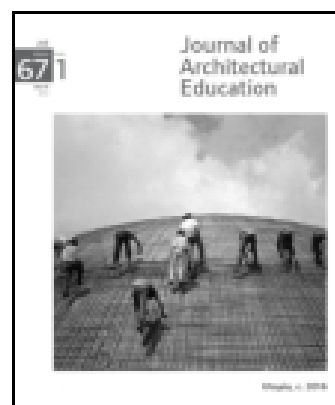


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“A Magnificent Adventure”

An Interview with Mrs. Sarah (Melvyn) Maxwell Smith about the Smith House by Frank Lloyd Wright

7

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The Smith House is an excellent example of Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian ideal. In common with other Usonian houses, such as the first Herbert Jacobs House (1936), the Smith House is laid out using a 2' x 4' grid. The house has a board and batten wall system of cypress wood panels screwed, not nailed, together and is heated with a hot water radiant heat system embedded in the concrete floor slab.

Sarah Smith still lives in the house and the following interview with her was conducted in September 1984. The interview is valuable for several reasons. Mrs. Smith provides us with an insider's account of the process of creating a Usonian House from the initial client contact with Frank Lloyd Wright through the completion of construction. She clarifies for us the respective roles of architect and clients regarding such items as the selection of the building site, the siting and design of the house, and the construction process. Perhaps most importantly, Mrs. Smith describes what it was actually like to work with Frank Lloyd Wright. In place of the popular conception of this architect as haughty and arrogant, Mrs. Smith describes a warm and solicitous Wright. Her recollections confirm many of the conclusions reached by Eugene Streich in his survey of Wright's residential clients.¹ Despite the difficulties and delays involved in securing and constructing a Frank Lloyd Wright designed house, Mrs. Smith, like so many of Wright's residential clients, recalls with affection and admiration her involvement with Wright, and her part in what she fondly calls “a magnificent adventure.”

Q. When did you first consider commissioning Frank Lloyd Wright to design a home for you?

A. When Smithy and I met, I had never heard of Frank Lloyd Wright. He told me all about Frank Lloyd Wright and said the girl that he would marry must want to live in a Frank Lloyd Wright home. Well, I was the type of girl that would have loved to have lived in a cabin some place on top of a mountain. I did not care about a plush type of home. All I wanted was one great big room with a large fireplace and a stone floor. That just fit in great with a Frank Lloyd Wright home. I did not care about drapery and rugs and all the plush things that go along with certain types of homes. Smithy and I were married on March 21, 1940.

Well the following summer (1941), we took a beautiful trip West. We came to a place called the Dells, in Wisconsin. Spring Green, that is the summer home of Taliesin, was not too far away. Smithy said, “Look at the map here, Oh, wonderful, why don't we go over and see Taliesin. It's not too far away, it's not too far off the path, so let's go.” Well, we did. The people at Taliesin had their own time, and they were getting ready for dinner. We just walked right in towards the drafting room. A young man came up, greeted us, and he heard Smithy say to me, “One day we are going to have a Frank Lloyd Wright home.” And the fellow said, “Are you interested in building a Frank Lloyd Wright home?” And Smithy said, “Oh yes, not right this minute, but we are going to have a Frank Lloyd Wright home some day.” He said, “Would you like to see and talk to Frank Lloyd Wright about your plans?” Well Smithy and I were just about bowled over and said, “Well, if it would be possible”. The young man said, “Just a moment, I'll jump in my jeep, and I'll see if you can't have an interview with Frank Lloyd Wright.” Smithy and I were absolutely overcome. In a short while he was back again, and said “Mr. Wright will see you.” We jumped into the jeep and we went to the studio of Frank Lloyd Wright. When we got to the studio, there was Frank Lloyd Wright standing there, impeccably dressed, from his white hair down to his white shoes. He greeted us both very warmly. He said, “Come, come in, do you have any babies?” He was already starting his interview. And so we said, “Oh no, you see we have only been married just a little over a year.” We walked in and what an interview we had. He told us to find a site that nobody else wanted. He said to look for land that had some drop to it. He told us to take a topographical picture of the site and send it to him, and he would design our home. And Smithy said, “We don't have any money. We are going to have to save for this. I see that you built a home for the Jacobs for \$5,000.” And Mr. Wright said, “Yes, I did.” Smithy said, “Well if he can have a home for \$5,000, I think we can afford a home for \$5,000 too.” Mr. Wright had quite a glint in his eye. He smiled at us both and he said, “Well, that's one of the big problems in the architectural world, to build a home inexpensively enough so that people can afford it. It may cost you more than \$5,000 now, for that was several years ago.” And Smithy said, “8,000?” “Well, maybe, we'll just work it out.” Then he asked us about our interests. We talked to him about the things we

Frank Lloyd Wright's Smith House is located in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. It was designed in 1946 for Melvyn Maxwell Smith and Sarah Smith. Melvyn Smith was a high school social studies teacher. Sarah Smith, now retired, was an elementary school teacher. Melvyn Smith first learned about Frank Lloyd Wright's work in an art and architecture survey course he took when he was a student at Wayne State University in Detroit. The Smiths visited Taliesin for the first time during a vacation trip in 1941. At Taliesin, they discussed with Wright the possibility of his designing a house for them. The outbreak of World War II forced postponement of any further discussions until Melvyn Smith's return from the service in 1946. This interview is an edited version of John Donoian's research project for a seminar devoted to Frank Lloyd Wright and taught by Dennis Doordan at Tulane University.

loved. Of course, Smithy and I were both great lovers of nature, and he asked if we were planning to have a family, and we said yes, we were. We loved people and we wanted to entertain people in our home. We loved music, we loved the arts, and Mr. Wright listened. We knew he knew just exactly what type of a home to design for us. What a beautiful interview! I will never forget it. Neither one of us will ever forget that first beautiful meeting we had with Mr. Wright.

Q. Sarah, how were you able to find this site? Did he help you with the selection of this site, or did you make it on your own?

A. Well, the minute Smithy got out of the service after the war (in 1946), he started looking. Believe me, he looked and looked and looked. And he was led to find this site on Pon Valley Road in Bloomfield Hills. How my husband could see this site out of all of the other sites, only God knows. Maybe God did know where he wanted us to be, because we were near a lake, we were also near Cranbrook Educational Community. Our area looked like a wilderness then. There were a lot of trees, marshes, overgrown with greenery. I know this realtor was led to show us this land. Smithy had an eye for beauty, he had perception. He was able to see design when it wasn't there. What an imagination he had. Mr. Wright didn't have anything to do with picking the site. He just told us to go and find something that nobody else wanted, and Smithy did. It's important to note that the land had a slight hill on it—just what Mr. Wright wanted us to have on our property. So Smithy immediately wired Mr. Wright and he said, "Mr. Wright, I have found the land, and I have the 'Wright' land, and all that we need is the 'Wright' architect." He received a telegram back from Mr. Wright. Mr. Wright said, "Come right away." This was over the Labor Day weekend, and Smithy had just a few days to spare. Smithy immediately got a flight out. He went to Spring Green and he brought the material that was necessary for the planning of our home. They were so busy at Taliesin that weekend. Mr. Wright really did not even give Smithy the time of day so to speak. That weekend so much was going on and Smithy thought, "Good Heavens, he is not even going to say anything about my plans." But Monday morning Mr. Wright gathered his fellowship around him. He said to the group, "Mr.

Smith has given us a challenge. He has given us a commission to design his home."

Q. Was there any problem with how the house would be situated on the property?

A. Oh, no problem whatsoever. Frank Lloyd Wright sited it perfectly. He showed in his plans exactly how the home was to be sited so there was no problem whatsoever. He situated the house into the hill so that the sun "poured" into the house in the wintertime—but not in the summertime.

Q. How soon did he come up with the design?

A. I can't give you exactly the time, but I am sure it was close to Christmas of 1946. Smithy did ask in September when he would receive the plans. Mr. Wright said, "When the spirit moves me!" One day, while we were waiting for the plans to arrive, we took a drive to see the Affleck home (ed. note, the Gregor Affleck residence in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1940).

With us was a young gentleman named Mr. Larry Kunin. Now, Mr. Kunin was a Boy Scout with Smithy in their youth and he was very important in the building of our home. I'll talk about that in a little while. When Mr. Affleck greeted us and invited us up to his home, I fell in love with the lighting of his home. It was so extraordinary and so different. Of course we immediately became friends. When we went home from that visit, we were all really intoxicated with all that beauty and it was soon after that we did receive the plans.

Q. Did Frank Lloyd Wright design any of the furnishing?

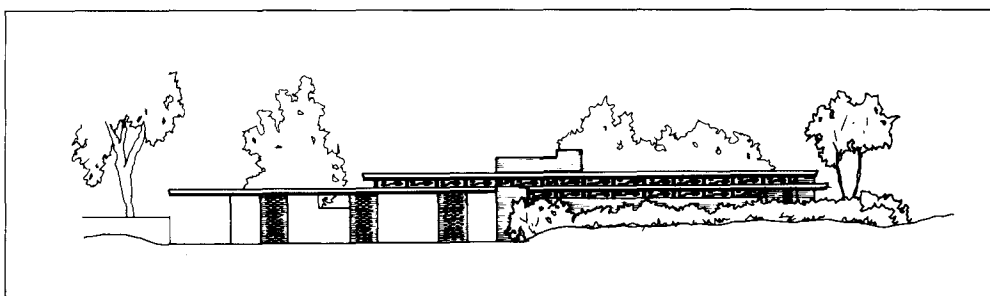
A. Oh yes, he designed all the furniture in the house. Like for instance, people have chiffarobes in their bedrooms. We didn't have to put in chiffarobes and dressers, etc. He had many built-in things.

In the living room we have this lounge where we can seat twenty-five to thirty people, it all depends on the dimensions of the individuals. We can have forty people in that living room, and it wouldn't be crowded. All of the hassocks, the dining room table and chairs, anything that is wood in the house was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

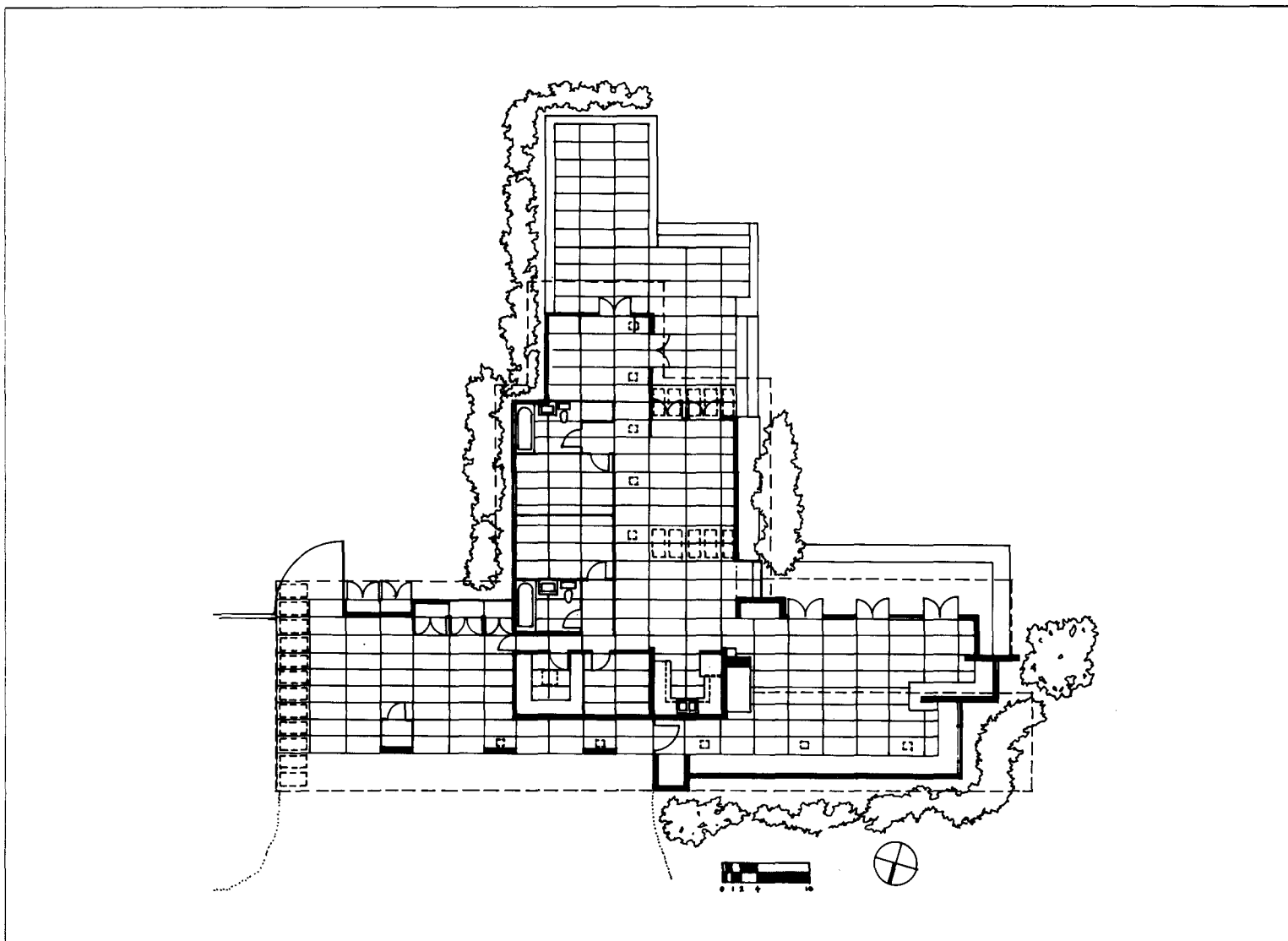
This home was designed for us, Mr. and Mrs. Melvyn Maxwell Smith. The proportions of the home are very interesting. Smithy would often go into the garden room and put his hand on the ceiling and he would say how great he felt, just as though he were a king! He could touch the low ceilings of his home. Now of course, all the ceilings were not all the same. They differed in height. In half of the living room we had a low ceiling and the other half just soared way, way up. So there was a variation to the heights in the house. Here's another interesting thought: Mr. Wright didn't think bedrooms should be very large; they were just to sleep in. So our bedrooms really were not that large. They were moderate size, but they weren't huge. However, Mr. Wright knew that we wanted to entertain, so he gave us a great-sized living room, and right off the living room was the dining room. Often times in Mr. Wright's smaller homes you didn't have a separate dining room. Usually you would have a large living room and part of that living room would be set up for a dining room. But in our home we did have a lovely dining room designed for us. Another thing is the lighting. Mr. Wright planned all flushed lighting. I just fell in love with his lighting, and in our home we have such interesting lighting effects and just by turning on certain lights it gave us such a romantic atmosphere. Even with all the lights off in the house, at night when the moon comes up and we had a full moon, oh, what a beautiful, beautiful feeling it was to look out on the water and see the moon coming into the home with its reflection. It is just beautiful.

Q. Did Frank Lloyd Wright urge special touches to the design of your home? What were they and how did they come about?

A. Well, let me start with this. Smithy looked the design over, got prices, and said, "Sarah, you and I can't build this home. We do not have the money for it." It was just impossible. So he went back to Mr. Wright, and said "Mr. Wright, I cannot afford to build this house, I do not have the money." He said, "Smithy you can build this house. You go home and you study these plans and know these plans so that you can hire people who are interested in Frank Lloyd Wright architecture. You will be able to find people to work very reasonably. You can contract that house yourself . . . *you can* build that house." He gave Smithy much confidence and Smithy came home. He studied those plans from 1946 to almost



1 North Elevation, The Melvyn Maxwell Smith House, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, 1946, by Frank Lloyd Wright (elevation drawn by John Donoian).



2 Plan, The Melvyn Maxwell Smith House, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, 1946, by Frank Lloyd Wright (plan drawn by John Donoian).

1949. He would stay up sometimes until two and three in the morning studying the plans. He went back with me to Taliesin in 1949, and said, "Mr. Wright, I am ready to build the home. But I have made a few changes in the plans. But Mr. Wright if you disapprove, we'll just simply forget about the changes I made." So Mr. Wright took the plans; Smithy was sitting to his left, I was sitting to his right, and Mr. Wright sat there looking at the changes. Mr. Wright kept tapping his pencil, tapping it and tapping it, and looked up at me. He said to me, "Your husband would make a fine architect." And Smithy said right then and there, he felt he received his degree in architec-

ture. And Mr. Wright called Jack Howe to come and take the plans and make the changes my husband suggested.

- Q.** Did Frank Lloyd Wright have any supervisory role in the building or did he leave it up to Mr. Smith and you to take care of the construction?
- A.** He had nothing to do with the construction of the building, but he said to Smithy, "If you run into trouble, I will send one of my apprentices over to help you." Smithy did not run into trouble until the very end; he ran into some difficulty, and one of the disciples of Frank Lloyd Wright, Jack Howe,

came and lived with us for two weeks and they settled the problem. I can't tell you exactly what the problem was. It had something to do with the roof.

Larry Kunin and Smithy worked together on supplies for the house. Larry was in the sweeping compound business and he had contacts in the lumber business. We finally ended up with Larry being able to get us a ridiculously cheap price for cypress for the home. This was the way we built our house. Everybody we contacted was able to do something for us. Smithy was able to talk people into giving us lower prices and that

brought down the costs of the house. It was just amazing. The next thing we had to do was to find people who would work for Smithy at a very low price. And Larry was instrumental in getting Smithy two very fine people, Peter Turczyn and Steve Kovass, to work at the home at something like two dollars per hour, very dedicated and wonderful people. These two very fine people had friends and relatives that also helped in the building of the home at a very low rate. They worked mostly at night because they had regular jobs during the day. The electrician, a brother of one of these men, would come at night. They would stay until maybe twelve and one o'clock at night working on the electrical work. The same thing happened with the plumber. What a dedicated group of people. Smithy had a brother-in-law who was in the cabinet manufacturing business. He was a very great help in the building of this home, because he was able to take this cypress and cut it all to size for the house, and, of course, there wasn't a charge for that. He was able to get all the screws and hardware and by the way, this Frank Lloyd Wright house, we might say in jest, was a "screwy house" because it was put together with screws. The hardware of course was all brass. Every single door in this home is piano hinged. A fine cabinet worker, George Woods, worked on this home. He was absolutely terrific, and of course again at a minimum wage; he worked early in the morning until late at night. It was amazing how the home was being built. There were many people who would walk through during construction. It was very amusing listening to people trying to figure out which room was a bedroom and what room was the kitchen, and invariably they would get it all wrong. Great hordes of people would come walking through especially during the weekend when the home was being built. Smithy was always very cordial to anyone that stepped into this home. He had

such patience with people. It was just beautiful to see his relationship with anybody who admired Frank Lloyd Wright homes.

Q. Frank Lloyd Wright had the reputation for being arrogant. How did he treat you?

A. Oh, Frank Lloyd Wright was just the most humble person. His humility was so great, so different from what one heard in the press. He came to our home several times. One time when he came to Detroit to lecture to senior citizens, Mary Palmer, Elizabeth Affleck and I got together and said let's have a luncheon for Mr. Wright. I said that we could have it at our home. Mary and Bill Palmer at that time were building their Frank Lloyd Wright home in Ann Arbor, and she wanted to invite her builder and some of the workers. Well, we had quite a group by the time we were through. Of course Mr. Wright was delighted to come. We set the buffet on this table in our living room. We invited Mr. Wright to be first at the buffet. He served himself and sat down on the lounge. No one went near him. Somehow or another people are afraid to approach geniuses. You rather stand in the background; you are sort of awed. Mr. Wright's voice came out loud and clear and said, "Isn't anybody going to sit near me?" Well, the minute he said that, people approached him and he was certainly well surrounded by the other guests.

I sat down and had the greatest conversation with him. I talked with him and we got into time. He told me that he could tell the time by the shadows on wall. He could tell the seasons and anything about time just with the shadows. You know, you used to hear about his arrogance and about his not being able to get along with the press. But really knowing that man, he was so beautiful, so wonderful, so easy to talk to. I enjoyed every minute that I was with him.

When Mr. Wright came to this home, he was so pleased with the home and with what Smithy did with the house. Smithy followed out Mr. Wright's plan to the nth degree. He said to Smithy, "You deserve one of my plaques." He did not give a signature plaque to many of his homes. You see that plaque as you enter the house. An interesting thing about this plaque is when we went up to Mr. Wright, he took the plaque, it was a little dusty, and he wiped it off on his trousers and gave it to Smithy. So you see, Frank Lloyd Wright thought a great deal of this home. He called it his "little gem."

I can tell you it has been a magnificent adventure to live in this home, "My Haven," (the name of our home). Smithy often quoted Emerson - "Nothing can be done without enthusiasm." Smithy was the most enthusiastic man I have ever known. The courage and determination Smithy expressed in building our home were some of the qualities that made this venture a successful one. ■

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Eugene R. Streich, "An Original-Owner Interview Survey of Frank Lloyd Wright's Residential Architecture" in *Writings on Wright*, ed. H. Allen Brooks MIT Press (Cambridge, MA) 1981