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The Luis And Ethel Marden House: Adventure in Restoration

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The Luis and Ethel Marden House (completed in 1959) in McLean, Virginia.

Nearly 50 years after its completion in 1959, the Luis and Ethel Marden House, spectacularly situated on a wooded promontory above the roaring Little Falls of the Potomac River in McLean, Virginia, stands as one of Frank Lloyd Wright's most stunning Usonian homes and least known architectural gems. Originally built for renowned National Geographic photographer and explorer, Luis Marden, and his wife, Ethel, one of the first women computer programmers, the residence has been meticulously restored by philanthropist and businessman, James V. Kimsey, founding CEO and chairman emeritus of America Online, Inc.

The story of the Marden House is itself worthy of a *National Geographic* special, having all the drama normally associated with the construction of a Wright home, as well as that engendered by concern for its future once it passed into Kimsey's hands.

A 2001 interview with Ethel for the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives at Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Arizona, sets the stage: Luis contacted Wright in 1940 about designing a Usonian home, which Wright agreed to do once they found a suitable site. By chance, while fly-fishing on the Maryland side

of the Potomac in 1944, Luis and Ethel spotted the perfect hillside setting across the river in Virginia and promptly purchased the two-acre site. When they finally received the first set of plans in 1952, the Mardens were not pleased. They felt that Wright had recycled a prairie house design that failed to meet their needs or take full advantage of the site. Wright had done his initial drawings from topographical maps and photographs, and only experienced the full drama of the site much later.

After more planning delays caused by Luis' extensive travel and Wright's focus on major commissions such as the Guggenheim Museum, construction on the Marden House began in 1956. Wright tasked Bob Beharka with on-site supervision of the Marden project and of the Robert Llewellyn Wright house, a similar almond-shaped, hemicyclical design being built for Wright's son in nearby Bethesda, Maryland. The Marden House was finally completed on May 30, 1959, at a cost of \$76,000. The 2,764-square foot home incorporated many hard-won, client-driven changes, including elimination of a proposed lily pond on the terrace, a two-car garage instead of the standard carport, location of the maid's room on the lower level rather than on a proposed upper level, a straight rather than curved line of windows overlooking the Potomac, a dropped terrace that did not block the view, a wine cellar, and a darkroom. Sadly, Wright never saw this masterpiece totally completed because he died a month earlier.

The Mardens named their home *Fontinalis*, Latin for "living in springs," which reflects their fondness for their favorite trout, *Salvelinus fontinalis*, and their love of the water. Among his many accomplishments, Luis discovered the remains of the H.M.S. Bounty and pioneered underwater color photography with Jacques Cousteau. An aviator and racecar enthusiast, Ethel also held the women's international record



The main living space provides expansive views of the Potomac River.

for deep sea diving in 1954. Both Mardens were avid sailors and after retirement, they retraced Columbus' route to the New World, raising questions about where he had actually first landed.

Their home offered the Mardens a cozy and very private sanctuary. Although they lived in a Wright masterpiece, it was never photographed or shown to the public. When Luis entered assisted care in 1998, the question of how to best preserve the house arose. In an interview on June 16, 2008, long-time friend, Joan Smith, also a Wright enthusiast, said: "They loved the house and wanted it and the land to be preserved. They knew, however, that the house would have to provide for their future so obtaining an easement or landmark status wasn't a viable option for them." Smith is also a former Conservancy board member and wife of Eugene Smith, Luis Marden's executor.

In 2000, Eugene Smith made discreet inquiries about whether Kimsey, who owned the property next door and who was in the process of building a 21,000-square foot residence there, would be interested in purchasing the Marden home and land. In an interview on June 6, 2008, Kimsey related: "I in-

stantly agreed to the purchase. I would have bought the house regardless of who designed it because I wanted to preserve my own scenic view of the Potomac and my privacy. There's nowhere else in Washington where you are 15 minutes from the White House [his office on Pennsylvania Avenue is one block from the White House] and practically living in a national park setting. In fact, the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal [U.S. National] Park is right across the river."

Kimsey was not in a hurry to make changes to his \$2.5 million purchase because, as agreed, Ethel could continue to live in the house as long as she wished. Nonetheless, Kimsey's purchase of the home set off a round of speculation among neighbors and Wright aficionados about his plans for the small Usonian house: Would he raze it and build another huge mansion, alter it beyond recognition, or restore it?

Kimsey admitted to being puzzled by all the reported concern: "Of course, I knew about Frank Lloyd Wright and his reputation, but I didn't really know or understand the depth of feeling people have about these homes. Initially, the intrinsic value of what I had didn't register with me or with my staff. I didn't even see the inside the house until six months to a year after I bought it. Until Mrs. Marden was ready to leave, which she did in 2003, I couldn't really do anything with it." The deed of July 20, 2000, itself protects the house from being demolished, removed, or razed and also required the expenditure of a minimum of \$500,000 by the owner to restore and enhance the residence and surrounding land.

Kimsey described his decision to restore the Marden House as an evolutionary process: "As time passed and I learned more, it became clearer and clearer that restoring the interior and exterior of house to its original condition, as much as pos-



Bob Beharka, Ethel Marden and Frank Lloyd Wright confer on site at the Marden House.



Living room with comfortable period furniture.

sible, was the only right thing to do.” His decision was informed by shocked reactions from architects, contractors, and others knowledgeable about Wright to Kimsey’s musings about converting the garage to a bedroom or tearing out interior walls to improve the view; the good fortune of a friend finding the original plans for the house in a cabinet bench; his growing concern over the continued deterioration of the house, and by finding the right man to do the job, contractor Bailey Adams. “His name kept coming up every time we talked to someone about restoring the house,” said Peter A. Kirsch, Kimsey’s chief of staff, in an interview on June 5, 2000.

By a twist of fate, Adams had met and befriended Luis Marden 15 years earlier, when he was searching for some exotic Brazilian wood for another project and learned through a friend that Marden had a stash in his garage. In a June 10, 2008 interview, Adams said, “I often compare buying this house to buying an old barn and suddenly finding an antique Dusenbergs under a dusty tarp. There are only a few choices about what to do with it. You can give it to your kid to paint hot pink and turn into a hot rod, you can strip it for parts, or you can restore it to its original glory. I told Mr. Kimsey that if he restored the house to its original state, he would then have more options about what to do with it. He’s a businessman and that approach made sense to him. He asked me what I needed and told me to go do it.”

Begun in 2004, the restoration took approximately 18 months and a budget in the seven figure range, according to Kimsey. With the exception of replacing kitchen appliances, the Mardens had not altered the house in any way, but the residence suffered from much long-deferred maintenance. Adams related: “The Mardens weren’t wealthy and it just got away from them. I’d been to the house many times so that I knew everything that was wrong with it: extensive interior and exterior damage from wa-

ter, improperly sealed cinder block, the tar and gravel roof near collapse from the weight of successive coatings and dirt, and retaining walls [facing the river] that threatened to tear away from the base. The beautiful mahogany panels, garage doors, and trim hadn’t been varnished for years. Over all, it was a mess.”

With the basic fabric of the house intact and original plans in hand, “working on it was almost like having Frank Lloyd Wright in the room with you showing you what to do,” said Adams. Joan Smith’s knowledge of the Mardens and the house, plus her extensive

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architectural library, also proved helpful, according to Hayley Winfield, Kimsey’s house manager and project coordinator for the Marden House restoration. In an interview on June 23, 2008, she said that Smith helped make contact with Beharka, who put them in touch with one of the house’s original carpenters, who served



The kitchen with new appliances and countertops.



The carefully planned entrance is flanked by boulders for the site.

as the lead carpenter on the restoration project.

Winfield credited the high quality of the restoration to Adams' love of the house, attention to detail, and desire to find just the right materials, products, and restoration processes. She also noted that, as the restoration moved ahead, "Mr. Kimsey became more intrigued and would stop by on Sundays to ask questions and see what progress had been made. The house just drew him in. I think his view of himself as the steward of the Marden House deepened. He came to realize that the restoration was an investment in something of real value that others also appreciated."

Restored to its original beauty, the Marden House is a conversation stopper. The simple entry, flanked by boulders from the property and halfway hidden by the soft branches of a Japanese maple, belies the drama of the setting into which it leads. Upon entering, one takes a few steps down. The low mahogany ceiling channels your vision to the 80 feet of glass that opens onto the breathtaking panoramic view of the Potomac's Little Falls and the wooded hillsides and rocky shore across the river. Glass doors lead to the terraced walkway where the rushing

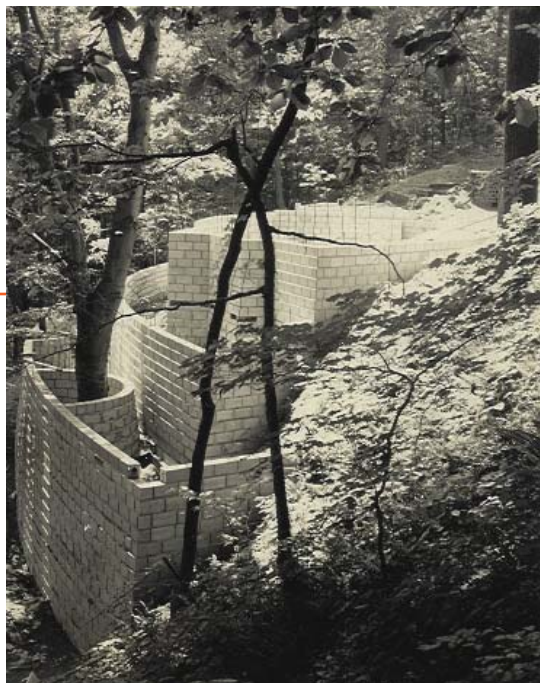
sound of the falls drowns out the soft cries of the birds. "It's the perfect house for this perfect setting," said Adams.

Thanks to its almost seamless integration of the interior and the outdoors, the Marden House feels spacious. The high-ceiling living room, adjoining dining area and sitting area are bathed in natural light from the clerestory windows and expansive wall of windows. The fireplace, which never worked properly, can now accommodate a roaring fire on a cold winter day. A lighting sculpture designed by Beharka has been restored and rehung by the fireplace. Each of the three bedrooms, one of which is on the lower level, retains its built-in bed, cabinets (including a spacious built-in clothes closet in the master bedroom), shelves and desk area. The bathroom fixtures and tiles are all original; Adams lobbied to retain them because they were in good working condition and preserved the 1950s charm of the house. A small study/bedroom at the front of the house offers a cozy, private retreat. The U-shaped kitchen, tucked away behind a bar area and to the right of the living room is outfitted with new appliances and a new hood. The original Cherokee red Formica countertops have been replaced with more durable polished concrete surfaces.

Every piece of wood, inside and out, including every mahogany ceiling panel in the house and garage, has been refinished or replaced, as needed. The red-tinted concrete floors throughout the house and garage have been meticulously restored. Adams stabilized the riverside retaining walls by installing drains and filling them with Styrofoam and engineered soil. A copper roof offers better protection, is easier to keep clean, and is more aesthetically pleasing than the original tar and gravel roof. "In fact, Wright probably would approve as he had originally designed a copper motif to be installed all around the edge of the roof," said Adams.



Frank Lloyd Wright examines the curved, cinder block retaining walls.



The environment and construction at the Marden House are united with the incorporation of the tree into the retaining wall.

The spirit of the Mardens has also been maintained. “I wanted to honor the Mardens’ lives and their love of their home,” said Kimsey. “As someone who has been fortunate to have a lot of adventures in life myself, I feel a kinship with Luis and wished that I had been able to get to know him, as I came to know Ethel.” The built-in bookshelves in the main living space are well-stocked with many of the Mardens’ books on travel, nature, and Frank Lloyd Wright. In the former darkroom, Luis’ fencing gear, fishing rods, oars, diving weights, and several of Luis’ *National Geographic* photographs offer glimpses into his career and into many of the couple’s shared passions: fly fishing, sailing and scuba diving. The sign, *Fontinalis*, recalls their ownership of the home. The nearby wine cellar with its original wine racks no longer houses the Mardens’ favorite vintages--wine was another one of their passions--but still retains its sign, *Hic Habitat Felicitas* (Here Resides Happiness), an apt summary of the entire home’s ambiance.

One of Kimsey’s few regrets about the Marden House is the inadvertent loss of the original moveable furniture designed by Wright and Beharka. “If I’d been more involved at the time of the initial sale, we would have purchased all the furniture offered to us and more of the Mardens’ memorabilia. My agent at the time didn’t understand its value to the house and turned down the offer. Thank God for Ethel Marden. She saved me a few ottomans and a small table. The rest of it is in [the Virginia Museum of

Fine Arts in Richmond] and in private hands. Unfortunately, I couldn’t buy it back for a million dollars now.” The house is now tastefully refurnished with period pieces from the 1950s. “We tried to keep the same palette as Frank Lloyd Wright’s, but obtained more comfortable furniture,” noted Winfield. “We even found a way to conceal a flat-screen television and other electronic equipment in the cabinets lining the back of the living room. The house is used for entertaining and it has to have a certain degree of functionality and level of comfort for this purpose.”

Although the Marden House is not open to the public, the restoration has clearly given it new life. The house often serves as a setting for fundraising events for the many philanthropies that Kimsey supports, as an overnight retreat for visiting guests, and as a venue for private romantic dinners. “Every bachelor should have a Frank Lloyd Wright house with this view,” Kimsey said. Although he has never stayed overnight in the Marden House, guest Patti Austin described the experience to him as “Zen-like.” When he wants to savor a quiet moment alone, Kimsey repairs to a red Hans Wegner “Papa Bear” chair, tucked into the glassed-in corner at the far end of the main room to read or just to commune with the scenery: “You can see great blue herons, hawks, deer, and other wildlife, folks walking on the rocks across the way, kayakers making their way down the Falls. It’s totally peaceful. My other house, grand as it is, doesn’t have a place like this to sit. This house is a joy and a blessing,” Kimsey said.

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