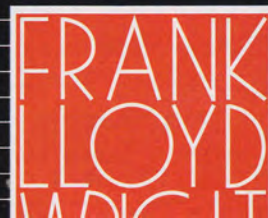


SPRING 2004
VOL. 15 NO. 2

QUARTERLY

BUILDINGS FOR DEMOCRACY

- MARIN CIVIC CENTER
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DEMOCRACY: THE MILDRED AND STANLEY ROSENBAUM HOUSE AND MARIN COUNTY CIVIC CENTER

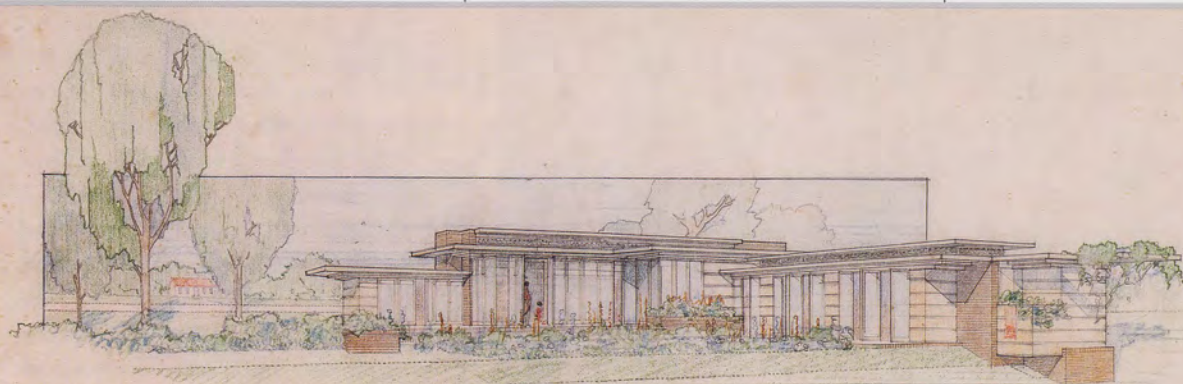


Frank Lloyd Wright wrote, "Down all the avenues of time architecture was an enclosure by nature, and the simplest form of enclosure was the box. Now when Democracy became an establishment, as it is in America, that box-idea began to be irksome. As a young architect, I began to feel annoyed, held back,

imposed upon by this sense of enclosure which you went into and there you were—boxed, crated. I tried to find out what was happening to me: I was the free son of a free people and I wanted to be free. I had to find out what was the cause of this imprisonment."

Wright said he first consciously began to try to "beat the box" in the 1906 Larkin Building. But it was in the second half of his career that he more fully developed the concept of "building for democracy." At first





USONIAN HOUSE FOR MILDRED AND STANLEY ROSENBAUM
FLORENCE, ALABAMA
FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT ARCHITECT SEPTEMBER 10 1939

Usonian House for Mildred and Stanley Rosenbaum, Florence, Alabama. FLLW FND 3903.001. © Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.

Throughout his career Wright had occasionally been called upon to design small houses, and when he did, he gave them the same attention as major commissions. Broadacre City required an architectural solution for affordable housing, and Wright attempted to address it, but, without interested clients, Wright's theories for building a low-cost house went untested.

Wright saw the main solution to affordable housing to be simplification in all aspects of construction. He eliminated anything that was unnecessary—from features to materials. He proposed carports instead of garages; elimination of basements; in-floor heating; no painting or plas-

tering; and no gutters or downspouts since roofs would be simplified.

Wright proposed, "wood board-walls, the same inside as outside—three thickness of boards with paper placed between them, the boards fastened together with screws. These slab-walls of boards will be high in insulating value, be vermin proof, and practically fireproof. These walls like the fenestration may be prefabricated on the floor and raised up into place, or they may be made at the mill.

"The appurtenance systems to avoid cutting and complications must be an organic part of construction. Yes, we must have polished plate glass. It is one of the things we have at hand to gratify the designer of the truly modern house and bless its occupants.

"...a modest house that has no

feeling at all for the 'grand' except as the house extends itself parallel to the ground, companion to the horizon . . .

"There is a freedom of movement, and privacy too, afforded by the general arrangement here, unknown to the current boxment . . . The now inevitable car will seem part of it. Where does the garden leave off and the house begin? Where the garden begins and the house leaves off. Withal, it seems a thing loving the ground with the new sense of space-light-and freedom to which our USA is entitled."

In 1937 Wright finally had a chance to see a Usonian house built when the first Jacobs House was completed in Madison, Wisconsin, at a cost of \$5,500 (see *Quarterly*, Spring 2003). The Jacobs house and Wright's other projects at the time attracted widespread media attention. In 1938 a

Time magazine cover story about Wright, “Usonian Architect,” presented Wright as a “worthy peer” of Thoreau and Whitman. This media coverage, along with Wright’s own published books, were attracting the attention of thousands of people including a gifted young man who would soon play a role in bringing Wright another client who was seeking a well-designed, modest home, and who would many years later play a major role in helping Wright’s only government building come into existence.

The Rosenbaum House

Wright’s second Usonian house was built by newlyweds Stanley and Mildred (Mimi) Rosenbaum in Florence, Alabama, in 1939. In the 1993 book, *Usonia: Frank Lloyd Wright’s Design for America*—written by Stanley and Mimi’s son Alvin Rosenbaum, a writer, designer and regional planner—the author provides a detailed description of the social and political events that shaped the Alabama communities of Florence, Sheffield, and Tusculum—nestled in the Tennessee Valley. The author provides an interesting and intelligent account of why this area—part of a series of ambitious regional development plans beginning with Henry Ford’s interest in setting up a planned community in the 1920s and, later, of the development of the Tennessee Valley Authority—was a perfect location for Wright to continue his quest for the solution to low-cost housing. But while the area may have been ripe for Wright’s contribution, it took a special set of circumstances to bring the client to Wright.

As Alvin Rosenbaum notes in his book, most of Wright’s clients who actually built the Usonian houses were well-educated intellectuals drawn to Wright by their idealism. Stanley and Mimi Rosenbaum certainly fit that criteria. In 1927

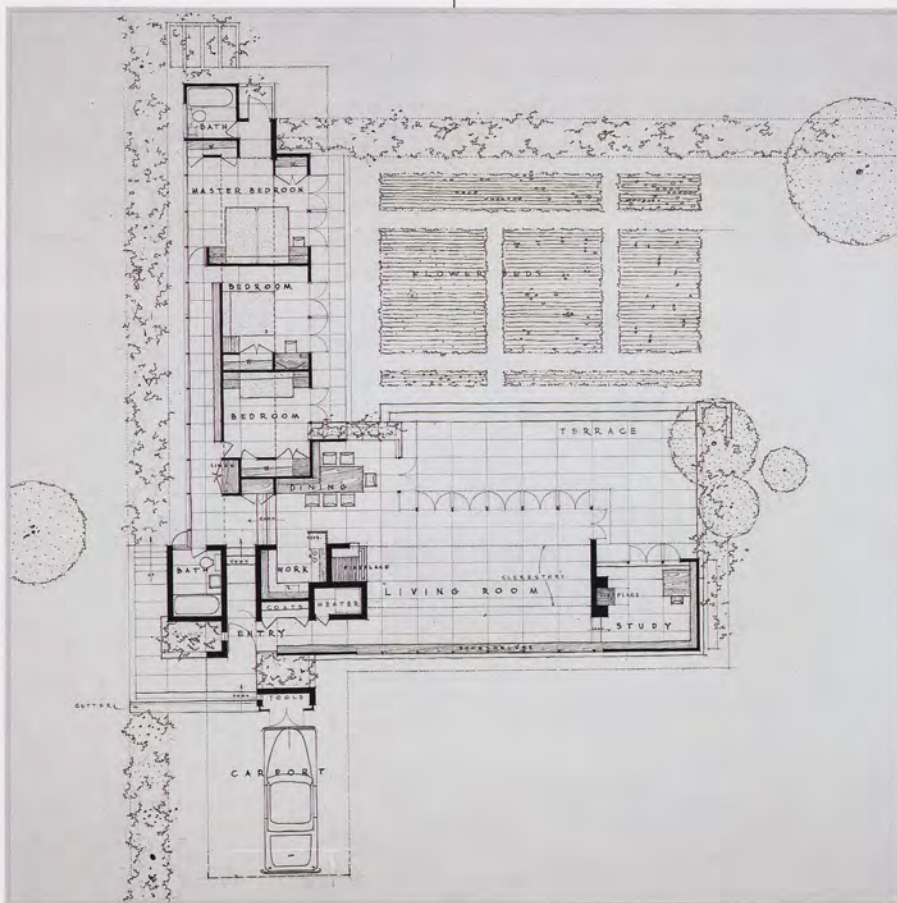


Mildred and Stanley Rosenbaum, 1979, in their Usonian home. Photo by George Terrell, courtesy Florence Department of Arts and Museums.

Stanley Rosenbaum entered Harvard University. After graduating with honors in 1931, he was unable to find a college teaching job as he had planned. Part of the difficulty resulted from the national economic depression and another factor was the lingering anti-Semitism in departments of arts and letters at many academic institutions. After earning a master’s degree from the University of Denver, with still no teaching positions available, Rosenbaum returned

to Florence, Alabama, where he went to work in his father’s business. The elder Rosenbaum emigrated from Poland and moved to Florence in 1918 where he began building movie theaters. By the time his son had left for college, the elder Rosenbaum owned five theaters in the area. Upon returning to Florence, Stanley Rosenbaum managed the Ritz Theater in nearby Sheffield, Alabama, and edited a local literary magazine. He also traveled to New York several times a year to see friends and Broadway shows and visit the major bookstores. In 1938 Stanley married Mildred Bookholtz, whom he met on one of his trips to New York. Mimi, from the Bronx, worked as a model for the John Robert Powers Agency while attending Hunter College at night. In his book, Alvin Rosenbaum recalled that his mother said that

Publication plan for Rosenbaum House. FLLW FND 3903.017. © Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.



while in a college economics class, she was assigned a paper on the Tennessee Valley Authority and that when she moved to Florence—at the heart of TVA—she felt as if she was “going off to a kibbutz in Israel, only better.” Author Rosenbaum also said about his father, “While Stanley Rosenbaum was a hometown boy, he had gone away to Harvard, was the son of immigrants and a member of a religious minority, and worked in a business that was spun from fantasies. His life in Florence was enviable, yet set apart, with one foot in and one foot out. Like other immigrant families, Stanley’s demonstrated their appreciation of a new culture by identifying with the makers of modern America, such as Franklin Roosevelt and Frank Lloyd Wright.”

As a wedding gift from the groom’s parents, the newlyweds received a large building lot and a check for \$7,500 to build their dream house, directly across the street from Louis and Anna Rosenbaum’s house on Riverview Drive. The Rosenbaums didn’t look far for an architect. A few years earlier, a talented fifteen-year-old artist

Construction began on the Rosenbaum House in January 1940 and continued through August. Bad weather and the Rosenbaums’ insistence on using union labor contributed to cost overruns for the “moderate-cost” house.

named Aaron Green had worked for the Rosenbaum theaters, painting signs as an after-school job. He and Stanley Rosenbaum became acquainted and continued their friendship even after Green became an architecture student in New York. Stanley selected Green as the architect for his new home, but after struggling with various problems, Green suggested that Frank Lloyd Wright should be engaged. When Rosenbaum said he thought Wright would be too expensive, Green wrote to Wright.

In the letter dated April 20, 1939, Green wrote: *Dear Sir: As a student of architecture, an enthusiastic admirer of your work, and a student of yours, even if indirectly, this opportunity to write is considered a privilege. However, it is not to deviate into a “fan” letter.*

Bids for a house which I have designed were excessive. Rather than begin again or destroy the unity of the house by the usual methods of cutting, I suggested to the client, optimistically, that you be asked to design the house. Because, as well as clients, the people are my friends, and because your solution would be far superior to another’s attempt in applying your ideas and philosophy, I would very much prefer your personal solution.

The client which I offer you will

be happy to leave all considerations of the building in your hands. They are familiar with your ideas and achievements through your published works, which I possess and prize. They have absorbed my interpretations of some and are now quite as enthusiastic as I.

The couple are recently married, the young man a Harvard graduate, writer, and poet. Both should be capable of bearing children deserving of your ‘Usonian’ house. Acquainted with your Jacobs house, I am well aware of your ability to cope with a similar situation.

The existing obstacle is a maximum of \$7500.00. The client is willing that you do the job ‘cost plus’ or bids may be submitted for contract. The family requires a three-bedroom house with study. The plot, 124 x 140 feet, slopes to the south, and faces a broad uninterrupted view of the Tennessee River on the exposure.

This section of the country, without a doubt, presents as backward an architectural expression as can be possible. This despite the fact that it is immediately in the midst of the T.V.A. engineering developments, and a part of the Muscle Shoals district. We need a local architecture.

I realize that the amount involved is very small, but the idea presented itself partly because I thought this





section of the country would interest you, and because I understand that you are at the present time working on a Florida school project [Florida Southern College]. This should be near your route of travel.

My official architectural training has been received at Cooper Union, N.Y.C. and at present I am debating the advisability of returning in October for a finishing year. A close study of your published works has resulted in far more actual benefit. If for nothing more than the experience of a visit through your recent house in Great Neck L.I. [Rebhuhn residence, completed in 1938], I sincerely thank you.

Your early reply regarding the contents of this letter will be greatly appreciated.

*Sincerely,
A.G. Green.*

The letter provided Wright with enough details about the clients, site and location, and the additional references to the area that Green thought would be appealing to Wright, but since Wright had left for London about the time Green sent the letter

to Wisconsin, and the Fellowship was still in Arizona, it was three months before Green received an answer. Finally on July 26 Wright sent a letter saying: "My dear Green: Will be glad to go through with a house for your clients. Perhaps you can follow through, with our assistance, in the execution."

Green responded promptly with more details saying, "A rather unusual circumstance exists. The parents of the young clients have their home directly across the street. You will notice in the drawing, a division line, 32 feet from the lot line. This space is to be kept free of building which would obstruct the view of those across the street, although the space will be included in the landscaping."

Wright soon sent preliminary plans, which the Rosenbaums enthusiastically accepted with only a few suggestions for minor changes. Wright asked Green to arrange for an apprentice to be lodged with the Rosenbaums noting that the usual methods for contracting a house seldom worked well with Wright designs. "We itemize all mill work—

The design for the Rosenbaum House was in dramatic contrast to neighboring homes, but was well received by the community.

let contracts for piece work—brick per thousand laid and measured in a wall—concrete per cu-ft laid, lumber according to our bill, etc. etc." Wright explained that "this throws a whole strain on us incommensurate with an architect's fee and we meet it by sending on an apprentice at the proper time to take charge, do shopping and hold the whole together..." Wright also asked for \$25 per week for the apprentice's services "so long as required (it should not be in this case longer than ten weeks)." Wright also explained, "We have standardized details during the years we have been working on the modest priced house problem and feel that in this way we can not only save our clients most of the general contractor's fee but get results of which we can be proud."

In fact, the house did not come in at budget, partly because the Rosenbaums wanted to use union labor and to purchase all materials from local friends if possible. In his book Alvin Rosenbaum provides details



about the various challenges presented during construction as well as a detailed analysis of Wright's ongoing struggle to develop moderate cost housing and Wright's varied attempts and failures to secure projects being considered by the federal government that would have advanced the concepts of Broadacre City.

When the 1,540-square-foot Rosenbaum home was completed in 1940 at a cost of \$12,000, it attracted immediate attention, and Stanley Rosenbaum wrote to a friend, "I believe every one in town has been to see it at least three times. We have had not less than 100 visitors a day on weekdays for the past few months, and the number runs as high as 500 on Saturdays." A few weeks after the house was completed, photographs of it were on display in New York as part of a large Frank Lloyd Wright exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Aaron Green, the young architecture student who had linked Wright and the Rosenbaums, decided not to return to Cooper Union to complete his education and instead went to Taliesin to apprentice with Wright. Stanley Rosenbaum became a University of North Alabama English professor. The family grew to include four sons. In 1948 Wright was commissioned to design an addition to the house that included two

The Rosenbaum House has been meticulously restored. The living and dining spaces feature Wright-designed furniture and showcase the use of cypress, glass, and brick.

new wings and added 1,084 square feet to the house, bringing the total area to 2,624 square feet.

Despite the financial challenges involved in producing the house at the modest cost originally sought, in every other way the Rosenbaum house did meet Wright's criteria for creating the ideal Usonian house—one that would provide the space, freedom, and beauty necessary for the growth of the individual. "I have often been asked what it was like to grow up in a Frank Lloyd Wright house," wrote Alvin Rosenbaum. "Unlike my parents, I had no basis



The Rosenbaum House is now open for tours Tuesdays through Saturdays (see page 31.)



for comparison with other experiences, since the house was already nearly five years old when I was born . . . The Rosenbaum house makes its first impression from afar, seen over the rise of a hill, in the foreground with the Tennessee River a mile beyond to the south. In the afternoon sun the colors of the house are vivid; Cherokee red roof and brick and honey cypress, with surrounding greenery, mostly juniper and holly . . . My own memory picture is of Mimi playing ‘Moonlight Sonata’ on the Baldwin, Stanley down in his study working out a Double-Crostic puzzle in the back of his weekly ‘Saturday Review of Literature,’ the afternoon light filtered through the perforated boards under the eaves, making patterns on the floor. Dinner was prepared in a tiny kitchen just beyond the living room (‘built like a galley in a Pullman car, where they prepare hundreds of meals a day from a similar-sized space,’ was how Stanley Rosenbaum used to explain it to visitors, as Frank Lloyd Wright had explained it to him). I also remember a Wright-designed console radio in the living room . . . Playing with my brothers, David, Jonathan, and Michael, I constructed tunnels between ottomans and beneath blankets in our dormitory. Outside, our

collie Diana lived in a Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired doghouse, with two rooms and a flat roof . . .

“In and around Florence there were perhaps three kinds of houses: solid mansions and smaller houses made of brick; wooden houses with clapboards and wide porches, often occupied by families who rented; and unpainted, dogtrot shacks with tin roofs, usually set well off the road, insubstantial, seemingly temporary places for tenants who grew cotton and vegetables. The Rosenbaum house did not fit into any of these categories, but synthesized qualities of all three. At the edge of town on the threshold of the countryside, the house is not part of either the country or the town, but it relates to both . . .

“The inner life of the structure itself is in its craft, the details that turned its carpentry into art, lending a substance to Wright’s form that exists as a tribute to the workers who built it. Time now speaks to the idea of preservation of this house that encouraged mind journeys into other cultures, a magnet for a constant stream of admirers, a house that in its conception was a prototype for an inexpensive, mass-produced, all-American dwelling for everyman, yet served as a friendly context for a family to find its own personality.

A tranquil enclosed garden reflects the serenity evidenced throughout the house. Photo courtesy Florence Department of Arts and Museums.

“In sum my childhood homestead was a series of delightful contradictions: urbanity comfortably set into down-home informality; an architecture molded to our family and to its site, yet somehow reaching beyond, created by Wright as a model for an ideal design for living; and a southern community that accepted, indeed, celebrated, what appeared to others to be the incongruity of it all . . .

“The house presents an opportunity to understand Wright the planner along with Wright the designer. The sensibility that Wright called Usonia was more than an architecture; it was an alternative design for nonurban, decentralized living . . .

“Growing up in a Usonian house created a series of encounters that always seemed somehow connected, as if the architecture flavored everything that flowed through it or came near it, an aroma and taste experience by nearly every passerby, to visitors, and among our family. It is a quality to which the integration of forms and textures, the prospects from the inside looking out, the ripple of levels down a gently sloping site, the materials, and the craft of their joinery and finish, the extra-

ordinary range of spaces—open and closed, dark and light, high and low, rough and smooth—all contribute.”

The Rosenbaums were the sole owners and occupants of the house. Stanley died in 1983. Mimi lived in the house until she moved into an assisted living retirement home in Florence in 1999. When the city of Florence purchased the home, it was with the commitment to do a total restoration on the sixty-year-old house. Barbara Kimberlin Broach, head of the Florence Department of Arts and Museums, who oversaw restoration of the house, said that the restoration process was “the way you would restore a piece of fine antique furniture. The small group of four carpenters would take a board off, if it could be cleaned and put back, they did so. If it needed to be replaced, that was what they did. Each and every piece, like a puzzle, an exact fit, exact piece. The house is screwed together—we used the exact same materials Wright set forth in his specifications.”

The house had to be brought up to current building codes and required rewiring, replumbing, and new heating and air conditioning systems. “The roof was gone,” said Broach, “and termites had enjoyed a long res-

idency in the core of the walls. Water damage had ruined many of the interior cypress panels. Only the brickwork was intact, the foundation sound, and the curtain walls and five glass corners were perfect.”

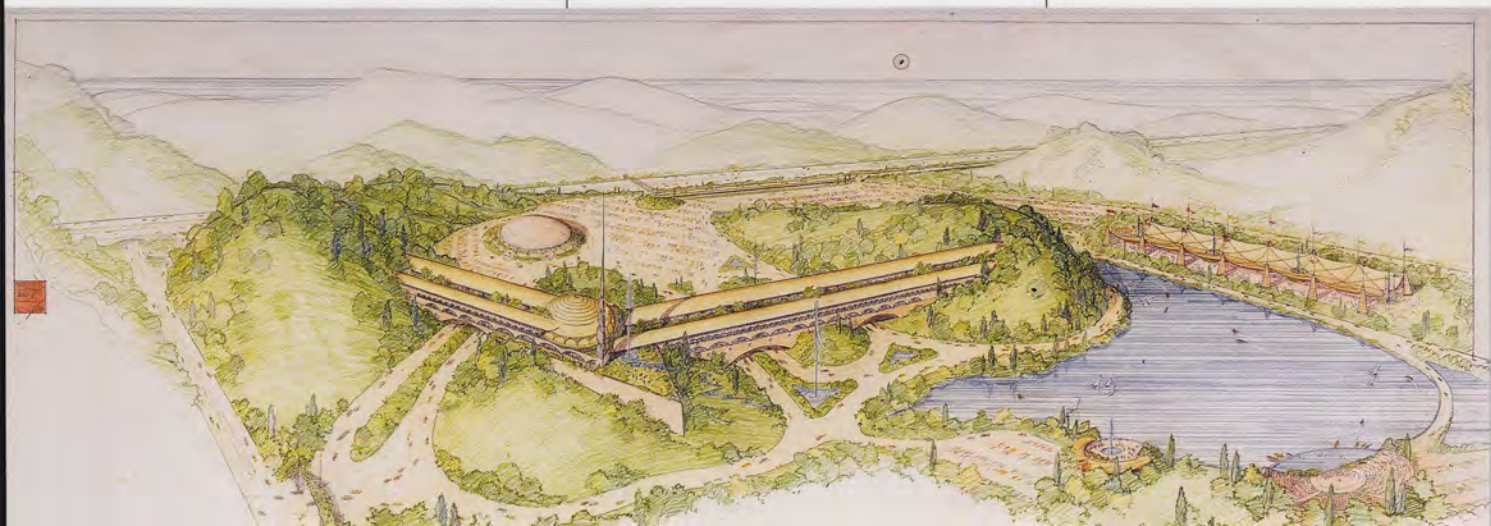
At the start of the project one of the carpenters examining the house with Broach said, “We could sure build you a new one for less than it will cost to fix this one.” But as the work moved forward, Broach said the carpenters, after working with Wright’s plan, “became craftsmen and in the end they were artisans. Like everyone drawn to this project, they did this restoration with love and total dedication, carefully and correctly, learning to appreciate the details of Wright’s design. We had Don Lambert, AIA, to help with every detail and to find answers to every question. Throughout the process we kept in mind that this would serve as a museum. Contracts were let out for special craft work. We were not in a rush, nor were we under a tight budget. We of course wanted to get the best value for our dollars, but we knew we only had one chance to do this properly, to preserve the house with integrity to Wright’s genius. When the restoration was completed a group of Wright purists came down from Chicago, walked in, and the first thing they said was, ‘Well, you didn’t

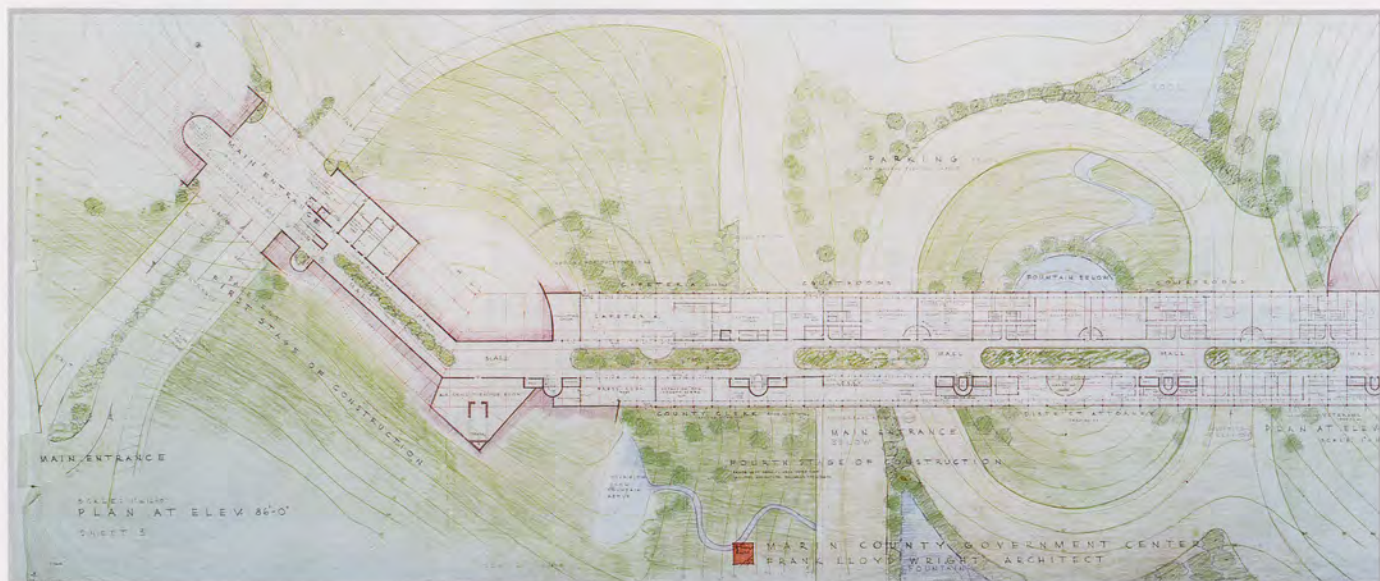
have to do too much did you?’ I breathed a sigh of relief.”

Broach said the restoration process helped everyone appreciate the lasting influence and power of Wright. “The carpenter who had originally suggested building a new house for less money walked through the house with me again after the work was completed, and—reflecting his pleasure from participating in the experience—said, ‘I wish we were starting all over again.’”

Mimi Rosenbaum, who recognizes the historical and cultural significance of the house, visited after the restoration was completed. Broach said she asked Rosenbaum how she felt about the city owning the house. “She put her hands on her shoulders and said, ‘I feel like the weight of the world is off my shoulders.’” The city, which spent more than \$600,000 on the restoration, is optimistic the house will continue to boost the local tourism industry in addition to serving as a learning center for architecture students and the general public. And that seems to be happening. An *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* travel writer recently wrote, “On a shady street lined with beautiful and expensive homes, this place is a standout . . .” And after contrasting it to the “white columns of nearby homes” called the Rosenbaum house a “marvel of utilitarian elegance.” Noting the home’s

Marin County Civic Center, San Rafael, California, perspective drawing. FLLW FND 5746.001. All drawings © Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.





many panels of floor-to-ceiling windows, Wright-designed furniture and built-ins, the broad patio out back, and the tranquil enclosed garden, the writer summed up her response to the house, saying the serenity gained from visiting it was a chance to “realize that living doesn’t have to be as complicated as we make it.”

Marin County Civic Center

Frank Lloyd Wright believed that all buildings should not only reflect the values of the democratic society, but should also reinforce them. He lamented that most American government buildings were designed with a contrived monumentality, vast in scale and built of expensive materials, but lacking a true relationship to American society and values. “The Lincoln Memorial is related to the toga and the civilization that wore it,” he said after a talk in Washington, D.C.

In 1937 Wright wrote, “The buildings of a democracy will first know and love the nature of the ground upon which they stand. They will realize the humble horizontal line as the line of human life upon the earth. Good or great building is the natural companion of trees and gardens and fields . . . Learn the basic principles of the new reality you profess as

these principles apply to buildings, sculpture, painting, planting, and clothing. Only so can Democracy give fresh proof of quality—proof that it can feel and think for itself to create new life anew on really noble terms.” It would be near the end of his long life before Wright would receive a commission for a government building in Marin County, California, and see his vision take three-dimensional form. And it would happen only because a group of people exercised their rights as citizens to bring the building into existence.

By the mid-1950s Marin County, just north of San Francisco, was in transition. The demographics were changing, and a new environmental

In addition to integrating the buildings with the site, Wright’s plan for the Marin County Civic Center provided for a functional structure with multiple entrances from parking areas, an interior central mall, and flexible office areas. FLLW FND 5746.003.

sensitivity was developing as a result of concerns that greedy developers would undermine the area.

Run for many years as cracker-barrel politics with a small clique of elected officials favoring their friends with key staff appointments and other benefits, the established order was initially being challenged when the county’s first woman supervisor,

A Wright-designed post office was the first building constructed at the Marin County Civic Center site. FLLW FND 5753.002.

