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# Wright DOWN THE Road

By Michelle Jones

Photography  
Courtesy of the  
Frank Lloyd Wright  
Rosenbaum House  
Museum

**FINDING FRANK  
LLOYD WRIGHT IN  
FLORENCE, ALABAMA**





**F**LORENCE, ALABAMA, IS THE HOME OF THE W.C. HANDY MUSEUM AND THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH ALABAMA. HELEN KELLER'S BIRTHPLACE IS JUST DOWN THE ROAD IN TUSCUMBIA. IN DOWNTOWN FLORENCE, A QUARTER GETS YOU TWO HOURS ON THE PARKING METERS AND AN 86-YEAR-OLD SODA SHOP SERVES MILKSHAKES THICK ENOUGH TO HOLD A STRAW UPRIGHT IN THE GLASS. NEAR THE CENTER OF TOWN THERE ARE TWO 1920s SEARS, ROEBUCK AND CO. KIT HOUSES, BOTH STILL USED AS PRIVATE RESIDENCES.





All of the above are wonderful extras, but for architectural fans and students, the reason for visiting Florence is the Wright-Rosenbaum House, a recently restored example of a Frank Lloyd Wright Usonian. These were Wright's "low-cost" housing alternatives for families; the name comes from Englishman Samuel Butler's adjective for things relating to the United States of America.

The Wright-Rosenbaum House was built for Stanley Rosenbaum, a Florence native who had returned to teach at the local university with a Harvard degree and a new wife. As a wedding present, Mr. Rosenbaum's parents gave young couple a plot of land and \$7,500 to build a house. They asked an architect friend to do the honors, but a few unsuccessful designs later, the friend encouraged them to approach Frank Lloyd Wright.

This was 1939. The economy had not yet completely recovered from the Depression and Wright was already a renowned architect, having completed famous commissions such as the Frederick C. Robie House (1909) and Fallingwater (1936). Yet, he was also designing the first Usonian houses. These were characterized by small bedrooms, small kitchens (the original Wright-Rosenbaum House kitchen is only slightly larger than a wet bar), radiant heating, carports instead of garages, lots of built-ins or pseudo built-ins and common areas with soaring ceilings.

At first glance, the Wright-Rosenbaum House appears to be a modest brick ranch. What looks like a low-slung concrete porch is really one of the carports, explains guide Mary Nicely with a mischievous grin. She opens the front door to reveal possibly the most con-

stricted space this side of an airplane bathroom.

"Wright used space so efficiently," Nicely says. "He squeezes you in like going into a cave." The mortar lines of a brick wall on one side and a wall lined with bookshelves on the other pull the eye toward a yellow chair in Rosenbaum's study at the far end of the house; it's a classic perspective drawing trick. The short entryway releases visitors into the living room, a space that feels incongruously large in rela-

**On sunny days, the room is bathed in warm tones of cognac as light floods through a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows, picking up color from the cypress walls and ceiling and the scored concrete floor painted Cherokee red.**



frames of the windows. The lines of the floor also continue through the windows and across the patio outside.

Always one to create site-specific architecture that melded interior and outdoor spaces, Wright did just that in Florence. He created a 1,500-square-foot house with its back to the street and walls of casement windows facing the river—all the rooms have direct access to the outside. Wright's plans also satisfied the requirement that the structure not block the river view of the house across the street, the one occupied by Stanley Rosenbaum's parents.

While much of the furniture currently found in the house is reproduction, the original origami-inspired pieces—seating cubes, ottomans, chairs and tables—

were built onsite to Wright's specifications. Indeed, in a 1940 letter, Mr. Rosenbaum commented that everything from the tiniest accessory up was custom-made, everything except the grand piano in the living room. In the main bathroom, Wright included built-in wooden towel racks, a drop-down linen closet and a skylight. The master bedroom has a window in the closet and "fake" built-ins: the side chair and its table are in fact two pieces that slide into slots in the walls.

tion to the dimensions of the house as seen from outside. On sunny days, the room is bathed in warm tones of cognac as light floods through a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows, picking up color from the cypress walls and ceiling and the scored concrete floor, painted Cherokee red.

As Nicely shows visitors the living room, she points to lines running across the floor (formed by the tiles) continuing up the walls, going across the ceiling and down the

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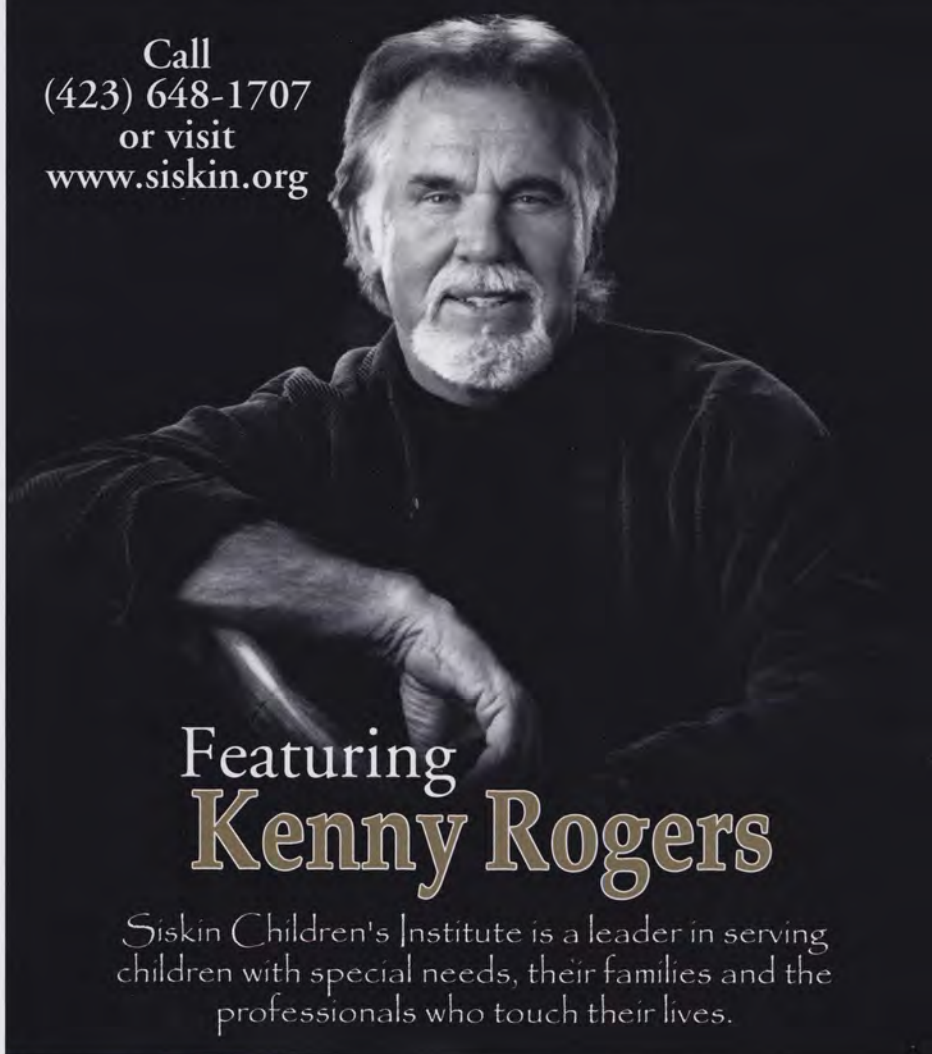
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Living in a masterpiece with everything designed in a logical manner may look good on paper, but inevitably people adapt their surroundings to their own lifestyles. Mrs. Rosenbaum followed her own design sense, replacing many of the origami chairs with ones designed by Charles and Ray Eames. She also had the stark white cabinets of her second kitchen sprayed brown says Nicely. The kitchen was part of the 1948 addition that added 1,084 square feet. of living space to the house, including a dormitory for the boys, a guest bedroom and bathroom and increased storage space (another request by Mrs. Rosenbaum).

Mrs. Rosenbaum lived in the house until 1999, 16 years after the death of her husband, when she moved into a Florence nursing home. Her long occupancy makes the Wright-Rosenbaum House the oldest of Wright's houses continuously lived in by the original family. One of the compelling stories of the house is the city's effort to preserve it, says Barbara Broach, Florence's director of museums. "There's the story of a small Southern town and the local politicians who had to step out and say 'we're not going to let this house fall on our watch.'" Broach says there were no letters to the editor or any such complaints about using taxpayer funds for the project. "They knew it was a very valuable asset for the city," she says.

During the two-year restoration of the house, Wright's trademark flat, cantilevered roof—which tended to be characteristically leaky—was repaired and central air and heating added. "To be able to do that without an attic and without a basement is quite an accomplishment," says Broach. "You can't see any of the pipes and you can't tell how we did it." Termite damage was attended to



and cabinetry hardware was replaced. The Rosenbaums had created a Japanese garden in the courtyard back in 1967; more than 30 years later, this was salvaged and replanted through a community effort.

Broach says it was decided the guest suite would better serve the public as an exhibition space: Now visitors peruse Wright's blueprints for the original dwelling and subsequent addition, as well as plans for the restoration in this area. By all accounts the house was attracting visitors well before the renovation was complete. Nicely says "an endless stream of people" came to watch—including an Australian architect's family touring Frank Lloyd Wright houses around the country. She says an exception was made in their case and they were allowed to walk through.

Another special walk-through was held after the house was completed. "We had three days called 'Walk Wright In,' for everyone local to walk through free, because they had paid for it and they needed to be able to see it," explains Broach. "We had 4,000 people come through."

The response by both locals and tourists alike to the Wright-Rosenbaum House has been marvelous. "It is the one historical site that attracts people from out of the state, and even out of the country as a destination," Broach says. "Before we would have people come to town, but they were doing other things and they would drop in to the different museums. But they come to see this house."

**Wright-Rosenbaum House**  
601 Riverview Dr., Florence

**Hours:** 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tues.-Sat.

**Admission:** \$7 adults,  
\$5 sr. citizens & students

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