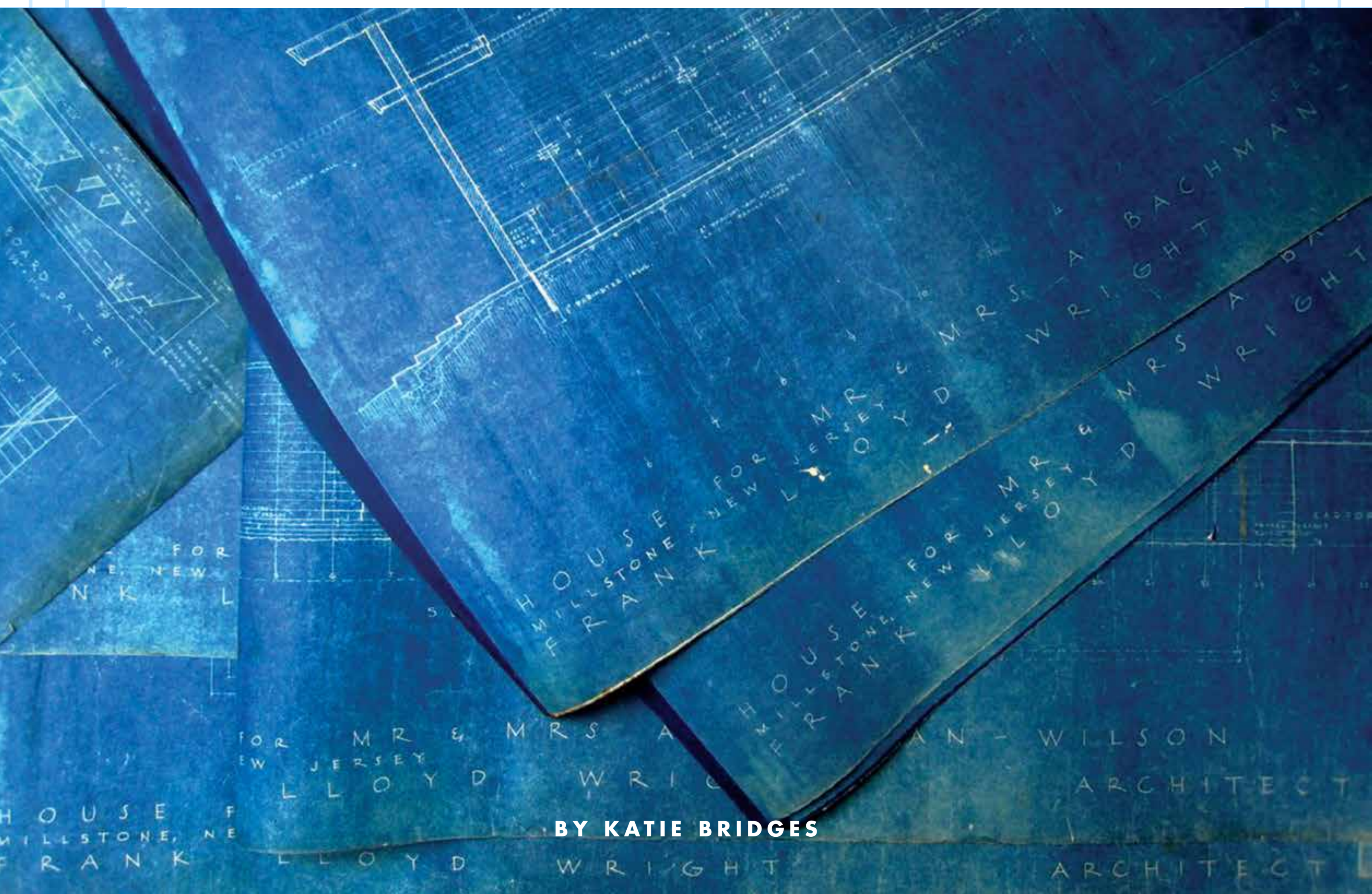
# OF HOUSE AND HOME

WHEN THE BACHMAN WILSON HOUSE WAS FIRST DESIGNED BY FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT IN 1954, IT WAS VERY MUCH A HOUSE—ONE THAT WAS ANALYZED AND MAXIMIZED DOWN TO THE SQUARE INCH. OVER THE YEARS, THOUGH, IT BECAME A HOME, FIRST AS THE NEW JERSEY RESIDENCE OF ABRAHAM BACHMAN AND GLORIA WILSON, AND THEN, LATER, AS A PASSION PROJECT HELMED BY THE TARANTINOS, A DUO OF WRIGHT CONSERVATIONISTS. BUT THIS YEAR, AS ITS BOARDS AND BLOCKS AND WINDOWS ARE REASSEMBLED ON THE GROUNDS OF CRYSTAL BRIDGES MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, IT'S BECOMING SOMETHING NEW ALTOGTHER: A LEGACY




BY KATIE BRIDGES

## BWH

Frank Lloyd Wright originally built the Bachman Wilson House in 1954 along the Millstone River in New Jersey

It's shaky because his hands are shaky, the way your hands would be if you knew you were about to lose the very thing—the physical thing, mind you—you loved most.

And it's jerky, shifting left to right, left to right, because he's filming the video as he's walking, as he's retracing the steps he's trod daily through his 1954 Frank Lloyd Wright Usonian home, the one he and his wife, Sharon, lovingly, painstakingly brought back to life over the course of decades. He's retracing the 25 years of footsteps he's taken across his home's threshold, through the entryway, past the open stairway and on into the living room, a room that explodes in soaring glass and mahogany and trees and New Jersey sky.

It's bright and it's warm and it's morning. It's just the way you'd want to remember it, if you had to.

And Lawrence Tarantino had to.

You could follow his footsteps, too, by viewing the video on YouTube, and you'd watch it again, and again, because there's just that much to take in. At first you'd see the polished board and batten, the mezzanine that blurs the line between indoors and out, the towering hearth. And then you'd see other things, more personal things, like a throw pillow set slightly askew, an orange ceramic coffee mug left on a windowsill, a pair of wind chimes, a framed photo of Wright affixed to the concrete wall.

That is to say, you'd first see the architecture. And then you'd see the home.

It was a home that deserved to be saved. And saved, it was—first, when the Tarantinos bought the house and tracked down its original owner, got the original blueprints and set to work restoring it piece by piece. Second, when a flood by the name of Floyd—and that irony is not lost on Sharon—struck in 1999. And then, despite their best efforts to mitigate disaster, six more times—each time the Millstone River behind the house overcame its banks, curled its way up the lawn, lapping beneath the door jambs and between the window frames, drowning the house in brackish brown water, sometimes as much as 6 feet of it, as was the case with Irene.

And Irene was the last one they could take.

The decision to save the house once and for all came on Nov. 6, 2011, a date Sharon can rattle off-the-cuff, like a loved one's birthday. Because in a way, it is.

"We saw CBS's *Sunday Morning* show on Nov. 6, 2011, and they interviewed Alice Walton about Crystal Bridges, and at that time, a lightbulb went on," Sharon says over the phone from Millstone,

PHOTOS: TARANTINOSTUDIO © 2015; COURTESY OF CRYSTAL BRIDGES MUSEUM

New Jersey, her voice catching in her throat. "Here is an incredible museum of American art, and it's on a wooded site, and Fay Jones is an important apprentice in Arkansas who connects very well to Frank Lloyd Wright, and what a wonderful connection all of the pieces are. And on that moment, Nov. 6, 2011, we felt strongly that a possibility might be there."

And so, two years later, as snow covered the ground and the Millstone River stood silent in the mid-Atlantic winter, the Bachman Wilson house came down in pieces. The Tarantinos—he an architect, she a designer—examined all of their home's innards, all of the lumber, the windows, the built-in bookcases and casegoods, cataloging their existence and sketching their whereabouts on an as-built blueprint. Then they wrapped the items in industrial-strength plastic wrap, affixed labels to the bundles—"Frank Lloyd Wright, Bachman Wilson, HANDLE WITH CARE"—and placed them carefully to the side, where a J.B. Hunt truck would soon gather them and cart them 1,235 miles southwest to Bentonville, Arkansas, to the grounds of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

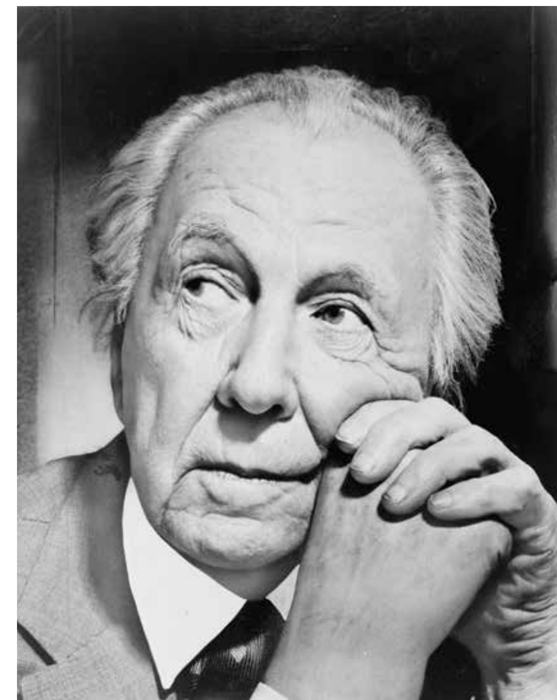
PHOTO CREDIT: TARANTINOSTUDIO © 2015

Scott Eccleston leans his lanky self over and picks up a rectangular block of poured concrete, flicking cakes of clay from its surface. "Does it surprise you that it's concrete block?" he asks, cocking his head in the direction of the house, which, at the moment, is partially obscured by a Mack dump truck.

I look up toward the house, brushing a strand of hair from my eyes. A cool breeze blows through the oaks' greening limbs, offering peeks of the museum to the north, the trails and great lawn to the south. I pause a moment to remind myself where I am because it's hard to sort it out in my head, really, the fact that I've pretty well transcended space and time to be standing here in the sun, soaking my black ballet flats in the rusty mud of a Frank Lloyd Wright construction site. I nod. Yes. Yes, it does surprise me, I tell Scott.

"It's just mahogany, glass, concrete floors and concrete block, and the concrete block—well, it couldn't be saved," he says, setting the block back down on the pile. "Feel this."

It looks like what I'd call a cinder block. It's rough and ragged, and I'm sure if you were to look closely—like, magnifying-glass close—you'd see a grayed-out landscape of peaks and ridges, ridges and peaks. Petrified meringue.



"Today's concrete block is really smooth—they do that because they want it to repel water," Scott continues, placing the block back atop the pile. "We actually had to go to a local block company, and we had a real block from Millstone, and we said, we need you to do this. And they said, 'Why?' And we said, this is how they did it in the '50s. And they actually had to pull a guy from retirement that could show them how to go old-school on this block."

As we walk up to the house, Scott's telling me about the lengths to which they're going in order to accentuate the horizontality of the house, how they've built a tool that will blend the vertical mortar joints until they disappear, and then he's pointing out the mahogany clerestory windows and their scroll-cut panels, and all the while, I'm looking at those damn black ballet flats to avoid the puddles, and then all of a sudden, we're inside. The ceiling's low; the concrete floor, red. Cherokee Red. For a moment, my heart catches in my chest.

Frank Lloyd Wright's color.

Scott, who as Crystal Bridges' director of grounds and facilities has overseen this project from its inception, knows far better than I do why it had to be Cherokee Red. He knows that there were no other options, no shortcuts that could be taken, even though Cherokee Red was no longer being poured, and he had to have it custom-mixed by its original maker, Scofield. Scott knows because he sat in this very house when it was in Millstone two years ago, "drinking coffee and drinking coffee and drinking coffee" with the Tarantinos until the light was just right, until the clerestory panels fractured the sunset into a pattern of pixels that danced across the Cherokee Red floor. He knows because he gets it.

He gets why it has to be this way.

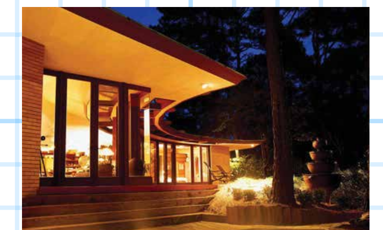
Bill Faber, the contractor heading up the reconstruction, gets it, too.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT PHOTO COURTESY OF LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

## SAVING WRIGHT

Frank Lloyd Wright-ophiles, take note: The starchitect was quite prolific. Of his 1,141 designs, 532 were constructed before his death in 1959, and many of those buildings were private residences—some of which are currently up for grabs, as is the case with the four featured below, according to the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy. Sadly, none of these are in Arkansas. But we do know a couple local folks who know a thing or two about moving a house…

**The George Madison Millard House (1906)**
$799,000 | Highland Park, Illinois
4 BR | 2.5 BA | 3,000 sf



**The Cooke House (1953)**
$2.75 M | Virginia Beach, Virginia
4 BR | 3 BA | 3,000 sf

**The Louis Penfield House (1955)**
$1.7 M | Willloughby, Ohio
3 BR | 1.5 BA | 1,800 sf

**The Winslow House (1893)**
$1.55 M | River Forest, Illinois
4 BR | 3.5 BA | 5,036 sf

*For more information on these properties and others, visit savewright.org.*

PHOTO CREDIT: TARANTINOSTUDIO © 2015, COURTESY OF CRYSTAL BRIDGES MUSEUM

**"I THINK THAT EMBODIES WHAT THIS WHOLE PROJECT HAS BEEN ABOUT. IT'S THE HANDSHAKING OF STEWARDSHIP, GOING INTO THE NEXT GENERATION AND ON FROM THERE."**

# MOVING THE BACHMAN WILSON HOUSE

The work started inside the home, where the interior fixtures and mahogany board and batten were removed, inventoried and carefully packaged, piece by piece.

As the walls came down in Millstone, Crystal Bridges' crew was busy preparing the site. The Tarantinos provided an "as-built" plan—basically, a blueprint based on how the house was actually constructed—to help the contractor and his team put the pieces back together.

Once cataloged and wrapped, the pieces were transported in two trucks courtesy of J.B. Hunt; the drivers had 5 million safe miles between them.

In a hangar at the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport, workers laid out an exploded view of the house from which they could pull lumber and fixtures.

The site chosen for the house, which was once a ravine on the Crystal Bridges grounds, mimics Millstone in that the private side of the house faces the woods and a waterway.

PHOTOGRAPHY FROM TARANTINOSTUDIO © 2015; COURTESY OF CRYSTAL BRIDGES MUSEUM

As Scott and I are talking about the floors, about the way they fall in a 4-by-4-foot grid, the way they line up with the windows, with the blocks, with *everything*, Bill's monkeying with the structural fins that support the 10-foot mahogany-framed doors that line the back of the house's soaring two-story living space. And he's chuckling, too, in that "It is what it is!" way, because they just don't all fit the way they should. Sort of like the window in the kitchen, which stumped Bill until he figured out that there "was a hump in the block" back in New Jersey, which meant he had to figure out how to put a hump in the block in Bentonville, too.

On most construction sites these days, if things don't line up, if things are uneven, if there's, say, a hump in the block, it's fixable: Fudge it a little, slap on some drywall, adjust the hinges. Bill? Bill doesn't have that luxury. He's not constructing with raw materials. He's following 60-plus-year-old prints with, for the most part, 60-plus-year-old materials—materials that were built by craftsmen, not sold by Home Depot. Which is actually something that he understands quite well, given that he spent the first half of his career as a master carpenter and the second half building homes for folks with last names like Hunt and Tyson.

It's not easy, doing things this way. It's not easily apparent that where Wright might have drawn a 4-foot square, the original contractor said, "3-foot-11-inches, close enough!" But as Bill bounces around the site, pointing out boards he massaged the tension out of, places where he's tucked away 2015 technologies into the concrete block, it's easy to see that he appreciates the challenge.

"We have the original nail holes, and we put new nails in the old nail holes, and when you can feel it go right into that original framing, you know it is where it was in New Jersey," he says, thumbing through a stack of scroll-cut clerestory panels perched together against a concrete wall, waiting to be reattached. "And then you think, OK, we've got it. Even though it might not be perfect, or the way that we would normally do it, it's the way it was."

The way it *was*. The way Wright created it to be. The way the Tarantinos wanted it to be.

"We have to understand that [the Tarantinos] have saved the house from flood after flood after flood, and then dealt with it having to come apart, all the while saying to themselves, 'You know, will anyone really take care of this house like they said?'" Scott says, eyes cast toward the clerestory. "And I'm telling you, the answer would have been no, in their mind. No one would ever be able to be the steward that they were. And you can't blame them for that. [It wasn't] until they came up here and saw opportunities for shortcuts—because, let's be honest, there would have plenty of opportunities—and

Sharon said, crying out there on that sidewalk, and I mean, she was so upset, she said, 'They did it the right way.' And Lawrence said, 'Yes. Yes, they did.'

"And I think that embodies what this whole project has been about. It's the handshaking of stewardship, going into the next generation and on from there."

"It was just piles of wood," Greg Herman, University of Arkansas associate professor of architecture, tells me. I've just asked him what it was like to first see the house upon its arrival in Arkansas in bits and pieces. It was, he says, "like a lumberyard."

He settles back into his office chair, leaning it far enough back that it almost touches the books lining the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves behind him: *Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Homes*. *Ozark Vernacular Houses*. *Heidegger's Writings*. Greg clears his throat and continues.

"It had lost its spirit in the disassembly, and I took the students out there, and here's this amazing Frank Lloyd Wright house, and it's just piles of lumber," he says. "It needs the reassembly in order to find its spirit, its Wright-ness. And that was an interesting experience because we all thought we'd be pumped to see this Wright house in a warehouse, and it just looked like lumber. Plastic sheets over it. Nothing romantic. No clues that there was any kind of genius involved."

And yet Greg knew of its genius—and what he didn't know, he learned. "One of the things that's interesting about Wright's Usonians is that their configurations change, their geometries change—there is a familial relationship between them, but they're all distinct," Greg explains, turning to his computer screen. "The Bachman Wilson house is based on a grid of squares; there are some that are based on rectangles and triangles. Let me show you."

And he does, flipping through a PowerPoint presentation on his iMac. Tasked with directing a team of UA students in the creation of the site's interpretive materials, he and a team of undergrads scoured the Frank Lloyd Wright archives at Columbia University's Avery Library—they were the first group of students ever allowed to do so—and created timelines, cross sections, light studies and scale models of the house from various perspectives. Together, their work will help inform visitors to the house—over 200,000 folks are expected to pass through its doors the first year—on Frank Lloyd Wright's philosophies and how they relate to his Usonian homes, like the Bachman Wilson.

"Very few Wright homes have been opened to the public," Greg says after showing me the last of the slides. "This is the only one that I can think of that's associated with an art museum's campus, in its totality. It's also the very first Wright house in Arkansas. And that—I think it elevates the dialogue, it elevates the consciousness of design, even though it's a 60-year-old house. It's current enough, modern-feeling enough. It's a little bit of a game changer."

**FLW**

Frank Lloyd Wright built actively from the 1890s to the 1950s, ultimately designing over 1,100 buildings

But will people really *get* it?

"It's like Fay Jones—Fay Jones' architecture was not an intellectual modernism. There's a lot of intellectual modernism that's difficult to connect to," Greg says. "Same with Wright. That doesn't mean it wasn't spiritual. It was extremely thoughtful, extremely spiritual. And this? This one is a beautiful house."

Back at the house, back at Crystal Bridges, these

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