

Fallingwater Was Only the Beginning: The Visions of Frank Lloyd Wright and the Edgar J. Kaufmann Family for Bear Run

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Fallingwater, the weekend house Frank Lloyd Wright designed for the Edgar J. Kaufmann family of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1935, is one of the most familiar icons of twentieth-century architecture. Sixty-two years after its conception, visitors captivated by its image of modernity are taken aback when they encounter the plumbing fixtures that sharply announce its true age. The house is the subject of an abundance of articles and books that explicate the history of its design and construction and offer approaches for aesthetic interpretation. Notable among these are Donald Hoffmann's thorough history, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr.'s appreciation, and, recently, Neil Levine's analysis of form and meaning.¹ In addition to these publications are the countless analytic studies we have assigned our students. Even as I write these words, somewhere in North America, groups of students likely are struggling to correlate photographs of the house with the notoriously awkward published drawings.

Most of these studies are devoted to examining the spatial and material properties of the house and their relationship to Wright's other buildings. In this paper, I'll shift the focus from the architect to the client, and in so doing, show how the Kaufmanns had a dynamic vision of the house and its setting that would lead them to engage Wright to design a variety of other buildings for their property on Bear Run. Of these, only the famous guest house and a small addition were realized, but the others had an ongoing existence in the collective imaginations of client and architect.²

The Kaufmann family had three members: E.J., his wife Lilian, and their son, Edgar, Jr. In 1935, E.J. was fifty years old and the president of Kaufmann's Department Store in Pittsburgh, which had been founded by his father. His innovative management of the store had earned him a national reputation as a brilliant retailer and provided the means for him to pursue his personal interests. Among these was a fascination with building that embraced houses, additions and remodelings of the store, and civic buildings.³ E.J.'s enthusiasm for architecture was more intuitive and impulsive than learned and measured, and he could be a difficult client whose interest in a project could swing rapidly and unpredictably from closely engaged to distant.

Edgar, Jr., was twenty-five in 1925, and his reluctance to follow his father's footsteps in the management of the store was a great disappointment to the elder Kaufmann. Possessing quite different personalities, father and son often were at odds over this and other issues, yet Junior's scholarly devotion to painting, sculpture, and, after 1934, architecture, sometimes provided a bridge over their difficulties.

Lilian Kaufmann was known for her intelligence and good taste, and she demonstrated her own entrepreneurial skills in running an upscale boutique in the department store. For historians interested in the family's patronage of art and architecture, she is the least visible member. During the construction of Fallingwater, her views usually were conveyed to Wright by her husband and son. She played a more direct role in the planning of two projects in the early 1950s: the "Rhododendron Chapel" on the Bear Run and a house in Palm Springs, California.

The family's engagement with Wright began in 1934, and evolved over the remainder of their lives. They became more than clients and were true patrons and friends of the architect. The circumstances of their initial contact remain unclear, but by October 1934, Junior had begun what would be a six-month stay as a member of the Taliesin Fellowship, and E.J. was talking with Wright about designing a planetarium adjacent to the store and participating in the planning of public works projects in Pittsburgh. In the course of these discussions, architect and client conceived the commissions for E.J.'s private office, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and Fallingwater.⁴

Before making any drawings for the house, Wright visited the site twice, and the Kaufmanns made two trips to his homes in Wisconsin and Arizona. We know little about what was said during these visits, but they were the settings in which the family communicated their desires for what they termed their "weekend cottage" to the architect, and he reciprocated by offering some clues of his intentions.⁵ The schematic drawings Wright finally presented to Kaufmann in September 1935, may have been surprising, but they did not shock, and the family needed no time to deliberate before urging Wright on. He had successfully given form to their aspirations.

Since 1921, the Kaufmanns had owned a prefabricated cabin on around 1600-acres of land along Bear Run in southwestern Pennsylvania that was leased and eventually purchased by the store employees' association for use as a summer camp. By 1933, the camp had closed and the Kaufmanns acquired the property for their own use. The land was quite different than the first-growth forests that often surround the vacation homes of the wealthy in the Adirondack Mountains or the Upper Midwest. It had been quarried, mined, and logged, and the summer camp had left a variety of simple wooden buildings. From the beginning, E.J.'s attitude toward the site emphasized the management of a working landscape than creating an illusion of pristine nature. For example, he replaced diseased chestnut trees with heartier pines and developed sawmills and farms. Within this setting, the family enjoyed an informal way of life oriented towards vigorous outdoor activities such as swimming in the cold mountain stream, hiking, horseback riding, and fly fishing, a sport in which Lilian excelled.

The Kaufmanns' particular ways of enjoying Bear Run were deeply rooted in their own personalities, but during the 1920s, they may have begun to identify their lifestyle of urban refinement and rural ease with the proclamations of modernity sweeping the country. In the course of the decade, E.J. aggressively embraced the idea of modernism in his store's marketing strategies. For example, he dedicated the 1929 anniversary number of the store's in-house magazine to "the spirit of the modern movement in all phases of life," and the following year, he completed an extensive modern makeover of the store's main floor.⁶

If the Kaufmanns came to see themselves as a Modern Family, they may well have been attracted to an emerging building type promoted by journals and books in the late-1920s and early 1930s — the weekend house intended to engage stressed urbanites as directly as possible with nature.⁷ Weekend houses were to convey a spirit of simplicity, but they were hardly simple, because every aspect of weekend life was to be studied and designed to foster the connection with nature. Wright provided the Kaufmanns with a textbook example of such a house. It and they presented a dramatic contrast to the anglophile country estates of other leaders of Pittsburgh society such as Richard K. Mellon at nearby Rolling Rock Club.⁸

By 1939, the Kaufmanns had completed the main house and the guest house and soon thereafter began to consider additional buildings at Bear Run. In 1942, they commissioned Wright to design a gate-house upstream of Fallingwater and a farmhouse on the opposite side of the highway that cut across their property. Wright set the gate-house beneath a rocky outcrop and used the same stone he had employed for the piers of Fallingwater to create a barrier surmounted by the caretaker's living quarters elevated to assure a clear view of all approaches.⁹ Kaufmann rejected this scheme as overly ambitious, but for more than a decade he and Junior continued to discuss the idea of a gate-house with Wright.

The farmhouse commission issued from E.J.'s enthusias-

tic development of a large dairy herd in the early 1940s. On a hillside site featuring a natural spring, Wright proposed a three-bedroom house on two levels: an L-shaped wing containing bedrooms, kitchen, entry foyer, tool rooms, and spring house, and, below, a living/dining room lined with windows opening to a deep porch.¹⁰ A dramatic shed roof ties the two parts together. Kaufmann's reason for not building the house are not known, but Wright's cost estimate of \$26,000 is a likely suspect. After all, the initial budget for Fallingwater had been \$20,000.

In 1946, the Kaufmanns asked Wright to address Fallingwater's cramped kitchen and dining areas. Evidently, they were entertaining on a more ambitious scale than they had envisioned when they first built the house. They promptly built the servants' day room Wright fitted beneath the western terrace. The dining room posed a more difficult and time-consuming problem. Wright proposed opening the exterior wall behind the existing dining table and creating a double-height, sky-lighted room that spanned the width of the driveway.¹¹ Part of the upper area of the room was to be occupied by the bridge to the guest house which he transformed into a balcony looking into the new space. The extension into the driveway required the redesign of the principal vehicular access to the house, an issue that may have been an independent concern of architect and patron. Wright envisioned a new approach along Shady Lane above the guest house and proposed reversing the orientation of the existing garage. Visitors would then descend the broad steps from the guest house and enter Fallingwater through the second-story bridge. A steep service stairway offered a short-cut to the kitchen.

Although these revisions altered the fabric of Fallingwater and the way by which visitors would first see the house, Wright undertook them willingly, and seemed quite pleased with his scheme for the Shady Lane entrance. He and the Kaufmanns appeared to share a vision of the house and its landscape that accommodated change.

In 1951, Edgar, Jr., and Lilian asked Wright if he would be willing to design for them a place for prayer and contemplation.¹² At first instance, the Kaufmanns' request is surprising. Although they were members of the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, they were not notably devout. However, in 1951, they were suffering from a variety of severe stresses. Lilian is reported to have taken increasing interest in spiritual matters, and the younger Kaufmann had been inspired by a visit to Wright's Unitarian Meeting House then under construction in Madison, Wisconsin. Edgar, Jr., also indicated that the family was thinking about the future of Fallingwater beyond their lifetime. He told Wright that they hoped the chapel might serve to inform future generations that Fallingwater was a place for spiritual renewal as well as simple pleasure. Lilian's death six months after the plans were completed in 1952 put an end to the project.

Wright envisioned the chapel, or oratory as he preferred to call it, as a fieldstone structure containing a rectangular room with seating for thirty oriented towards a lectern and a

smaller, square, reading room dominated by a fireplace.¹³ Above the main room he proposed a steep, spire-topped gable roof made of glass and copper panels. The site intended for the chapel has not been confirmed, but it may have been on the right bank of Bear Run upstream of Fallingwater near the present location of the family crypt. Seen at a distance from the driveway leading to the house, its most striking features would have been the sharp horizontal of the copper-edged roof resting on the fieldstone walls and the crystalline panels of the steep gable.

The Kaufmanns and Wright shared a belief in architecture as a vehicle for spiritual transformation. The building of Fallingwater and the planning of the chapel and, at the same time, a house in Palm Springs, California, were activities the family and their architect believed would lift their hearts from their individual troubles and inspire them to higher and common purpose. This idealism similarly informed the ambitious projects the elder Kaufmann and Wright conceived for the city of Pittsburgh in the late-1940s and early 1950s.

By the time of his father's death in 1955, Edgar, Jr., was thinking about how Fallingwater could be successfully transformed from a private retreat to more public usage. He commissioned Wright to design a gate-house complex that would include housing for guests as well as staff.¹⁴ Unlike the project of 1942, which had strong ties of material and form to Fallingwater, Wright's new scheme of 1956 and the simplified version prepared in 1957, presented a different character. Architect and client used the commission as an opportunity to promote Wright's concept of "Usonian Automatic" houses which were intended to be built of concrete block at relatively low cost. Wright's scheme demonstrated how three such houses might be tightly grouped to share a common yard yet be oriented to provide a sense of independence and privacy.

Like the other projects for Bear Run, the gate-house complex was not built. Wright was frustrated by the Kaufmanns' decisions not to execute the plans they commissioned from him, and throughout their relationship he used every means of charm and insult to urge them forward. However, this body of projects represents something more than a series of failed commissions. It documents the Kaufmanns' belief in the transformative power of architecture and reminds us that the house above the waterfall that we so admire is part of something more than the single image which has made it famous.

NOTES

¹ Donald Hoffmann, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater: The House and Its History*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Dover, 1993); Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., *Fallingwater: A Frank Lloyd Wright Country House* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986); Neil Levine, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), chap. 8.

² This essay is part of ongoing research on the Kaufmanns and Wright that has been funded by the Heinz Architectural Center of the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, and the University of Texas at Austin. One product of this work will be a complete checklist of drawings for Fallingwater and the other Bear Run projects preserved in the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives. I'm indebted to the late Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., for his encouragement of my work, to the patience of Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, Indira Berndtson, Margo Stipe, and Oscar Muñoz at the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives, and to the assistance and support of Lynda S. Waggoner and Sarah Beyer at Fallingwater and Dennis McFadden at the Heinz Architectural Center.

³ See my "Edgar J. Kaufmann, Frank Lloyd Wright and the 'Pittsburgh Point Park Coney Island in Automobile Scale,'" *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 52 (June 1993), 139-58.

⁴ For the office see Christopher Wilk, *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Kaufmann Office* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1993).

⁵ Hoffmann, p. 16, for example, reports Blaine Drake's recollection of Wright's telling Kaufmann that he intended to locate the house on the south side of the waterfall during their second visit to the site in 1935.

⁶ *Storagram* (June-July 1929), np. The remodeling was designed by the Pittsburgh firm of Janssen & Cocken.

⁷ See for example, Knud Lönberg-Holm, "The Weekend House," *Architectural Record* 68 (August 1930), 175-192. Among the examples illustrated in this article was Wright's Ocatilla Desert Camp, 1929.

⁸ Rolling Rock Club was designed in 1928 as a Cotswold estate by the gifted and eclectic Benno Janssen who had designed a Norman country house in the Fox Chapel suburb of Pittsburgh for the Kaufmanns in 1922 and would soon prepare the Art Deco modernist scheme for the department store.

⁹ For published drawings see Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer and Yukio Futagawa, eds., *Frank Lloyd Wright* (Tokyo: A.D.A. Edita, 1984-88), vol. 6, *Monograph*, 414-15.

¹⁰ Pfeiffer and Futagawa, vol. 6, *Monograph*, 416-17.

¹¹ Drawings for this project are in the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives: 3602.096, 3602.106, 3812.013, 4702.001.

¹² Letter from Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., to Frank Lloyd Wright, 2 September 1951; Frank Lloyd Wright Archives.

¹³ The best drawings of the chapel are preserved in the John H. Howe Collection of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison. See Terence Riley and Peter Reed, eds., *Frank Lloyd Wright Architect* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994), fig. 371.

¹⁴ Pfeiffer and Futagawa, vol. 8, *Monograph*, 494-98.