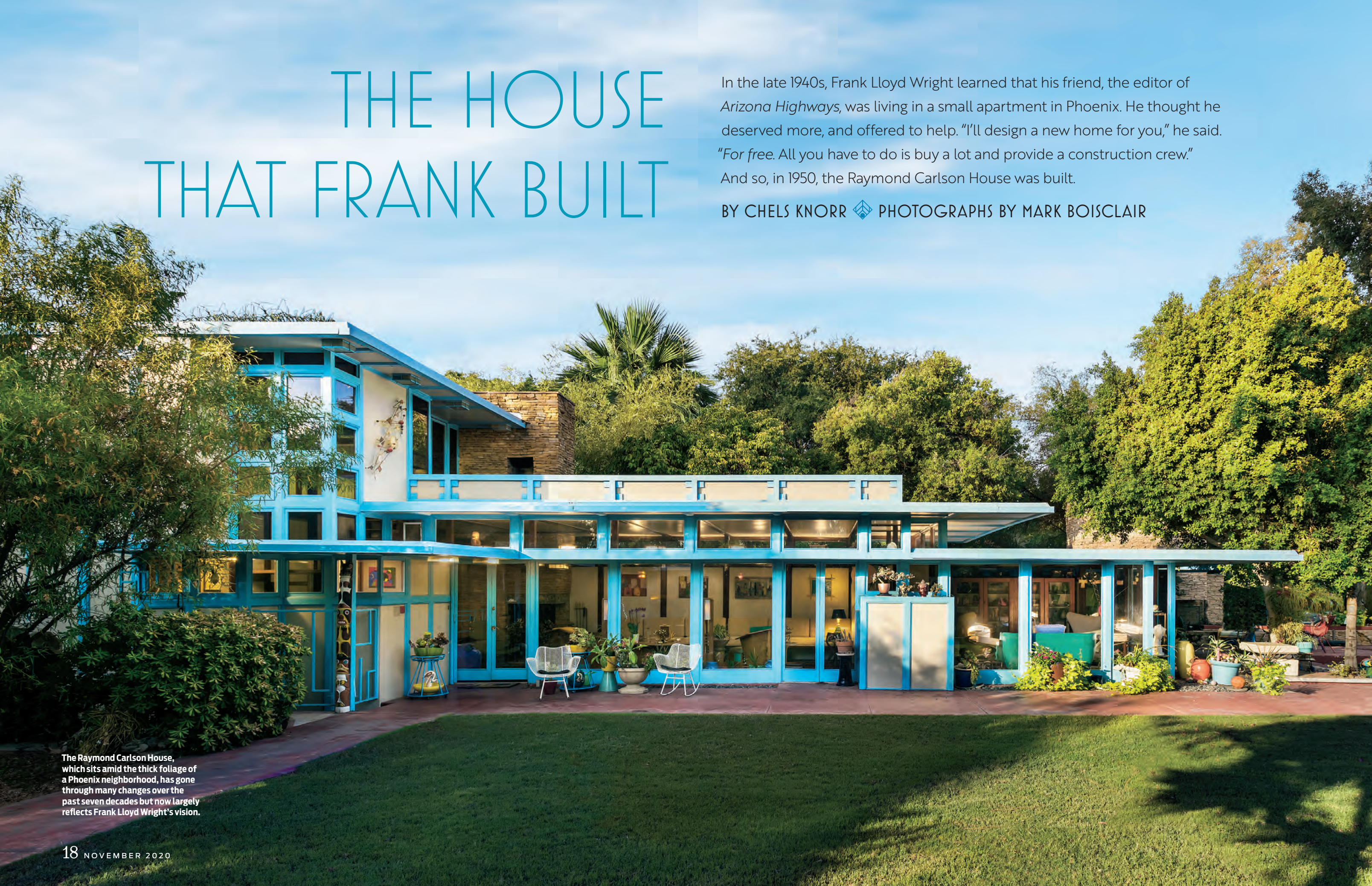


THE HOUSE THAT FRANK BUILT

In the late 1940s, Frank Lloyd Wright learned that his friend, the editor of *Arizona Highways*, was living in a small apartment in Phoenix. He thought he deserved more, and offered to help. "I'll design a new home for you," he said. "For free. All you have to do is buy a lot and provide a construction crew." And so, in 1950, the Raymond Carlson House was built.

BY CHELS KNORR  PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK BOISCLAIR



The Raymond Carlson House, which sits amid the thick foliage of a Phoenix neighborhood, has gone through many changes over the past seven decades but now largely reflects Frank Lloyd Wright's vision.

have two prices,” Frank Lloyd Wright said to Raymond and Helen Carlson in the late 1940s. “I either charge a hell of a lot, or I charge nothing.”

Wright had offered to build the Carlsons a house, but they had declined, knowing they could never afford his architect fee. But after being promised Wright’s friends-and-family discount, the Carlsons found a small lot in Central Phoenix and Wright designed the home to accommodate the Carlsons’ budget. The total price tag when it was completed in 1950: \$15,000 — the equivalent of less than \$166,000 today. True to his word, Wright made nothing on the project, giving half of his 10 percent fee to the builder and half back to the Carlsons to help furnish what he called an “aristocratic little gem of a house.”

Today, just a blue fence and a carport are visible from the street. But inside the gate, past the thick foliage of an established neighborhood, the Raymond Carlson House holds the stories of seven decades, five owners and an architect who left Phoenix a different place than it was when he arrived.

1950-1971 | Owners: Raymond and Helen Carlson

Raymond Carlson, the visionary editor of *Arizona Highways* from 1938 to 1971, turned a trade publication full of road conditions and advertisements into an armchair traveler’s paradise — a magazine exhibiting gorgeous photos, riveting prose and, at its peak, a global circulation of more than half a million.

Mr. Carlson loved the Southwest and the desert, and he spent his career building a shrine to it. “It is a land that takes knowing,” he wrote. “Now, how do you come to know a desert land? Well, it takes living in, a lot of living in, that’s how! It’s not an easy land to know. ... It’s hot, prickly, dry, ugly, repulsive, unkind, dangerous, rocky, totally without rhyme or reason. It is all of that unless you know it well. As we said, it takes a lot of knowing, and then the desert is a different story.”

As a gregarious and well-connected Phoenician, Mr. Carlson fostered friendships with many of the people who defined Arizona’s modern culture, such as Ansel Adams, Ted DeGrazia and Barry Goldwater. Another member in that circle of friends was Frank Lloyd Wright, whose works and words were featured in *Arizona Highways* several times in the 1940s and ’50s.

The Carlsons lived in an apartment in Phoenix while they saved to buy a house, and when Wright got word they were house hunting, the master architect offered his friends his services if they could find a lot. Once they did, he told them they should have also purchased the lot next door. When Wright realized the small lot was all they could afford, he designed them a small Usonian Automatic, a tract home design with which Wright dabbled late in his career. In a 1950 letter to Walter Bimson, a power player in Phoenix, Wright wrote of the project: “I wanted to show Phoenix a new and better way to live there in the dust than the pancakes they copied from me that are sprawling all around about the dust.”



LEFT: The house’s kitchen, which sits 4 feet below ground level, has been updated with new appliances.

OPPOSITE PAGE: A wall of the house is adorned with one of Wright’s signature red tiles and a scribbled note from the architect to Raymond Carlson.



The Usonian design makes use of standard-size building materials, making it easier for the owners to help construct their homes. Indeed, the Carlsons and Wright hired contractor Vincent Gentzwill but completed much of the construction themselves to save money. Gary Avey — the son of George Avey, *Arizona Highways*’ longtime art director — hauled buckets of water for the concrete, according to a 1989 story in *Phoenix Home & Garden*.

Built on the south side of the lot, facing northeast, the Carlson House used 4x4 redwood posts, “transite” (asbestos and cement) panels, and windows placed to limit heat exposure. Wright put maximum stress on the structures: Cantilevered eaves shield the home from the heat, while extensive windows let in light. The home is broken into four levels: the kitchen, 4 feet below ground level; the living room, through which you enter at ground level; the third level, with the

main bedroom and a tiny guest bedroom; and the top level, which Mr. Carlson used as a study, equipped with a rooftop terrace overlooking the yard.

In the *Phoenix Home & Garden* story, Gary Avey recalled spending a summer trying to teach the Carlsons’ parrots, Polly and Gonzalez, to talk. Avey, who died in 2005, told writer Nora Burba Trulsson: “I taught them only mundane things. The obscenities were something they picked up from Raymond when he got mad.”

When the home was completed, Trulsson wrote, Wright awarded it a red tile — his signature stamp of approval, and one of just 80 produced for this purpose. He called it “a little gem of a house” in the Bimson letter. On the wall alongside the red tile, “Hurrah Ray FLLW” is scribbled in pen in Wright’s handwriting. The origin story of this scrawl varies, but the home might be the only one Wright ever signed.

Mr. Carlson “wisely shellacked it for posterity,” Dixie Legler wrote in *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Western Work*.

Mrs. Carlson died in the mid-1960s. In the 1970s, her husband sold the home, handed the magazine’s reins to Joseph Stacey and moved into a Scottsdale nursing home. He died in 1983, at the age of 77. The home was subsequently sold to Dan MacBeth, who, among other things, moved the driveway to the adjacent cross street. His tenure as homeowner, however, was short, and he sold the Carlson House in the early 1970s.

1970s-1985 | Owner: Lance Carlson

When Lance Carlson (no relation to the original owners) moved in, he decided to do some remodeling based more on personal taste than on architectural prowess. Unaware of the intricacies of Wright’s design, he began taking things apart but managed to avoid any catastrophic structural failures.

Carlson decided to enclose the carport, located just off the living room. After he converted it to a study, cars had to park closer to the street. He constructed a guest house adjacent to the main house, and hired Steve Martino, a Scottsdale landscape architect known for his sundial work at Desert Botanical Garden and his work around Papago Park, to design the landscaping and terraced pool in 1975.

Carlson corresponded multiple times with Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, who organized Wright’s extensive archives. In a 1978 letter to Pfeiffer, he described the property’s improvements, hoping to sell the home to someone who would appreciate Wright’s creation. However, even though he

called himself a Wright aficionado, Carlson made choices that would have made the architect livid, such as painting the house brown and enclosing the stairs. The subsequent owner would spend much of his time in the home restoring Wright’s original vision.

Wright designed his homes as immersive experiences, with the furniture, built-in dressers and closets all part of the appeal. For this reason, Wright homes are typically sold inclusive of their original furniture. Carlson ignored this unwritten rule, taking everything that wasn’t attached to the walls, including the kitchen table and all the freestanding furniture in the living room and bedrooms.

1985-2003 | Owner: Christian Petersen

Christian Petersen first drove by the Carlson House in 1985 and purchased it shortly thereafter, knowing it needed substantial renovations to return it to Wright’s intent. For that task, he hired Charles Schiffner — an alumnus of the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture, and a Taliesin Fellowship architect.

Once Schiffner and Petersen signed the contract for renovations, Schiffner took his hammer and beat out the risers on the 22-inch-wide staircases. Light, like magic, pierced the exposed, floating steps. “We both knew at that moment we were doing the right thing,” Schiffner says. It was as if the beams of light were Wright giving his approval.

An heir to the Vise-Grip fortune, Petersen told Schiffner he was grateful to have inherited money so he could put it



into the house. Petersen viewed the act as his gift to architecture, and Schiffner admits the house might not still be standing had Petersen not poured almost as much into renovations as he paid for the house. Schiffner recalls one day in particular when one thing after another was going wrong. Petersen sat in the yard as Schiffner and the contractor approached him. Before they ever reached Petersen, he said, “I can tell by your walk. ... Just fix it.”

Petersen disliked what he called “Tudor drag,” the brown color of the outdoor paint. “One of the first things we did was scrape away the paint — several layers — until we got to the turquoise,” Schiffner says. They were able to color-match the gray of the remaining transite and repaint the home in its original colors.

During Petersen’s residency, he received a package from Lance Carlson: a three-ring binder with professional photographs of the home’s original furniture, in sleeves, accompanied by their sizes and prices. Carlson was trying to sell the furniture back. But Schiffner noticed that the photos each had dimensions written on the back and told Petersen he could reconstruct some of the furniture rather than pay the astronomical prices Carlson was asking. He built two cube chairs with ottomans, a set of tables and lamps. Those items remain with the house today.

2003-present | Owners: George Shepard III and Jeff Eldot

George Shepard III first came across the house in 1993, when he and his husband, Jeff Eldot, drove by it on their way to the laundromat. At the time, the home was surrounded by a chain-link fence, and Petersen was standing on the other

OPPOSITE PAGE: The banquettes in the living room reflect Wright’s fondness for built-in furniture.

LEFT: Restoring the original look of the 22-inch-wide staircase was part of an extensive renovation of the house in the 1980s.

BELOW: In 1967, Raymond Carlson filled out a survey about the house for the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. In it, he indicated that serious architecture students from Taliesin West were welcome to visit.

COURTESY OF FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT FOUNDATION

side of it when the men got out to take a look.

“Is that what I think it is?” Shepard asked. Petersen put his hands on his hips: “You better believe it,” he said. Shepard jokingly replied, “Well, if you ever want to sell it, let us know.”

Shepard and Eldot regularly brunched on Sunday mornings, and on their way home, they would drive by the Carlson House. On a Sunday in 2002, a “For Sale” sign stood out front. The couple called the listing agent. By the end of the showing, Shepard was putting together an offer with the agent. Eldot said with a laugh, “There’s nothing to talk about,” thinking they couldn’t possibly afford a Wright house. But Shepard was determined.

The couple casually chatted with some other agents, asking questions under the guise of small talk as they pursued homes around the Valley: “What do you think about that house on 12th Avenue, the Frank Lloyd Wright house?” Some agents thought it was overpriced, but it seemed that no one knew what the house was actually worth. Wright homes often are tricky to appraise, because they can’t simply be compared to others in the neighborhood — which is why the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy offers an appraisal package. (Wright homes with similar square footage are currently on the market for between \$700,000 and \$10 million.)

After almost a year of negotiations, Petersen, Shepard and Eldot came to an agreement. Once the men settled in, they hosted a housewarming party. Several people from the



Date: 1967

Original Client: Raymond Carlson

Original Address: [redacted]

Contractor: Vincent Gutzwiller

Address: [redacted]

Date of Construction: 1949-1950

Cost: 15,000*

Subsequent Owners:

Has the building been demolished: no date: [redacted]

Has the building been remodelled: no date: [redacted]

By whom: [redacted]

Are the original furnishings still in the building: yes

If not, where can they be found: [redacted]

Do you have any color slides of the building: no

Do you have any blueprints or drawings of the building: only architect's original plans

Current value of the building: \$20,000

Current use of the building: residence

Present condition of the building: good, well-maintained

Do you permit visitors: yes

Under what conditions: only serious students

Present Owner: Raymond Carlson since 1950

Address: [redacted]

Do you wish your name withheld from any published lists or reference to the building: no

Signed: Raymond Carlson date July 6, 1967

*with lot landscaping, cement driveway, furnishing etc. property valued at \$25,000!



The living room, at ground level, demonstrates Wright's extensive use of windows to let in light.

Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy attended, as did friends and family. As they waited for guests, Eldot and Shepard stood outside, admiring their setup. "It was a stunning afternoon in November," Shepard says. "All of a sudden, there was a huge wind, and it stripped the paint off all the edges of the house, and it flew in the air like Frisbees." The couple just stood in the yard, getting showered by paint chips, and laughed. Despite the ensuing cleanup, it felt like something profound had happened. "It was a spiritual moment," Shepard says.

Today, lawn flamingos, while not part of Wright's design, have become a fixture at the Carlson House. For Petersen's 30th birthday, friends installed 30 lawn flamingos on the grass. They were pictured in the 1989 *Phoenix Home & Garden* story and matched the laid-back vibe of the house.

Shepard, too, has dozens of lawn flamingos, a collection he began before moving into the Carlson House — they're strewn across the southwest section of the yard. They're of all shapes, sizes and materials, and some are more than a hundred years old. Shepard never meant to start the collection, but one day he was walking past someone's house and heard a voice from inside say, "Hey, you out there! Get those two flamingos out of my yard! I can't stand them!" So he took them. They were from the 1940s and made of aluminum, which was scarce at that time due to World War II.

Shepard is a collector, and not just of lawn flamingos. However, the Carlson House, with its tiny built-ins, was not built for storage. When he and Eldot moved in, he had to pare down. Luckily, his flamingo installation is outside — and even in 2020, the flamingos still match the house.

That's not the only quirk. Shepard and Eldot are willing to bet they own the only Wright house that has a cat door, their own addition. Angel, a red tabby, roams around the house's upper posts and beams, a secret passageway of sorts that frames the living room, and curls into the staircases. Eldot says his favorite place in the house is upstairs, on the top floor, which now is the main bedroom. From the top of the staircase, he can see into the yard through the trees, and when he goes to bed late or wakes up early, the moon shines through the grid of windows and casts a tangle of shadows on the walls. Wright could have just put a window at the top of the stairs. Instead, he created an experience.

You might assume that owning a Frank Lloyd Wright house is like living in a museum, and to some degree it is. But while Shepard and Eldot are careful to keep the home authentic to the architects who designed and renovated it, they live there — and have for almost 20 years. They walk on the carpets, remnants from the Wright-influenced Arizona Biltmore, and cook in the kitchen, which they've made more usable with new appliances. Their two rescue dogs curl up on the long living room couch. "I'll take quirky over perfect any day," Eldot says. [AH](#)