

# Letters from the Great Wright Road Trip, Part 2

The beta test of an itinerary that features eight sites designed by master architect reaches Pennsylvania

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OWing to the proximity of eight Frank Lloyd Wright sites to the Greater Toronto Area, Visit Buffalo Niagara, the Hagen History Center in Erie Penn., and GO Laurel Highlands created the “Great Wright Road Trip” to honour America’s greatest architect (1867-1959). From Aug. 15 to Aug. 18, I beta-tested it with my wife, Shauntelle, and present it in the form of letters back to our Toronto friends. This is Part 2.

## HAGEN HISTORY CENTER

356 West 6th St., Erie, Penn.

From our last stop at Graycliff, in Derby, N.Y., the next Wright site is about 90 minutes away. But before we hit our destination, we detoured to Erie’s waterfront – which is really lovely – for lunch with a view of Presque Isle.

The fifth stop on our Great Wright Road Trip was the Hagen History Center, and boy was there a surprise in there! Recently, the HHC’s benefactor, Thomas Hagen, purchased an entire Frank Lloyd Wright office from James Sandoro in Buffalo (the guy who built that FLW filling station we wrote to you about last week). The office, which opened in 1951, was originally on Grant Avenue in San Francisco, as FLW had partnered with the much younger Aaron Green to establish a field office. Green used the office until 1988; soon after, it was put on display behind glass in Pittsburgh, which I’m guessing was no fun.

Now, thanks to the hard work of architect Jeff Kidder, we opened the (original) door and walked right in just as a client would’ve: “So we had to design this building around it,” Mr. Kidder said. “Everything you see that’s redwood is the Wright and Aaron Green interior ... and we replicated the windows and that’s actually the building that was across the street.”

Most fascinating, to me anyway, is how FLW could break up a rectangular space: this is an office you have to meander through, and we did. It’s set up to look like the architects have just gone out to lunch, with drawings on the drafting boards.

And although it’s more utilitarian than a FLW house, it’s absolutely fascinating. “There’s nothing unnecessary,” Mr. Kidder says, “everything ties into something else, and you can’t change a thing.”

## KENTUCK KNOB

723 Kentuck Rd., Dunbar, Penn.

Three hours later, we were listening to our docent tell us about Bernardine and I.N. Hagan, and how the 86-year-old Wright told the couple he could “shake the designs” for Usonian houses “right out of his sleeve” so taking them on as clients while worrying about the Guggenheim in New York wouldn’t be an issue.

And, friends, while I know it’s the iconic hexagonal grid design of this 2,200-square-foot wonder you’d like me to describe, I was fixated on the little things: the massive stones underfoot; the supernarrow hallways; that tall, light-filled kitchen and FLW’s groovy clerestory panels. These jigsaw-cut clerestories were much cheaper than stained glass, but they still created dancing light-shapes on the floor ... like sunlight through the trees. Smart guy that Frankie.

The other thing that fascinated us is how much Ms. Hagan was able to push the master for changes: “As far as I’m concerned Bernardine designed this house more than Frank Lloyd Wright,” our docent said.

While we weren’t allowed to take interior photographs, I got some from the nice folks at the gift shop here for you.

## FALLINGWATER

1491 Mill Run Rd., Mill Run, Penn.

Only 15 minutes away from Kentuck Knob, Fallingwater is so much different it might as well be on the moon. It’s everything an iconic piece of architecture should be: bold, brash, risk-taking, innovative, striking, and even warm-and-cozy and sheltering in places. It’s probably the most important single family home in the United States, and that’s saying something in a country so full of great architecture.

While Shauntelle and I were here in 2003, I could come here 20 times and see

## IF YOU GO

To avoid the chaos at the airport, this trip is best experienced by car. While the stop in Erie won’t necessitate an overnight stay, you’ll want to book two nights (if not three) in the Laurel Highlands region of Pennsylvania. While we only had lunch there, the Summit Inn Resort (1907) in Farmington, Penn., has a grand front porch and is less than 15 minutes from Kentuck Knob. We stayed at Hartzell House Bed & Breakfast in Addison, Penn., and the food prepared by new owners Melissa and Robert Angelini was so good we still have dreams about it.

Also close to Kentuck Knob and Fallingwater is Nemaacolin. It’s hard to describe this luxury resort in a few sentences, but here goes: where else can you play with a two-toed sloth, off-road in a Jeep, golf, shoot clays, go bowling, eat in a Forbes five-star restaurant and stay in a building designed by a student of Taliesin? It’s one of the strangest, most wonderful complexes I’ve ever toured ... but it’s not cheap.

something different. This time, it was the staircase to the water, all of the sash-less corner windows and the points at which FLW’s work intersect with outcrops of rock. I also learned that the Kaufmann family owned this land long before the house was here – it was a campground/retreat for their more than 3,000 department store employees.

“So they owned 1,500 acres out here,” said our very well informed docent. “Cabins and cottages, a swimming pool, tennis courts, clubhouse building where our visitor’s centre is, riding trails, hiking paths, you could go fishing ... and it only cost a couple of days to stay, and that included your meals.”

But back to the house: they were letting visitors take photographs on the main floor, which they’ve never done before. They also took us up to the guesthouse, which I don’t remember touring. It’s notable for its higher ceilings and its gorgeous pool, which is fed by the waters of Bear Run. Ms. Kaufmann would choose to sleep up here on hot summer nights, apparently.

## POLYMATH PARK

187 Evergreen Lane, Acme, Penn.

Toronto Friends, after an amazing breakfast at Hartzell House, we drove on twisty Laurel Highlands roads for an hour to arrive at a very strange collection of homes in the forest. I say strange because while this 125-acre site originally didn’t contain any FLW homes at all, today it contains two (and Frank Lloyd Wright Jr.’s Birdwing from Minnetonka, Minn., sits in shipping containers awaiting reconstruction). Plus, there is a restaurant and you can rent any of the homes for overnight stays!

The two houses built here originally were penned by Taliesin student Peter Berndtson, who helped FLW with the Guggenheim, and we started the tour at the one once owned by the Balter family out of Pittsburgh.

“[Berndtson] didn’t abide by every single Wright rule,” said our docent of the 1964 house, “so if you’re a huge fan of Wright and you know everything he would and wouldn’t have done, you might see some things here he wouldn’t have done.” I am too dazzled by how light from the long skylight ignites the living room to notice.

We toured the 1957 Duncan house next (relocated in 2007). Interestingly, it’s one of nine that resulted from a partnership FLW had with contractor Marshall Erdman to produce “ready-cut” or prefab homes. “This house has the same solar axis as it did in Illinois, meaning the suns rises and sets in the same windows,” our docent said. That sun was hitting blondwood panelling, by the way, since the Duncans didn’t like FLW’s dark wood choices; Mr. Erdman said “don’t worry about it, I’ll bleach [the mahogany] out for you.”

The final stop was Mantyla House, designed by FLW for the Lindholm family in 1952. The reason this one was relocated here, we’re told, is because the radiant floor failed when the Lindholm’s grandson, Peter McKinney, switched them on and learned it would “cost as much as tearing down the house and rebuilding it five times” to fix them.

“This is not a staged home; this is exactly how the McKinneys were living in it in 2016.”

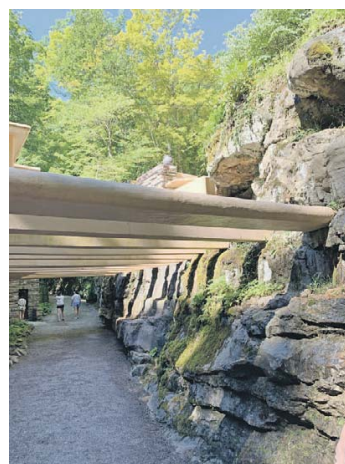
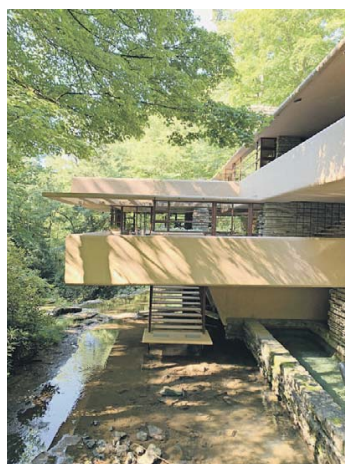
Portions of Dave LeBlanc’s trip were provided by GO Laurel Highlands; they did not review or approve this story.



Drafting boards from Frank Lloyd Wright’s office in San Francisco are now on display at the Hagen History Center in Erie, Penn. DAVE LeBLANC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



The kitchen at Kentucky Knob in Dunbar, Penn. The 2,200-square-foot house was designed by Wright in a hexagonal grid design. SARA MITCHELL



Wright’s Fallingwater in Mill Run, Penn., is bold, brash, risk-taking, innovative and striking. DAVE LeBLANC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



The 125-acre Polymath Park in Acme, Penn., contains two FLW houses, with a third awaiting reconstruction. DAVE LeBLANC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL