Art Journal

ISSN: 0004-3249 (Print) 2325-5307 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcaj20

Wright's Small Rectangular Houses

Bernard Pyron

To cite this article: Bernard Pyron (1963) Wright's Small Rectangular Houses, Art Journal, 23:1, 20-24, DOI: 10.1080/00043249.1963.10794465

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1963.10794465

Bernard Pyron

WRIGHT'S SMALL RECTANGULAR HOUSES

His Structures of the Forties and Fifties

Frank Lloyd Wright is recognized as one of the greatest architects of the modern age, probably the most outstanding American Architect of our century. Yet Wright built few public buildings during his career, although the few executed works were influential enough to give him an important place in architectural history. Aside from his earlier nondomestic works like Unity Temple, the Tokyo Imperial Hotel, Midway Gardens and the Johnson Wax buildings, it was his domestic architecture which kept him going as a producing architect. His unexecuted projects were, however, as influential as those of Mies van der Rohe.

But Mies, Corbusier and Gropius built few houses, and indeed few architects can afford to design modest, relatively low cost private dwellings. Unlike the other leading architects, Wright built a vast number of modest houses for middle class families during the thirties, late forties and throughout the fifties. Perhaps he had no other choice, since the commissions for large public buildings usually went to architects who were less controversial, more compromising and as many potential clients thought, less expensive. There is some reason to suspect, at least on the evidence of Wright's unexecuted projects, that his potentialities were only partly realized. To some extent our society denied Wright the opportunity to execute and develop his architectural ideas, as it did Sullivan. If Wright had been given greater freedom, more money to work with and more important commissions, he might have moved much farther toward the abolishment of the box and away from conventional post and beam construction, and into a realm of fantastically free forms. Perhaps we would have seen ideas like the ascending spiral of the Guggenheim Museum, the exuberant fairy-tale architecture of the Baghdad projects, and the completely circular projects of the forties and fifties appearing much sooner in his career.

Wright went along his own course as a preacher, and in the meantime realized some of his architectural theory in working with small residential problems, designing each house individually to fit the client, the site, and the materials, but still drawing from ideas of his earlier houses. By the fifties, his final "Golden Age," he was turning out more of his small houses than ever before. Except for the help of his staff and a few senior apprentices, this work would have taken a great deal of his time. And most of his clients were people with relatively modest incomes, who were somewhat conventional in their taste.

Partly as a response to these demands for modest, not completely unconventional houses, Wright moved in the direction of simplification and standardization during the thirties, forties and fifties. His Usonian house of the thirties and his diamond module houses of the early fifties[1] were attempts at simplification of the designing and building processes. His pre-fabs of the late fifties represented an effort to achieve some of his ideas on a mass production basis. However, the great mass of his executed work of the late forties and fifties were individually designed small dwellings for middle class families. In spite of his hatred for the rectangular box, a great number of his recent small houses were rectangular, based on the square module, often a four foot unit. Many of these rectangular houses have been discussed briefly in various architectural publications, but many others, some as important as the published ones, remain virtually unknown. All of the unpublished houses discussed below appear in Bruce Radde's almost complete list of Wright's works which is part of an anthology of writings and buildings by the Master of Taliesin.[2]

In designing these rectangular houses that were built since World War II, Wright added little to the repertoire of architectural ideas he deveolped during the Oak Park period which ended in 1909. The idea of creating essentially one interior space, broken into sub-spaces by vertical and horizontal masses appeared as early as 1902 in the Ward Willitts house and was elaborated in the Robie and other great early houses. The idea of the interpenetration of masses of two heights was never repeated during the fifties in exactly the form of the Prairie houses of 1902 to 1909, but the general concept of the interpenetration of masses was certainly one important trademark of Wright's domestic architecture of the fifties. He showed a preference for the horizontal line and for massiveness in his early houses, and this preference did not change during his later life. On a less abstract level, there are many differences between his early Prairie houses and those of the last twenty-five years. The large Prairie house with its leaded casements and dark stained woodwork evolved into the cleaner, more compact Usonian of the thirties. In turn, the Usonian was replaced by the variety of recent square module houses. The characteristic hip roof of the Prairie houses virtually disappeared during the

The author, who holds a Ph.D. in Psychology and Art from the University of Wisconsin is now teaching art at Whitewater State College, Whitewater, Wisconsin.

[1] Bernard Pyron, Wright's Diamond Module Houses: His Development of Non-rectilinear Interior Space, *Art Journal*, Winter 1961-1962, 92-96.

[2] Edgar Kaufmann Jr. and Ben Raeburn (Eds.), *Frank Lloyd Wright: Writings and Buildings* (New York, 1960), pp. 331-346.

thirties but reappeared in a simplified form during the fifties.

The pioneering Prairie house grew from the center mass outward in long horizontal lines. Those low wings with the great overhanging roof hovering above, broken by massive chunks of vertical masonry, gave Wright's early art an unmistakable individuality. In their great sheltering roofs, their openness to the outdoors, their free interior spaces, and even in the brown board bands against a golden plaster, they were strongly in the spirit of Japanese architecture, the Phoenix Hall (1053) or the Katsura Villa (1620), which Wright had undoubtedly seen during his first trip to Japan in 1905. Like the Japanese masterpieces, the great Prairie houses seem to have been built by an organism which was a part of nature rather than outside of it; they grew from the landscape as a tree does, but in accordance with their own principles. In spite of his Western style artist-individuality, Wright had something of the Taoist and Zen feeling of wu-wei, non-interference with nature.

Wright's Prairie style came to an end in 1909, although the Johnson home in Racine, Wisconsin (1937) is really the final house in this larger style. Only one house of the fifties seems to approach the Prairie type, the Harold Price Jr. house of Bartlesville, Oklahoma (1956). The Eric Brown house of Kalamazoo, Michigan (1951),[3] a long, low, in-line plan (Fig. 1) is the best example of a group of smaller descendants of the Prairie line. Unlike the earlier houses, these smaller structures are only one floor in height and in plan are essentially a rectangular living-dining-kitchen area joined to a more narrow bedroom wing. They are houses of the Midwest, as were their larger, more complex ancestors.

Another long, low plan, of the same character as the Brown house, the David Weisblatt house of Galesburg Village, Michigan (1951) is built of Wright's Usonian Automatic concrete block[4] made on the site (Fig. 2). It nestles comfortably on the side of a sloping meadow, while a circular living room terrace, one reminder of Wright's unrealized circular scheme for all four of the Galesburg Village houses, rides the slope. The closed side of the house burrows slightly into the slope, so that the roof on this side extends almost to the ground. Another of the Galesburg Village houses, that of Eric Pratt (1951), is similar in plan to the Weisblatt house (Fig. 3). The unusually wide lapped board facia of the Pratt design is similar to that of the Muirhead, Staley and R. L. Wright houses. None of the houses of the Galesburg Village group are pioneering masterpieces, but are successful variations on other houses and all are well placed on their circular lots which Wright laid out himself. Conceived as a cooperative venture, these houses were built with the same concrete block set up with steel horizontal and vertical reinforcing rods in the joints (with the exception of the semicircular Meyers house of conventional concrete block). These houses form a little settlement two miles from Galesburg Village. It is one of the very few Wrightian settlements in the world, a small scale realization of some of his ideas set forth in the Broadacre City plan of the early thirties.

These long, low houses, of which the Brown plan is the best example, are developed from several central ideas. The emphasis on horizontality, massiveness, acceptance of the natural site and the open plan appear in all. In many Wright houses there is no one clear central idea and yet many of these approach his concept of organic architecture. For example, the John Carr house of Glenview, Illinois (1951), another long, low, in-line plan, is not developed from one central idea but from several (Fig. 4). One cannot predict from some central theme stated boldly the form of every part of the house; it has several interesting surprises. A band of perforated brick placed up near the eave runs the length of the bedroom wing and

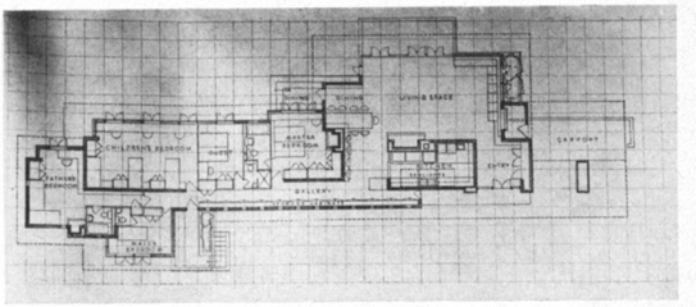

Fig. 1. Eric Brown house, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1951. Floor plan. (From *House and Home*, March 1953.)

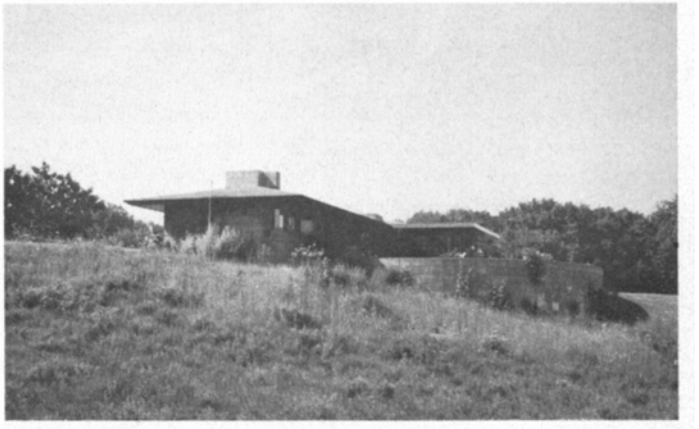

Fig. 2. David Weisblatt house, Galesburg Village, Michigan, 1951. View from the north. All photographs are by the author.

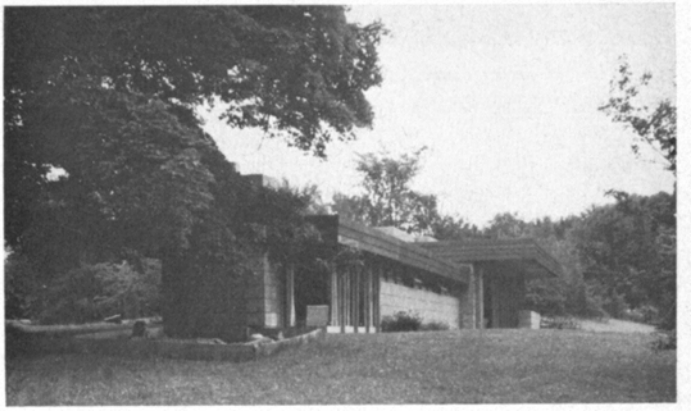

Fig. 3. Eric Pratt house. Galesburg Village, Michigan, 1951. View from the west.

[3] *House and Home,* (March 1953), pp. 106-113.

[4] Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Natural House* (New York 1954), pp. 162-164.

Fig. 4. John Carr house, Glenview, Illinois, 1951.

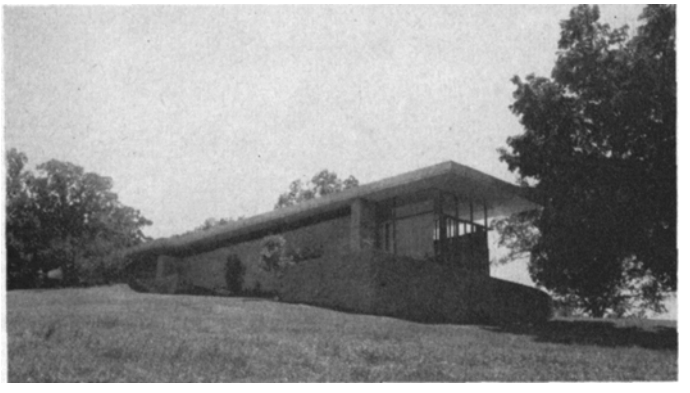

Fig. 5. Douglas Grant house, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1950. View from the northeast.

Fig. 6. Douglas Grant house. Interior.

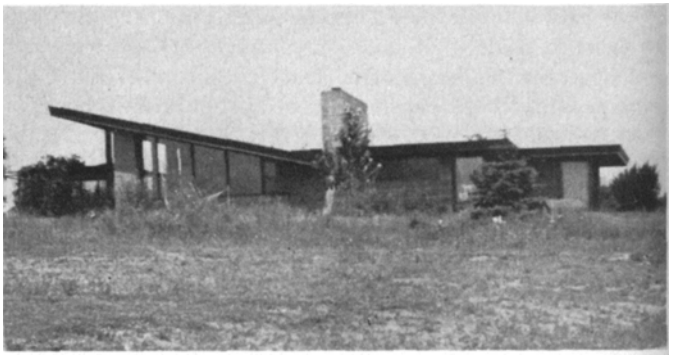

Fig. 7. Robert Levin house, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1951. View from the south.

appears as a delightful example of Wrightian ornament in other parts of the structure. These large perforated bricks add a necessary texture and detail to the long wall expanse. Although many of Wright's more recent houses lack the personal touch that can be seen in the detailing of his Prairie houses, he did use ornamentation during the fifties effectively to offset his long, unbroken walls.

There are other long, low houses of the fifties that could be added to this list, such as the flat-roofed Karl A. Staley house of Madison, Ohio (1955), and the Donald Schaberg house of Okemos, Michigan, similar in plan to the Weisblatt house, completed in 1958. There are other, possibly more original designs, that are based on a simple rectangular floor plan without the wider kitchen-living area typical of the Brown house and its relatives. Designed during the late forties and completed by 1950, the Douglas Grant dwelling of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, is one hundred and twenty-five feet long and only sixteen feet wide (Fig. 5). The house rides level along the slope of its hill site so that the bedroom area is on the level of the ground at the beginning of the hill slope. A balcony from the bedroom area extends into the high living room space creating a low, recessed kitchen space beneath (Fig. 6). This house is built of small, thin Iowa shale quarried on the Grant property, laid in a special form that was built by the Grants and their stone mason from old windmill parts. The shale was laid horizontally without the usual Wrightian outcroppings of two or three inches.

Of a somewhat later vintage, the Quentin Blair house of red and white sandstone near Cody, Wyoming (1953),[5] is built from one of the simplest of Wright floor plans. Wright knew how to make a simple rectangular plan into a more pleasing house. One of his tricks was to place a shed roof over part of the house and another was to enrich the rectangle by adding planters and terrace walls. The small triangular masonry piano niche which grows from the center of the living room wall of the Blair house is such an enrichment.

Another group of houses have shed roofs over the living room and a flat roof over the bedrooms but in plan are more complex then the Blair house. They are the Maynard Buehler house of Orinda, California (1948), the Robert Levin house (1950) next door to the Brown house in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the former Ina Morris Harper house of St. Joseph, Michigan (1951),[6] the Seamour Shavin house of Chattanoga,

[5] *Household*, (June 1956), pp. 25-27.
[6] *House and Home*, (August 1958), pp. 102-105.

Tennessee (1952), and the Samuel Eppstein house of Galesburg Village, Michigan (1953). The Buehler house, partially composed of hexagonal areas, has a square shed roof rising upward over the hexagonal living room. The Griggs house is large, based on a seven foot square module, and has two steep shed roofs facing east and south. The Levin house is less complex but seems to fall apart as a design in its southern view with its weak, narrow fireplace stack (Fig. 7). When shown a photograph of this house, Wright suggested this criticism to the author. These shed roof houses have no obvious prototype in earlier Wrightian domestic architecture.

Much of the detailing, if not some of the basic designing of these small homes, was no doubt done by Wright's staff. In many cases the clients themselves, their sites or their requirements may not have motivated Wright to lavish more of his creative energy on their homes. But Mr. and Mrs. Don Lovness of Minnesota came to him with more enthusiasm for his work. They watched him do much of the preliminary designing of their house and thus know it was not largely the work of one of the "Hillside pencils." Completed by the owners themselves in 1957 (Fig. 8), it does have an unusual amount of detail for a very recent small house. To form the ceiling, boards grooved on their edges are placed at 90 degree angles to each other to form a pattern of squares contained within each other. The exposed wooden beams are scored every few inches with a saw-cut. The Lovness living room, of a greater height than the two small bedrooms, holds one of the most massive of Wright's fireplaces whose cantilevered hood dominates the room. The lighting decks, which scale the living room down to human size, are another important device used in almost all Wright houses. These decks not only break up interior space, providing cave-like recesses above them, but are useful places to put pottery, seasonal greenery and autumn leaves. In spring or summer a Wright house without greenery or flowers placed in its lighting decks or on low tables would lack that rich affirmation of nature in its seasonal changes which imparts an added life to the architecture.

Another structure of the fifties which received more of Wright's personal touch was the house built temporarily for the 1952 exhibition of his work at the site of the Guggenheim Museum in New York.[7] Mr. and Mrs. Ellis A. Fieman visited the exhibition and as a result are living in their own house (1955), an adaptation of this model home to their site and needs. The Paul Trier house of Des Moines, Iowa, designed in 1958 and completed by 1960, is based on the 1952 exhibition house. Another late Iowa house, that for Robert Sunday of Marshalltown (1959), is similar to this house in plan and in its high living room.

One of Wright's noblest wishes was to produce well built, inspiring homes within the price range of the average American which he felt would contribute to a new American culture. The Hoyt house of Geneva, Illinois (1906)[8] and the Hunt house of Lagrange, Illinois (1907), were early attempts at low cost housing. During the fifties he made several attempts to design low cost houses. The standardized Usonian Automatics and

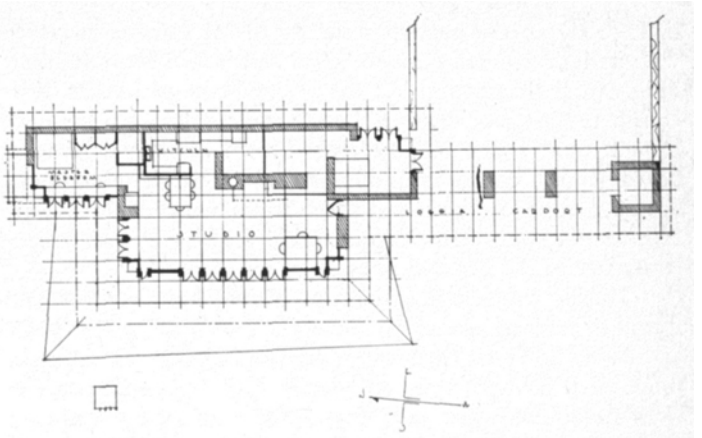

Fig. 8. Donald Lovness house, Stillwater, Minnesota, 1957. Floor plan, (redrawn by the author).

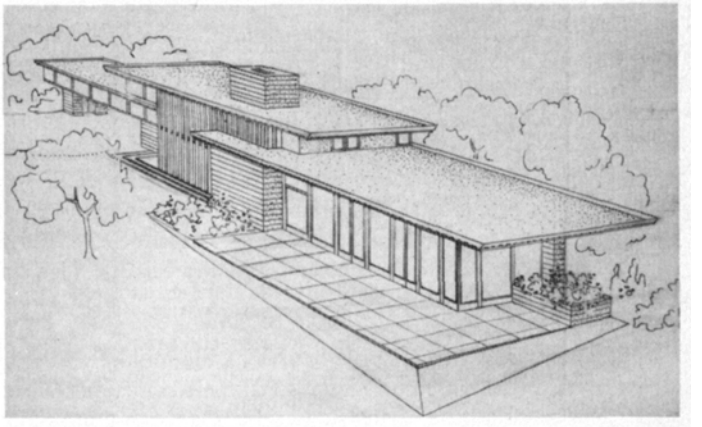

Fig. 9. Louis Penfield house, Willoughby, Ohio, 1954. Perspective, (redrawn by Louis Penfield)

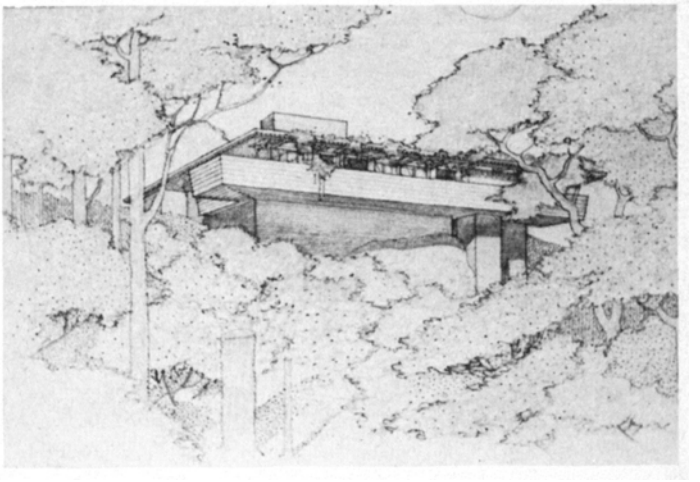

Fig. 10. Frank S. Sander house, Stamford, Connecticut, 1955. Perspective drawing.

pre-fabs of the middle and late fifties were conceived as a full scale movement toward an economical, partially mass-produced house. None of these, however, cost less than about $25,000, but the Raymond Carlson house of Phoenix, Arizona (1950) cost only $16,000 according to Wright.[4] The Louis Penfield house of Willoughby, Ohio (1954), the first of two designs

[7] *House Beautiful,* (November 1955), pp. 264-269.
[8] Grant C. Manson, *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910: The First Golden Age,* (New York 1958), pp. 173-174.

built partly by the owner, is similar to the Carlson structure with its light colored cemesto board and brown concrete block (Fig. 9). Earlier houses like the Hardy home of Racine, Wisconsin (1905) are suggested by the contrast between the dark brown wood strips and the light brown block and cemesto board, while the large areas of glass and the partial second floor are suggestive of the Abraham Wilson house of Millstone, New Jersey, a concrete block and mahagony structure contemporary to the Penfield house.

During the forties and fifties Wright built nothing that would rival his unique masterpieces of "Falling Water" (1936) and Taliesin West (1938). Cantilevered balconies as daring as those of "Falling Water" are rare in his more modest houses since 1936, although a very long cantilevered balcony was used in the original design of "Eaglefeather," the Arch Obler house of California (1941). Part of the Sturges house (1939) of Brentwood Heights, California, is cantilevered over a hill slope.[9] Other houses of this period were raised off the ground on piers, like the Pew house (1940) on the shore of Lake Mendota of Madison, Wisconsin, and the Lloyd Lewis house of Libertyville, Illinois (1940). The effect of these Wrightian piers was not, however, to raise the house off the ground in opposition to its site which was the function of Le Corbusier's concrete posts, but to permit part of the structure to ride out from its firmly anchored base over a hill slope, like the living room balcony of the Frank S. Sander house of Stamford, Connecticut (1955), a direct descendant of the Sturges house of the thirties. Like its more famous ancestor, it is basically a rectangle in plan (Fig. 10).

If many of Wright's small houses of the middle and late fifties were becoming more impersonal and sometimes little more than variations on earlier houses, he was moving in newer directions in his use of hexagonal and circular forms in his monumental works such as the Beth Sholom Synagogue of Elkins Park, Pennsylvania (1956-9), the Greek Orthodox Church of Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, completed in 1961, and the Pilgrim Congregational Church of Redding, California, designed in 1958 and under construction in 1961. The Marin County Civic Center (California) based on the arch and circle, was also being constructed in 1961. During his last years, as he was riding on a wave of increasing public acceptance, he made a final attempt to build more larger, enduring public buildings. By the middle fifties he had pushed the small American house as far as our culture would permit in the direction of his concepts of free interior space brought to life by horizontal and vertical masses of warm rock or wood arranged as sculptural forms. Even in these more muted rectangular houses of his last great productive period, he often worked with the void of interior space as a sculptor would work with a solid form, molding it by fireplaces, lighting decks and masonry or wood masses as partial partitions, but letting it flow freely from one area to the next, and always joining it to the larger space of the outdoors through large window and door expanses. Even though we have seen the end of Wright's architectural career, many of his designs of the late fifties are now under construction and a few more will be built in the future, so that a final judgment of his last domestic works will have to wait. At present, no one person knows exactly how many of those projects of the late fifties, dated prior to the Master's death in April 1959, have been executed, not even Wright's staff. But the Wright hunters will soon be on the trail of these too.

[9] Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *In the Nature of Materials* (New York, 1942), pp. 379, 380.

Acknowledgement

The writer wishes to thank Bruce Radde and T. E. Rickard for providing information on several houses.

Donald G. Arnstine

UNFINISHED BUSINESS IN EDUCATION IN THE ARTS:

CAN TASTE BE TAUGHT, AND IF SO, WHAT FOR?

Mr. Arnstine received the Ph.D. in the field of Philosophy of Education from the University of Illinois in 1960. He received professional training at the Cleveland Institute of Art and has both worked as a commercial artist and taught secondary school art. He is currently Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Wisconsin, where he teaches courses in philosophy of education and a seminar in aesthetics and education.

In the wake of the present effort to shape American education to produce large numbers of scientists and engineers, education in the arts is becoming an increasingly peripheral interest of the schools. The time that public school pupils have at their disposal is limited, and so is the money available for financing schools. To a public rightly concerned with these limitations, educators in the arts must be able to present convincing arguments to show that the arts are in fact worth teaching. And to this same public, weary and perhaps disillusioned with what it takes to be a chaos of relativistic aesthetic standards, educators must be able to say that taste is not wholly an individual matter, but that some standards do in fact exist and are available for teaching. Without being able to argue in some way for the importance of education in the arts and for the existence of aesthetic standards, educators who propose that the schools teach the arts are in effect asking the public to buy a pig in a poke. The discussion that