the other houses in town—and always has. “It’s our conversation piece,” says local resident Betty Burdine, who has lived here for 50 years. “At some point, everybody’s gone by and stared at it. But until a few years ago I can’t remember anyone mentioning Frank Lloyd Wright.”



Bringing the house back to its original condition required stripping and staining all of the woodwork, and rewiring Wright's ingenious recessed ceiling lights.

Come again? Yes, Frank Lloyd Wright. The same architect who added “Prairie Style” and “Fallingwater” to the American lexicon designed the eye-catching anomaly on Florence’s Riverview Drive. He couldn’t have imagined that residents who shook their heads over his radical style would eventually rescue the house from ruin and declare it a town treasure.

Quite a feat for a city that prizes modesty over modernity.

Wright’s Florence connection began when local boy Stanley Rosenbaum married Mildred Bookholtz in 1938, and brought her home to Alabama. Stanley had his eye on a sloping corner lot directly across the street from the traditional house where he grew up, and his parents obliged, offering the property as a wedding gift. The newlyweds would stay in the neighborhood, but “fitting in” wasn’t part of their plan.

A friend recommended that the Rosenbaums approach Frank Lloyd Wright, reputed to be a seasoned and affordable architect. Optimistically, the Rosenbaums asked Wright to design a three-bedroom house with two baths, a study, and a liv-

ing room large enough for a piano—all for \$7,500.

Wright responded with plans for what he termed a “Usonian” house: an affordable family residence blending traditional building materials with new and inexpensive products such as concrete block and plywood. And within a year the house was finished, but at a cost of more than \$14,000—nearly double the original estimate.

With its earthy blend of red brick and richly stained cypress, the 1,540-square-foot house proved a sensation in Florence. Hundreds of residents drove by on weekends to gaze at the structure. Barbara Kimberlin Broach, director of Florence’s Arts & Museums, says that “one visitor stared at Stanley Rosenbaum’s house for a long time, then asked, ‘What is it?’” The Rosenbaums didn’t seem to care.

Remarkably—despite cost overruns, local ribbing, and never-ending problems with both the dead-flat roof and the in-floor heating system—the Rosenbaums adored Wright and his design. “Our enthusiasm ... has not abated one whit,” Stanley wrote.



They even returned to him five years later to request an addition. Stanley Rosenbaum lived in the house until his death in 1983, and Mildred stayed until 1999, when she moved into a local retirement facility.

By then, says local architect Donald Lambert (whose firm worked on the restoration), the house was in terrible shape. "Someone from the building department practically certified that the house was in danger," he remembers. "There were buckets all around to catch rainwater. A part of the roof in the addition was covered with plastic sheeting, and we knew there was a threat of collapse." Still, Lambert felt determined to save the house, because it was architecturally significant, and because it was "good for Florence."

"I was friendly with Mayor Eddie Frost and lobbied him to buy this house," Lambert remembers. The argument was straightforward: "If you're going to invest in something that the city will own, let's invest in something with national or international significance, like a property designed by Frank Lloyd

Wright." Frost and the city council agreed, and used \$75,000 in public funds to purchase the house from Mildred Rosenbaum.

"This was a great preservation effort not just by an individual, but by 39,000 people," says Barbara Broach. "With money generated by a one-cent sales tax for community development, we made sure that everyone here had a stake in the preservation of this house."

That's when the process of restoration and reconstruction began in earnest.

"We took this thing apart piece by piece," Lambert says. Priority Number One involved repairing the roof. Wright's design had called for a sloping surface, but the construction crew built a flat roof instead, causing extensive problems with leaks and mold. "We started by peeling it off," Lambert says, "and by the time we were finished we'd had to take off every stick of old wood."

Contractors then began the arduous process of replacing everything overhead. Where required, they introduced steel

plates between pieces of wood for extra stability. (Wright had used steel in portions of the original house, so Lambert felt comfortable introducing the material.) Like the original roofers, they followed an intricate plan for roof joists. But unlike their Depression-era predecessors, they gave the finished roof the subtle slope that Wright had called for. For the first time in half a century it didn't leak.

Controlling heat and humidity in the house posed the second grand challenge. Wright had designed an in-floor heating system, but (as with so many of his innovative solutions) it failed after a few years. The Rosenbaums resorted to a motley collection of space heaters.

Conditions seemed even worse during Alabama's hot and humid summers, when temperatures in the house skyrocketed. Though the Rosenbaums experimented with rooftop and other makeshift air-conditioners, the units functioned poorly and condensation wreaked havoc with woodwork throughout the interiors.

Lambert opted to install completely new heating and cooling systems: two hidden behind a parapet atop the roof to preserve the home's simple lines, one placed inside a bedroom closet, and one outside the master bedroom. "We left the original pumps and the original water heater in place so that visitors could understand how the in-floor system once worked," Lambert says. "But restoring those would have required jackhammering the concrete floor, repiping, and repouring it all. We couldn't justify that cost."

A final surprise awaited construction crews examining the walls in Mr. Rosenbaum's tiny study. Termites had not touched the horizontal cypress boards there—"apparently they didn't taste very good," Lambert says—but the pests devoured the pine sheathing behind the cypress, as well as a collection of books on the study shelves. When workers opened book covers, half-eaten pages cascaded



onto the floor.

To save the study, craftsmen inserted new sheathing and reinstalled the cypress planks, which were then sanded along with all of the interior and exterior cypress in the house. That entire process took months.

With restoration work complete, Barbara Broach and other volunteers returned the Rosenbaums' original Wright-designed furnishings to the house. Chairs in the dining room were the only pieces that had to be reproduced for the preservation effort. The originals were so uncomfortable, Broach says, "that Mrs. Rosenbaum gave them to the maid." She then bought the family a set of Eames chairs that stayed here for years. "Though those looked fine, we wanted to show the interiors as they appeared when the house was completed, so we used wood salvaged during the restoration and had a carpenter remake Wright's originals."

Finally, after spending nearly three years and more than \$700,000 on the project, the City of Florence opened the house to the public, inviting every resident to walk through. "They had a huge stake in this," Barbara Broach says, "and they lined up all day long for three days." More than 4,000 visitors came through exactly 62 years after the Rosenbaums had moved in. Today, approximately 5,000 visitors take guided tours of the house each year.

Florence has received numerous accolades since the restoration. The Alabama Architectural Foundation offered a prized Significant Building Award in 2002, and the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy followed with its 2004 Wright Spirit Award.

"At first," Broach says, "whenever people visited I'd nervously call Don Lambert and say, 'We'll be taking another test with visitors here tomorrow ... I just thought I'd let you know.' But time after time I'd watch them admire all we'd accomplished. Now I just relax and enjoy sharing this remarkable house." 



There are three Frank Lloyd Wright National Trust historic sites: Pope-Leighey House on the grounds of Woodlawn in Virginia; the Frank Lloyd Wright Home & Studio in Oak Park, Ill.; and the Robie House in Chicago. Both Illinois sites are operated by the Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust. See PreservationNation.org/travel-and-sites.

If you go ...

The Rosenbaum House at 601 Riverview Dr. in Florence is open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and on Sundays from 1 to 4 p.m. Admission is \$8, \$5 for students and senior citizens. See WrightinAlabama.com.

Carpenters removed and replaced roofs and ceilings throughout the house (opposite), and rebuilt dining room chairs to Wright's original specifications.