

Frank Lloyd Wright House in Orinda a Structural Symphony

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“The space within becomes the reality of the building,” said Wright, who defined space as “the breath of art.”

Purchased in 2013 by arts supporter, Gerald Shmavonian, the home was designed by Wright in 1948 per a commission by Maynard P. Buehler and his wife, Katherine. “Mr. Buehler was a building contractor himself, and made sure each part was inspected as it came in,” observes Shmavonian. Buehler also invented rifle scope mounts and similar devices still respected by firearms experts today.

Eighty-one at the time, Wright was actively involved but able to visit Orinda only twice due to other pressing projects. Walter Olds, a senior Taliesin apprentice, served as Wright’s eyes and ears on the build from October 1948 to April 1949. In 2006, the Wright-Buehler House was added to the National Registry of Historic Places – “the work of a master” from the Modern Movement.

Visitors arrive via a western-facing, Cherokee red-tinted concrete walk – above which redwood siding is punctuated by clerestory cutouts – the geometric motif customized for the Buehlers’ home. “Wright strongly believed that decoration was not an addition to be made after the fact, but was integral,” writes Carol Roland, author of the Wright-Buehler House application for placement on the National Registry of Historic Places. Even the carport was vital.

Additions Stay True to Wright’s Vision

After Wright’s main work was completed, Katherine Buehler asked Olds to add two smaller structures to the complex – a children’s playhouse and a guest house. The simple, rectangular, one-and-one-half-story structure was “sited on the rear slope above the creek” and originally “opened onto the pool terrace,” notes Roland, and offered views of the property’s gazebo area.

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“Every architect is – necessarily – a great poet. He must be a great original interpreter of his time, his day, his age,” said Wright. This gold leaf ceiling infuses the room with light.

Photos Ohlen Alexander



Gerald Shmavonian (right), hosted a Fandango at his Wright-Buehler House and Gardens recently to help save Orinda’s historic Joaquin Moraga Adobe. From left: Debra Batiste, Ron Batiste, Sharifah Manusia, Jane Kenoyer. A fundraiser is also being planned at the Wright House for the Orinda Intermediate School.