

Saving the David Lloyd Wright House, Phoenix

Frank Lloyd Wright was the greatest American architect of the 20th century, and he put his distinctive stamp on every kind of building, from churches to civic centers, across the USA. Phoenix is fortunate to have three key works: the Arizona Biltmore, where another architect interpreted Wright's ideas; Taliesin West, the architecture school that Wright began in the 1930s in Scottsdale; and the spiral house he designed for his son David in 1950. That house was abandoned and threatened with demolition. Happily it was saved at the last minute, and is being restored as a house-museum the public can enjoy.

It is cause for celebration. Everything Wright did had significance, but this house is special. In raising the living spaces above the ground and accessing them from a ramp, Wright explored an idea he had first proposed in the 1920s and brought to a glorious conclusion at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in the 1960s. The house and the concept have inspired a succession of architects, who came here to learn from the genius of a master. When the house opens in 2017, it will delight everyone who loves beauty and understands that architecture can enrich our lives.

Like so many of Wright's later works, this house is restrained and frugal: a response to the needs and shortages of the postwar decade. It's built from concrete blocks: a complex of sweeping curves, raised on stubby columns, accessed by the ramp and a cylindrical stair tower, topped by a shallow pitched roof that extends to shade a terrace. There is a band of ornament, but otherwise the walls are plain. The interior is warmed by the dark red floor, the shingled wood ceiling vault and colorful rugs that echo the interwoven circles of the architecture. For Wright, a house had to be a total work of architecture, so he designed all the furniture, the lighting, and floor coverings. So valuable has Wright's work become that a single chair can fetch more than the entire house cost to build. It's a tribute to the adulation that this architect--who was widely ignored or disparaged during his long life--has finally achieved, a half century after his death.

-- Michael Webb