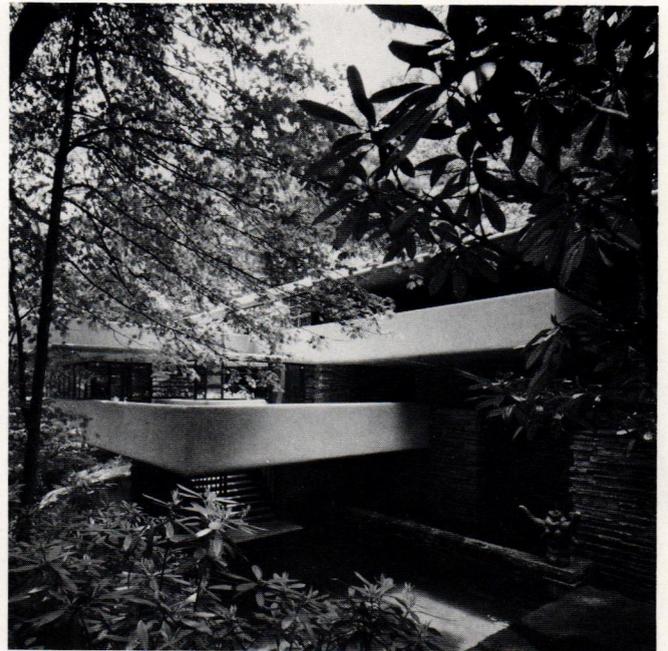


Wright  
Reflections

1982  
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**Kentuck Knob** (bottom right)  
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## WRIGHT REFLECTIONS

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# Wright Reflections

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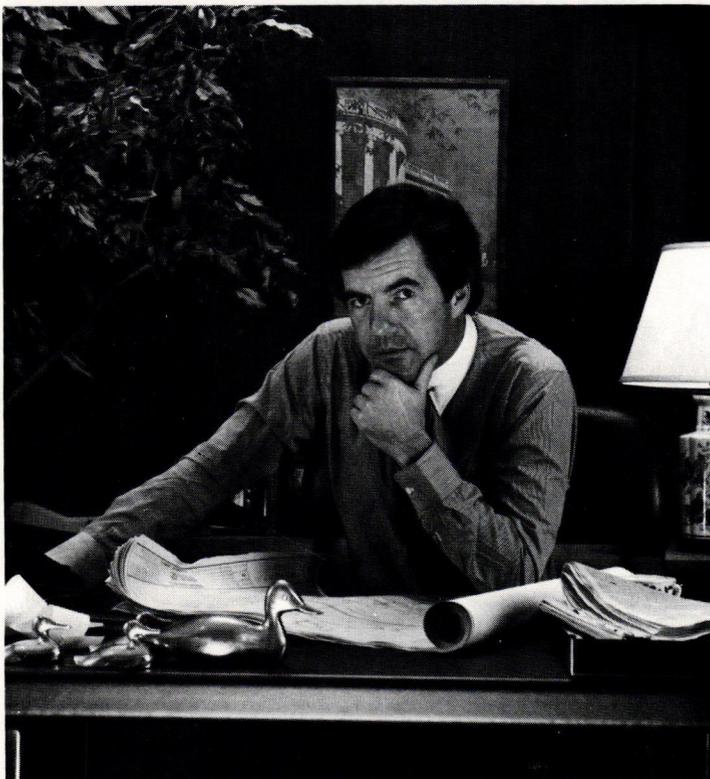
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# Wright's Pennsylvania Buildings

by Richard D. Bullock, Ph.D.

The four Frank Lloyd Wright designs actually built in Pennsylvania — Fallingwater at Bear Run, the Hagan House at nearby Chalkhill, the SunTop complex at Ardmore, and Beth Sholom Synagogue at Elkins Park — are all statements of his maturity, accomplishments of his halcyon years. Having won international recognition decades earlier, and finally clear of the early Thirties when he glumly mused that he might never obtain another commission, Wright after 1935 steadily received invitations to design the bold, radical structures that were to confirm his preeminence among American architects.

The Pennsylvania buildings are part of that distinguished group. While the Commonwealth is typical of Eastern states in possessing relatively few Wright structures, each design of the four is notable in the master's oeuvre, presenting the daring, imaginative stroke that characterized so much of his later work. And each attests to Wright's delight in astonishing his viewers, an appetite shared by other originals in the strange mixture of tastes of the time.

In 1936 when the provocative concrete trays of Fallingwater were poured and set, other artists were loosing their own contentious statements: Meret Oppenheim covered a teacup, saucer, and spoon with fur for the surrealist Dadaist "Objet (Dejeuner en fourrure)"; Albert Speer began his Congress Hall in Nuremberg; Mondrian showed his "Composition in Red and Blue"; Picasso started work on "Guernica"; and Wright's earlier cordiality to the machine received a witty rebuke in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*.

Three years later the construction of Wright's "SunTop" complex sought to demonstrate the wisdom of low-cost, high-efficiency Usonian housing in an inhospitable milieu: high-cost, class-conscious Ardmore, a Philadelphia Main Line suburb. Violating Ardmore's single-house-big-lot tradition, the SunTop project provoked a good deal of hostile response, rather much in keeping with the spirit of other 1939 events. Apart from Britain and France entering warfare with Germany, that bellicose year saw James Joyce continue his own war on standard English with *Finnegan's Wake*, Anton Webern his attack on the well-tempered scale in his "Cantata No. 1," and Vassily Kandinsky his battle with objectivity in his aptly titled "Ambiguity." Possibly more to Wright's liking was a peaceable 1939 masterpiece, Jean Renoir's humane, conciliatory comedy, *The Rules of the Game*.

The Hagan House at Chalkhill and Beth Sholom Synagogue in Philadelphia's Elkins Park were both begun in 1954, the first presenting a dramatic prow motif leading a composition of hexagonal modules, the latter accomplishing Rabbi Mortimer Cohen's vision of the "mountain of light" with its translucent, glowing roof. The same year saw construction start in England on Basil Spence's Coventry Cathedral, and in Mexico City on Felix Candela's Church of the Virgin Malagrosa. Aaron Copeland completed his opera *The Tender Land* (whose melodies are often associated with showings of Wright's Prairie designs), William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* questioned

the benevolent Nature that underlay Wright's world view, and Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* reaffirmed the essentiality of the individual's courage in the face of the mob.

Although few in number, the Pennsylvania structures by Wright are choice. One of them, Fallingwater, may be the most loved building of modern times. PSA members attending the October Forum at Seven Springs and Bear Run directly experienced Fallingwater's power to excite wonder and affection when they spent part of an evening in the house's rooms and grounds in the Forum's closing feature.

Earlier in panel discussions they had heard firsthand accounts of Fallingwater's planning and construction from Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., who gave the house to the public through his donation to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, and from three former Taliesin fellows who supervised work on the job: Wesley Peters, Edgar Tafel, and Byron (Bob) Mosher. The account that emerged was of an extraordinary partnership between a genius architect and a client — Edgar J. Kaufmann — uniquely gifted in aesthetic insight and humane values.

Fallingwater, together with Wright's other Pennsylvania structures — the Hagan House, the SunTop Complex, and Beth Sholom Synagogue, forms a design group affirming the architect's concern for beauty, human dignity, spirituality, the environment, and technological progress — in short, the architecture of American democracy that was his goal.