



Crystal Bridges
Museum of American Art

Frank Lloyd Wright's Bachman Wilson House

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Introduction to the Bachman-Wilson House

ROD BIGELOW: Hello, I'm Rod Bigelow, Executive Director of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. Welcome to Frank Lloyd Wright's Bachman-Wilson House. Originally constructed near the Millstone River in New Jersey, this house was designed in 1954 for Abe and Gloria Wilson and their daughter Chana ["Hanna"]. It was acquired by Crystal Bridges after a series of floods threatened to permanently damage it in its original location. The house was taken apart piece by piece and reconstructed here on the Museum grounds where it can be protected and enjoyed for future generations.

[Short Pause]

NARRATOR: Before you go inside, please observe a few guidelines that will help us preserve the house and provide a pleasant experience for all of our guests. Please do not touch anything, including the walls and windows. Photography is not permitted inside the house. You can find interior photographs of the house on our website.

[Short Pause]

NARRATOR: Throughout this tour, Dylan Turk, Curatorial Assistant at Crystal Bridges, will be speaking about the design and history of the house.

[Pause]

NARRATOR: Please proceed through the front door and down the entry hall toward the living space ahead. Compare the narrow hallway to the open space you are entering as you place yourself in the center of the room.

[End of Stop]

The Living Space

GUIDE: As you noticed when you entered the house, the entryway is rather dark and small with low ceilings. You were surrounded by primarily cold materials. This was intentional. Frank Lloyd Wright designed this space not as a grand entryway, but as an efficient way to enter the house and navigate to where you need to go.

[Pause]

GUIDE: Look around the living space. This house is a classic example of Wright's Usonian architecture, an affordable and uniquely American design for modern living that emphasizes a connection to nature through economy of space and innovative building techniques. Standing in the middle of the living space and looking up, we can see that this house is a raised Usonian, which means it's two-story. Wright designed only a handful of two-story Usonian houses. This design provides for a higher ceiling and heightens the dramatic difference between the entry and living spaces.

[End of Stop]

Materials in the Living Space

GUIDE: As you look around the room, notice that the materials used are primarily glass, wood, and concrete.

[Pause]

GUIDE: Let's start by focusing on the use of glass. Turning toward the wall of windows, we see that glass dissolves the boundary between inside and outside. Not only does this help connect the inhabitants to their environment, it also allows for natural elements, such as sunlight, to enter the house. This creates an integral link between the location and the design of the house.

[Pause]

GUIDE: As a companion to glass, Wright used wood throughout the interior of the house by bringing organic material inside,

[Pause]

GUIDE: The wood used throughout the house is primarily Philippine mahogany. If you turn to face the bookcases, you will notice that wood was not only used to create sections of the walls, but also composes the built-in elements, such as the shelves [Short Pause], sofa [Short Pause], cabinetry [Short Pause], and stacked lighting fixture in the corner to your left. These are all original to the house.

[Long Pause]

GUIDE: While not original, all of the movable furniture pieces you see are reproductions of Wright designs, including the low stools in front of you called hassock chairs [Short Pause], the coffee tables [Short Pause], and the two distinctly shaped chairs known as “origami” chairs to you left. Lawrence and Sharon Tarantino, an architect and design team who owned the house from 1988 to 2012, restored the interior, crafted furniture reproductions, and upholstered the couch, hassock chairs, and dining room chairs with green vintage fabric dating from the 1950s.

[Long Pause]

GUIDE: Perhaps the most important design choice is under your feet: the concrete floor.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE: Wright named the color of this floor Cherokee red, and used it in many of the 532 structures he built. The floor is also the heating source for the house through a process called Radiant Heat. Hot water runs through pipes inside the floor, heating the concrete and creating a consistent dispersal of warm air throughout the house, while also providing a warm surface for the family to walk on.

[Short pause]

GUIDE: Quintessential to Wright's design is the four-by-four-foot grid scored into the concrete floor. Essentially, we're standing on Wright's drafting table. Follow the grid lines in the floor with your eyes toward the sofa, and you'll notice how they divide the couch cushions [Short Pause] and continue unbroken up the support for the bookshelf [Short Pause], through the joints in the concrete-block wall [Short Pause], across the beams overhead [Short Pause], down through the door frames [Short Pause], and out onto the terrace. From this central spot, it becomes clear that the entire house is designed on this grid.

[End of Stop]

The Clerestory

NARRATOR: Let's turn our attention upward to the horizontal windows above the concrete wall.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE: The narrow band of windows separating the walls and the ceiling, called a clerestory [clear story], allows natural light to flood the space while still maintaining privacy. The effect also makes the roof appear as if it's floating above the walls.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE: Notice the geometric shapes cut into the wood panels in the clerestory. Wright designed this pattern based on winged seedpods which fall from a variety of trees. Light filters through the windows, casting patterns of light and shadow that move through the interior of the house throughout the day, further connecting the design to the natural world.

[End of Stop]

The Hearth

NARRATOR: Let's turn toward the hearth.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE: When looking at the fireplace, you can clearly see how it is nestled into a larger concrete block column that extends through the second story.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE: This column serves as the structural backbone of the house, supporting the mezzanine and the balconies on the second floor. It also houses the utilities, such as water and electrical.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE: Wright places a hearth in the middle of the room as a warm spot to gather, encouraging conversation among the family. This central fireplace is the heart of the home. That's what this is about -- being the social center for the family.

[Pause]

GUIDE: The living space, as a whole, embodies the things Wright was most passionate about—using simple materials, light and nature, and minimal design to create a space to connect with others.

[End of Stop]

Dining Room Area

NARRATOR: While facing the fireplace, please step into the small dining space and turn your attention to the long dining table and chairs.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE: The dining table is composed of two tables that are different in size and shape. Put together so they fit snugly against the central block structure, these modular elements can be moved to reconfigure the space and accommodate various dining needs.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE: The glass corner window located across from the spot where the two dining tables connect features a beautiful trademark of Modern architecture used to further integrate the house with the outdoors.

[Pause]

GUIDE: Rather than using frames, this corner window—called a mitered window—is made from glass touching glass. The mitered edges are unique, striking, and require a skilled craftsman to execute. This is a moment where Wright truly shines, and makes the space feel as if it opens directly onto the terrace.

[Pause

NARRATOR: Move forward a few steps and look up at the low ceiling.

[Pause]

GUIDE: Notice how the wood directly above you extends through the glass and out onto the terrace, uniting inside and outside seamlessly with the same materials and pattern.

[Pause]

GUIDE: You will see that the mahogany above you and throughout the house is made up of narrow strips of wood called “battens” flanked by wider boards. The battens are affixed to the underlying structure and support the boards. Wright used this board and batten technique because it allows the wood to expand and contract with changing weather conditions. Additionally, the pattern it creates accentuates the horizontality of the entire structure, strengthening the cohesion of the design.

[End of Stop]

The Workspace

NARRATOR: Now look at the kitchen, or what Wright called the workspace. Remember, please do not touch anything.

[Pause]

GUIDE: Unlike the open living room, which is multifunctional, this space was designed for a specific job to be carried out efficiently. While primarily women worked in kitchen spaces in the 1950s, by calling it a workspace and designing for efficiency, Wright elevated this work through recognizing it as a truly strenuous and vital job. The workspace features all mahogany cabinetry and counter tops made of “fireslate,” a concrete and fiber composite commonly used to make chemistry lab tables.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE: As you exit the workspace, turn right and move carefully through the very narrow hallway into the guest bedroom and study.

[End of Stop]

The Private Spaces

GUIDE: You are now in the guest bedroom. Even though it's small, it's designed with comfort in mind, containing elements like the row of windows that lets in natural light [Short Pause] and the warm wood of the built-in desk [Short Pause], cabinetry [Short Pause], and bed frame. Former owners of the house have described the experience of sleeping in bedrooms here “like sleeping in a ship’s cabin.”

[Long Pause]

NARRATOR: Your last interior stop is back down the hall, in the small half bath across from the stairs for a closer use of the entry space and bathroom.

[Long Pause]

GUIDE: Located in the central concrete core of the house, this half bath features all original fixtures, surrounding board and batten construction, and a fireslate countertop.

[Long Pause]

NARRATOR: As you come out of the bathroom and back into the hallway, you'll notice the stairway going up to the second floor.

[Pause]

GUIDE: This hanging staircase is anchored into the concrete and supported by metal pipes that run up to the ceiling. Because of the nature of their construction, the stairs are delicate, so public access to the second floor is not permitted. You can find images of the second floor's two bedrooms and full bath on our website.

[Pause]

NARRATOR: Now make your way back out the front door. Take a left down the steps.

[End of Stop]

The Grounds and Carport

GUIDE: As you look at the exterior of the house, see how the front is composed of concrete block, and the front door is almost hidden, oriented toward the carport. These are techniques Wright used to create separation from the road, maintain privacy for the residents, and acknowledge the prominence of the automobile. Also note the extreme horizontality of the house, designed to lie across the ground rather than to rise up and away from it.

[Pause]

GUIDE: Looking at the carport, you'll see it has no support at its east corners. This is another trademark of Wright's designs. The carport is cantilevered, that is, supported by horizontal beams anchored at one end, which allow the opposite end to float free. Wright coined the term "carport" and designed them in his Usonian homes to discourage the storage buildup common to garages and to encourage interaction with the outdoors when going to and from the car.

[Short Pause]

NARRATOR: This concludes our audio tour of Frank Lloyd Wright's Bachman-Wilson House. Thank you for visiting! For further information, visit the Frank Lloyd Wright Welcome Pavilion at the entrance to the house grounds. Additional information can also be found in the Museum's South Lobby. Please return your audio guide to the Guest Services Associate positioned nearby. Have a great day and come back and visit us soon!

[End of Stop]