

Edward Serlin House

Overview:

The Edward Serlin House is a private residence designed by [Frank Lloyd Wright](#) and built in Pleasantville, NY in 1949. It is the second of three houses that Wright designed as part of a planned community named "[Usonia](#)", a word Wright used to describe his vision for a democratic and cooperative future for America. Wright had been designing usonian houses throughout the country since 1936.¹ The Edward Serlin house, one of the later examples of usonian design, includes many features common to Wright's architectural vision. They were moderate-cost houses with straightforward designs meant for middle-income families, a type of house Wright spent much of his career thinking about. In 1939 Wright wrote, "The house of moderate cost is not only America's major architectural problem, but the problem most difficult for her major architects."²

There are 47 houses on 97 acres in Usonia.³ Wright designed three of these; the rest were designed by others and approved by Wright. Of the three homes Wright designed there, the Edward Serlin House conforms most closely to Wright's ideal: low-slung on the site, with a simple floor plan anchored by a large central fireplace. The house features a shed roof, which slopes upward toward the back of the home, allowing for a tall rear wall of glass doors topped with a row of windows providing views to the forested landscape.

History:

In the early 1940s, Priscilla and David Henken, young professionals living in New York City, had been talking with friends about the idea of starting a cooperative community outside of the city. After seeing an exhibit at the MoMA that included Wright's conceptual model for a planned community called [Broadacre City](#), the Henkens decided to adopt this as the model for the community they envisioned. The Henkens moved to Wisconsin, where Wright was based, to become apprentices of the architect. It was there that Wright developed what would become the site plan for Usonia.

The Henkens began enlisting other people interested in the idea of a cooperative, launching what became a long and involved series of meetings that spanned many years. By 1947, the development of the cooperative began in earnest. Membership fees were collected; site surveys and feasibility studies were undertaken. Wright's involvement created a draw, and soon many new members were signing up to join the community. The same year, the group secured a 97-acre parcel of land in [Pleasantville, NY](#) and design work got underway.

In January of 1948, Edward Serlin became a member of the cooperative.⁴ His job as the director of publicity for Radio City Music Hall helped raise awareness about the community and attracted yet more members. Applicants were asked to fill out a financial disclosure form and a questionnaire inquiring into

their political and personal philosophies in order to gauge whether their values aligned with the larger community's. The house Wright designed for Serlin was in keeping with the architect's vision for a simple, efficient, and affordable home. The building of the house was begun by contractors Harold Turner and Ted Bower, and completed by David Henken's construction company, Henken Builds.⁵ In 1970, an addition that had been in the original Wright plan but never built was completed.

Architect:

Frank Lloyd Wright, perhaps America's most famous architect, designed over a thousand buildings throughout his career. He was a visionary thinker, conceiving utopian ideas for society that he believed could be encouraged by good design. By the 1930s, Wright faced dwindling commissions for several reasons, including the onset of the Great Depression. During this time, Wright wrote and thought about architectural theory, and began to develop new ideas about how architecture could play a role in the changing cultural landscape of America. One of the areas to which Wright gave extensive consideration was the suburb, resulting in his own utopian vision of how these communities could look.

Wright believed that technological advancements in transportation, primarily the car, and communication by way of the telephone could lead to solutions for highly congested and overpopulated cities. To this end, he proposed the concept of Broadacre City in his 1932 book *The Disappearing City*. In this theoretical planned community outside of the densely populated city center, each resident/family would be allotted a one-acre lot on which to build. The houses built on these lots would be efficient, manageable by middle-income clients without servants. Wright considered the development of this type of house to be of the utmost importance, and experimented widely with new techniques in the pre-fabrication of building elements, heating systems and architectural designs.

In addition to being a brilliant architect, Wright was also a savvy businessman. He saw an emerging market for a new type of home for the modern family. Interest from young professionals spurred him, during the lull in construction during the Depression, to be ready with designs when the economy recovered. While the usonian style houses were intended to be affordable alternatives to conventionally built houses, there were inevitable cost overruns. It has been remarked that Wright, "never fully intended to create affordable housing for the middle class so much as to make beautiful housing less expensive."⁶

The Serlins are reported to have been friendly with Wright and pleased with his design for their home despite some frustration about cost overruns. When chided by Edward Serlin about why their home was so simple when the other two Wright-designed homes in Usonia were more elaborate, the architect is reported to have said, "What are you complaining about? You got the fundamentalia."⁷

Building: Site and Context

The Edward Serlin House is located in the Town of Mount Pleasant in Westchester County, New York, 35 miles north of New York City. The Usonia cooperative acquired the land on which the houses of the cooperative were built by entering the winning bid in an auction for the parcel on January 21st 1947.⁸ The 97-acre parcel is a wooded grove with rolling topography, containing many small hills and dells that provide ideal settings for the type of houses imagined and built there. Frank Lloyd Wright designed the layout of the lots and selected the building site for each home. Wright also designed the roads in the community, retaining as many trees as possible. Wright's original site plan called for circular 1 1/4 acre lots, with the interstitial space between the circles to be community owned, acting as buffer zones between lots. The town's building department rejected the plan for circular lots, so the lots were filed as polygons. Wright, however, continued to use the circular lot plan in his designs. The roads throughout the community are narrow, twisting and turning around the topography, as opposed to determining a more traditional grid-like layout.

The Serlin House sits at the end of one such road. The house sits low on the landscape, nestled into its site. Mature oak, maple, and evergreens surround the house and close in around it, making the extent of the house—arranged linearly, perpendicular to the approach—intentionally ambiguous when approached from the front. The land at the back of the house drops off steeply some one hundred feet to a small stream, giving way to views to the south. The effect of the siting is effective, both in terms of the privacy it provides and the connections to the natural world it elicits. Wright took advantage of the topography of the site to reinforce the design of the Serlin House. By siting the house parallel to the edge of the slope, and by designing a shed roof that slopes up from the front to the back of the house, he highlights what is a surprising panorama.

Form and Use

The Edward Serlin house is a single story residential house with a slab on grade foundation and a shed roof. The shed roof slopes at a low angle from the front of the house, rising towards the back. Like many usonian houses, the Serlin House features large, open living spaces and more compact kitchen and bedrooms. Wright believed this arrangement of spaces would encourage people to gather in communal areas, promoting the casual domestic lifestyle he associated with modern democratic society. The house features two large chimneys, one of which is located at the center of the house and serves as the architectural anchor of the plan.

The rooms of the house are arranged along a linear corridor that runs the length of the structure. The corridor is at times formed by walls and at other points implied by built-in

furniture, also a common feature of the usonian style house. The plan for the house is based on a five-foot by five-foot square module. The module drives the architecture and is most evident in the grid patterns formed into the concrete floor. The dimensions of each room adheres to the module. The two smaller bedrooms are ten feet by ten feet; the master bedroom is fifteen by fifteen; and the bathroom is five by ten feet. The doors throughout the house are two-and-a-half feet wide, and often come in pairs to fit the module. Every room in the house has a least one door to the outside. As mentioned above, there are two chimneys in the house, one in the house's center and one at its west end, in the master bedroom. Each of the chimneys has two fireplaces, one on each side. The second of the fireplaces on the west chimney is outside of the house, as the room it was intended to be in was never built.

Materials and Methods of Construction

Wright's interest in creating well-designed houses of moderate price led to his experimentation with new construction techniques and mass-produced elements. Embedded in the slab is a radiant hot water heating system. The radiant floors of the houses of Usonia are believed to be the first use of this type of heating system, wherein hot water is run through pipes in the slab, warming the slab and heating the house. The system was constructed of black iron pipe, which was effective until it failed in 1987 due to corrosion and was replaced by a flush to floor convection system. The exterior walls of the house are constructed of locally quarried granite cut in rough rectangular blocks, which reflect the larger form and compositional language of the house. The exterior trim of the house is made of Tidewater Cypress, a reddish wood that frames the stonewalls. The built-up roof consists of several layers of paper and tar and covered with gravel.

The interior walls are framed with 2x4s and the walls and ceiling are clad with shiplapped Cypress boards. The concrete floors, with the five-foot module expressed in the control joints, are rendered in Wright's signature "Cherokee Red." Much of the furniture and cabinetry is built-in and is made with the same pine that appears on the walls and ceiling. These built-ins include shelving, cabinets, and a couch, as well as speakers and a turntable. With an eye toward economy, the cabinets have piano hinges and either lack hardware altogether or have wood handles. In places where the granite of the exterior walls protrudes into the interior space, the great care and craftsmanship used throughout the house is evident where the pine boards are scribed to meet the rustic stone.

Sustainability

The Serlin house and the larger community were ahead of their time in regards to sustainability. Wright made an effort to maintain the trees on the site to the greatest extent possible.

The granite for the home was quarried locally and bought collectively with other homeowners, so it did not require large amounts of fossil fuels to be transported to the site and, today, requires minimal upkeep. The exterior trim of Cypress, also bought collectively, is resistant to rot and insects and, being of high quality, has lasted over 60 years. The radiant floor heating system, despite having failed eventually, lasted over 45 years and was an important experiment in what has become an efficient heating system used extensively in modern homes today. The glass throughout the house is single-pane. This requires a significant amount of energy to heat, however the design of the glazing, which in some cases includes mitered glass corners, demands this treatment. While the heating needs are increased because of the extensive use of single pane glass, the moderate size of the house by today's standards uses less energy than many much larger contemporary homes. The large overhangs of the roof also allow for passive solar heating in the winter and shading in the summer. One aspect that may be frequently overlooked in the larger sustainability debate is the effort on Wright's part to harmonize the building with its natural surroundings and to disturb nature as little as possible when building a new structure.

Significance

The Edward Serlin house is an important building in the history of domestic architecture. It represents and advances the changes that were taking place in the larger society. During this period, the middle class became interested in and capable of buying modern suburban homes, which enabled a new way of living. These Americans were looking for efficient family homes that could be managed without the need for a staff. Women had begun to enter the workplace more widely during World War II and wanted to be freed from domestic work. This generation wanted dwellings like the Serlin house, which nurtured progressive, child-centered family life, close to nature while still accessible to city centers.

Frank Lloyd Wright developed many of the features that we take for granted in contemporary residential architecture, many of which appear in the Serlin House. The open floor plan with both kitchen and dining room open to the living room allowed for a more casual inclusive lifestyle, where families could spend time together. Additionally, Wright's experiments with new and efficient construction techniques were important in the development of building technologies. Wright was a constant innovator who continued to push this conversation forward throughout his life. The houses of Usonia were important steps in this evolution.

¹ Twombly, Robert C. *Frank Lloyd Wright, His Life and His Architecture*. New York: Wiley, 1979. 240. Print.

² Wright, Frank Lloyd. *The Natural House*. New York: Horizon, 1954. 79.

² Wright, Frank Lloyd. *The Natural House*. New York: Horizon, 1954. 79. Print.

³ Reisley, Roland, and John Philip. Timpane. *Usonia, New York: Building a Community with Frank Lloyd Wright*. New York: Princeton Architectural, 2001. Print.

⁴ Reisley, Roland, and John Philip. Timpane. *Usonia, New York: Building a Community with Frank Lloyd Wright*. New York: Princeton Architectural, 2001. Print.

⁵ Reisley, Roland, and John Philip. Timpane. *Usonia, New York: Building a Community with Frank Lloyd Wright*. New York: Princeton Architectural, 2001. Print.

⁶ Broach, Barbara Kimberlin., Donald E. Lambert, and Milton Bagby. *Frank Lloyd Wright's Rosenbaum House: The Birth and Rebirth of an American Treasure*. San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2006. 12. Print.

⁷ Reisley, Roland, and John Philip. Timpane. *Usonia, New York: Building a Community with Frank Lloyd Wright*. New York: Princeton Architectural, 2001. 72. Print.

⁸ Reisley, Roland, and John Philip. Timpane. *Usonia, New York: Building a Community with Frank Lloyd Wright*. New York: Princeton Architectural, 2001. 22. Print.