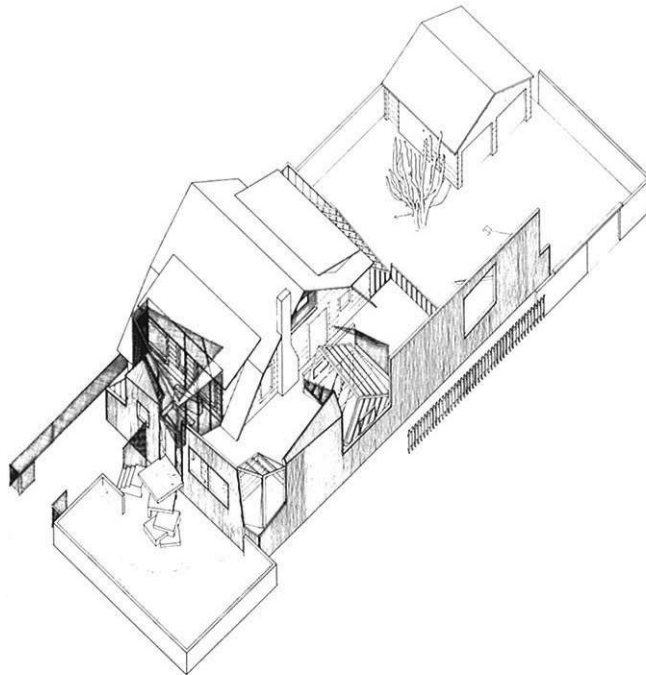


ARCHITECTS' HOMES

NÍALL MCLAUGHLIN

Gehry residence,
Remodel 1991-4

Axonomic view



ARCHITECTS' HOMES

NÍALL MCLAUGHLIN

Frank Gehry's house in Santa Monica plays a trick with your perception. To the unschooled eye it does not look like it was designed by an architect at all. Indeed some might say the owners could have done with an architect. A conventional suburban house has been extended in every direction by a series of apparently chaotic structures. They lean and lurch and shamble around the perimeter of the prim little house. They are like cages, or decayed greenhouses, or shacks. They are made from wire glass, rough wood, conduit and basketball-court fencing. Of course this was 1979, the year of punk rock and not giving a shit. Frank's effrontery did wonders for the banal suburban house and they made architectural history together. Now, every move he made is a well-copied cliché. There will be some part of Frank's house in the next new icon being built in your town.

Frank Gehry went on to design the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and the Walt Disney Concert Hall in LA. He became architecture's biggest star. It is touching to hear that he continued to live in his little lean-to shack in Santa Monica. Now it seems that the years of looking out the window and seeing hordes of fervent design students photographing your breakfast have taken their toll on the architect. The house has become a trap and he wants to move. I'm sorry. Frank at his best can be both provocative and deeply human. Despite all the highly sculpted, super-software modelled, titanium frumpery he has produced since, this is the best thing he ever did. It is what all my favourite architecture is, both thoughtful and apparently careless. It has

Gehry residence,
Remodel 1991-4

View of exterior



Gehry residence,
Remodel 1991-4

View of kitchen



a genial – ‘yeh, this’ll do’ – informality that is a great antidote to the kind of obsessive control that many architects mistake for good design.

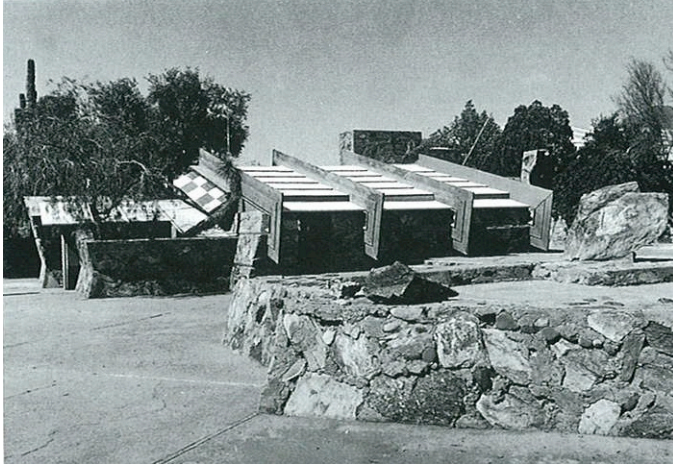
It makes you think about architects designing their own houses. At first it seems like the most natural thing in the world. The artist making a statement in their own terms, unsullied by the treachery and compromise of real life. No shackles, no client changes, no dreadful furniture, no recriminations about the constant little drip coming through the recessed light fitting in the ceiling. The Sunday Supplements are crammed with earnest architects living the dream by building their own home. Some people would expect us to do it. Surely any architect with real self-belief would live in a house of his or her own making. It is the least they owe the public. “Don’t inflict it on us if you are not prepared to live in it yourself.”

For me the idea of designing my own house is a nightmare. Where would I begin? I have no ideas. As soon as it was nearly finished I would begin to hate it. I would realise all of the other things I might have done and it would dawn on me that I have to live in this one. When I moved in I would immediately want to move out. I would hate my own furniture and be unable to forgive myself for the persistent little drip from the light fitting in the ceiling. I don’t think I am lacking in integrity. I believe that this is evidence of my own sanity. An architect who lives in a house designed and furnished by himself is in a hall of mirrors. Every reflection is myself.

I know some architects who like this situation. They admire their reflections in their own cutlery. They like to control every aspect of their lives and they equate good design with a Cistercian absence of mess and things. Architecture becomes abstinence.

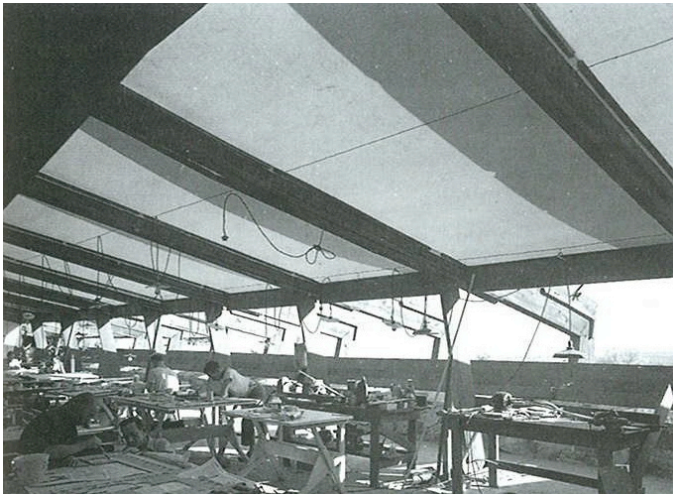
Taliesin West,
1947

Exterior view



Taliesin West,
1947

Drafting room



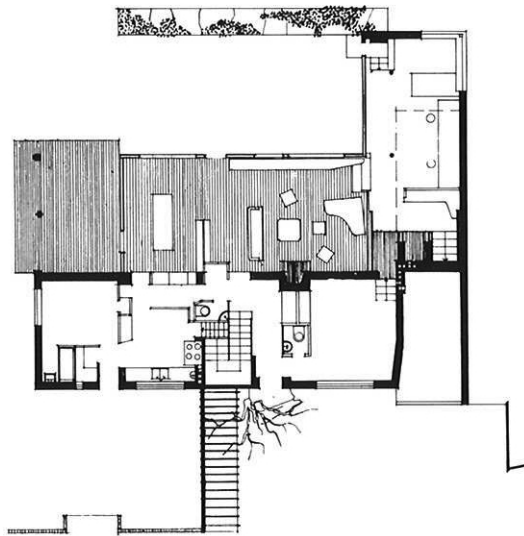
The point is to exercise social and geometric control over everything. Where better to start than at home? The unrivalled champion of over weaning control is Frank Lloyd Wright. At least Frank Gehry had a choice about moving out of his house. Frank Lloyd Wright got burnt out of his. A deranged servant torched the place. To be fair, if I worked for the man in the pork pie hat I'd go mad too. His idea of home is a place where he designs the lot. There is something genuinely creepy about Frank Lloyd Wright.

Frank's mother fixed architectural drawings to the skirting boards when he was a baby. She weaned him on a stern diet of geometric Freble Blocks. Parents, beware of this strategy. The child turned into a monster. He had an overwhelming desire to exert control over everything that entered his visual or social field. It began with a lending library attached to his first house in Chicago. Neighbours were encouraged to drop in and borrow books especially chosen by Frank Lloyd Wright for their improvement. In time the whole neighbourhood could be following Frank's reading agenda. When he left his wife for another woman, he installed his mother in the family house. She lost a husband but gained an expert in the Freble method.

After the second house and the mad servant, Frank decided to move to the desert. He made no secret of his desire to design, not just the house, but the whole landscape from one rim of mountains to the other. When they tried to route electric pylons through Arizona, Frank rang Mr. Roosevelt himself to have the project stopped. He had a special car built with Frank Lloyd Wright designed window screens so that, as he drove from Chicago to Phoenix, he could experience America through a framework of his own creation. Taliesin West, his last house, was designed as a kind of summer camp in the desert with Frank

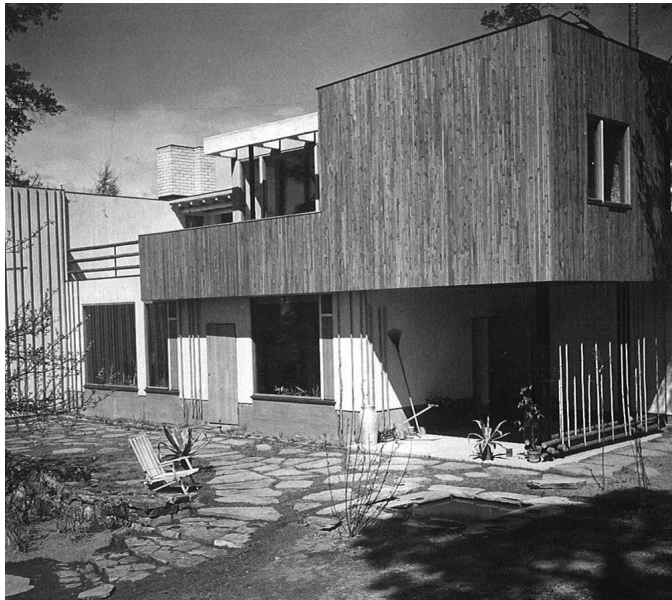
Villa Aalto, Helsinki
1934-5

Ground floor plan



Villa Aalto, Helsinki
1934-5

Exterior view



as chief scoutmaster. He filled it with work mates and students. He designed every single artefact in the building. Since it was too far to drive to Phoenix in the evening, the staff had to stay at home with the boss. Frank built a cinema for his captive audience. He had a special musician's preview screen for the showing so that he saw the action seconds before the rest of the viewers. A key moments he would shout from the back, "Here come the cavalry!" Seconds later, they would come.

Some canny architects avoid the trap of building their manifesto house for themselves by building an experimental house for their parents. For example, Le Corbusier built one of his first really radical houses for his mother. There is a kind of just symmetry about this arrangement. "I was your little project, now you can be mine."

When Erno Goldfinger built his vast housing towers in London in the 1960's he insisted on moving in so that he could test his own product. So he packed his bag and moved to Poplar. He described it as a social experiment, but others thought it was a publicity stunt. Erno chose a large apartment on the top floor. He said, "Tall blocks with open spaces are the ideal of the moment. I have wanted to build this for thirty years. I will help bring the countryside to London." He stayed for three months then sneaked back home to Hampstead Heath, which really does help bring the countryside to London. It's a pity he didn't stay. I love his Trellis Tower in North Kensington. It is a proper leviathan. There is great demand among architects to find a flat there.

There is one architect-designed house that I do love. The Finnish architect Alvar Aalto built it. He made it as an unfolding experiment on his own ideas. It is a kind of messy collage built on

a little hill over a Finnish lake. The plan is a loose spiral around an open courtyard. Everything from the organisation to the detail tells you it is not complete. Nor is completion possible within the grammar of the architecture. It is a provisional house, a trial piece that ends up lasting, and the spiral plan is emblematic of an endless unfolding. The walls are cross-hatched with different materials, bits that worked, bits that leaked, sublime bits. It is like an artist's studio turned inside out. It is about inhabitation and change, not control. We understand that architecture exists in time. It is always nearly finished.

Good luck to Frank Gehry in his new home. I hope they don't turn the old one into a museum.