

# Frank Lloyd Wright, From the Inside and Out

PORTLAND, Me. — Until Frank Lloyd Wright appeared on the scene at the turn of the 20th century, most American architects might design you a house

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but didn't particularly care how it lived with you. Not Wright. Turning away from traditional European models of homes and their furnishings, this bold yet practical visionary developed a truly American style of architecture, creating a harmony of house and nature by attuning a dwelling to its surrounding landscape.

He saw the ideal home as "a complete work of art, in itself as expressive and beautiful and more intimately related to life, than anything detached such as sculpture or painting," he wrote in 1955 for the magazine *House Beautiful* (itself named for a concept of social and architectural reform aimed at the enhancement of living).

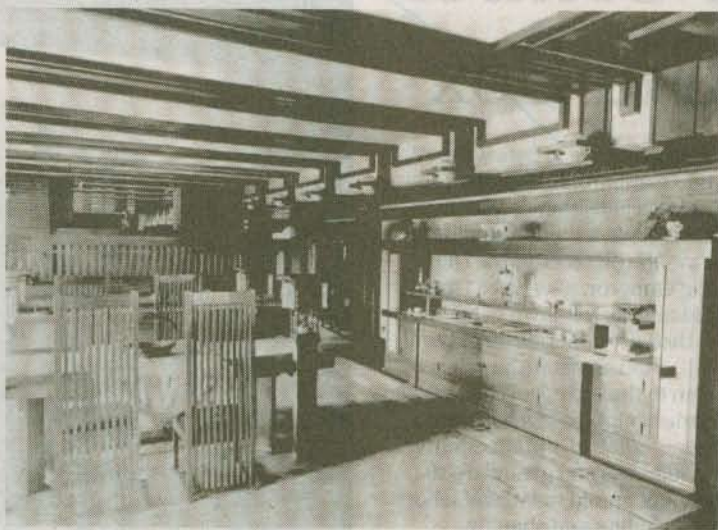
You get an engrossingly detailed picture of how he achieved his vision in "Frank Lloyd Wright and the House Beautiful" at the Portland Museum of Art. The show displays more than 100 examples of his furniture, metalwork, textiles, plans, drawings and publications, along with photographs of particular interiors.

It was organized by International Arts and Artists, of Washington, D.C., in conjunction with the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation of Scottsdale, Ariz. Virginia T. Boyd, professor of design studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, served as curator.

Wright's low-slung, earth-hugging houses, spread out horizontally, were usually covered by wide, overhanging roofs. The focus inside was a generous living area in a large masonry core that encompassed a large fireplace wall and a small kitchen. A wing of bedrooms and baths was laid out along an extended axis.

To open up interior space and provide light, Wright outlawed most interior partitions, created built-ins and multitasking furniture, put in broad bands of glass windows that functioned as exterior walls rather than as mere apertures, developed ingenious

"Frank Lloyd Wright and the House Beautiful" continues through Oct. 8 at the Portland Museum of Art, 7 Congress Square, Portland, Me.; (207) 775-6148; portlandmuseum.org.



FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT FOUNDATION

The dining area of Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House in 1908.

**Frank Lloyd Wright**  
*Portland Museum of Art*

lighting fixtures and designed large areas of carpeting patterned to resonate with the house's floor plan. In his 1932 autobiography, he wrote, "The most desirable work of art in modern times is a beautiful living room, or let's say, a beautiful room to live in."

For one of his most famous houses, designed for Frederick Robie of Chicago in 1908, he created a large, open living area (shown in a photograph) in which the dining room is reduced to a table surrounded by a set of high-backed chairs. The chairs themselves created an enclosure that gave diners a sense of intimacy within the larger surroundings. A storage unit with vertical and horizontal cabinets was built into a nearby wall, the whole replacing space-hogging conventional furniture.

Wright found glass integral to his concept of space not only for its decorative function and ability to affect how light came in. In his early houses, like the one designed in 1908 for Edward E. Boynton of Rochester, he still used standard casement windows, ornamenting them with colored lines and small geometrical designs and arranging them in bands to enhance his horizontal aesthetic. Later, when it became possible to work with large sheets of glass, he designed houses with floor-to-ceiling exterior glass walls that vastly ex-

tended interior space into the landscape, and vice versa.

Further along in his career, he turned to plywood, at the time a new material, and combined it with clear glass. In his clever "light-screen" designs placed near the ceiling of the Bernard Schwartz house (1939) in Two Rivers, Wis., he made a sandwich of two layers of plywood with a sheet of glass between (shown in the show in a photo mural). Cutting shapes from the plywood let the glass project patterns of light onto indoor surfaces.

## A design visionary with a blind spot: chairs.

Wright also designed marvelous carpets that more or less followed the house plan, with intricate and sometimes brightly colored patterns drawn from his extensive geometric vocabulary. Space in this show does not permit their actual display, but they are seen in detailed plans and drawings.

Wright's particular *bête noire* was free-standing furniture. He "wanted to think of free-standing furniture as abstract forms aesthetically and structurally consistent with the building, rather than as utilitarian objects," Professor Boyd writes in the catalog. Although he could and did create wonderful single pieces, like his Japanese-print table of 1898, de-

signed for the study and storage of a collection of prints, and a handsome library table (1899), he was much more comfortable with multipurpose units, often built in, that served for storage as well as other functions.

Chairs seemed to be a particular problem for him. Often, his were not entirely receptive to the human posterior. His slant-back dining chair of 1902, for example, consisted of a straight, tall board placed at an angle behind a normal chair seat.

Later, his free-standing designs, including his chairs, became less rigid, more adapted to the country's increasingly informal way of life. In a full dining set of ribbon-striped Philippine mahogany designed in 1955 for the Heritage-Henredon furniture company, he kept the high chair backs of earlier days but upholstered them and made the seats deeper and wider. A perky dining chair designed in 1953 for his Usonian house — a more affordable dwelling for middle-income families — is still a rigid piece of geometry. But its seat is much closer to the ground than his earlier chairs, and its back is punctured by an asymmetrical abstract design that recalls his light-patterning glass screens.

Wright was at his best with modular pieces: stackable small tables, chairs and other items that could be fitted together to make larger units. A case in point are his 1955 designs for Heritage-Henredon, integrating modular units of seating, storage, display and table into an arrangement that for all practical purposes served as one piece of furniture.

In the last phase of his long career, Wright, always interested in reaching larger audiences, took on commercial assignments. Aside from designing furniture for Heritage-Henredon and others, he created sophisticated wallpapers, textiles and carpet designs for Schumacher & Company, interior-paint colors for the Martin-Senour company, and model home designs for the magazines *Life*, *Ladies' Home Journal* and *House Beautiful*. (*Life* even produced a poster-board model in 1938 that readers could assemble in 3-D.)

Although from necessity some of the work here is in reproduction, this is a very rich show. It enhances a grasp not only of Wright's work, but also of his enormous influence on the way we live today.