UNEXPECTED WRIGHT
Wright Sizing
Smaller is better at Frank Lloyd Wright’s Pope - Leighey House
LAUREEN WALSER
“Why don’t you go ahead and put your hand on the floor,” Peter Christensen says to me. “Give it a feel”.

It’s an odd request. But I’m a visitor at Pope-Leighey House, the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Usonian house in Alexandria, Virginia, and like any good guest, I do as I’m told. I feel the floor. It’s warm.

“Radiant heat,” says Christensen, a longtime docent at the site. “There’s almost no insulation in this house, but do you feel how wonderfully comfortable it is?”

It is comfortable. Despite the frigid temperatures outside, I slip off my coat and feel tempted to walk around barefoot.

The heated concrete floors are one in a series of surprises I encounter during my visit to Pope-Leighey House, dedicated as a National Trust Historic Site in 1965. There’s also its size. The two-bedroom, one-bath house with a den measures 1,200 square feet, but it seems bigger inside, thanks to Wright’s combination of high ceilings, large expanses of glass, and an open floor plan. Even the kitchen, which only holds one person comfortably, feels airy, with its tall slot window that floods the space with light.

Another surprise is the hidden storage. On the short walk from the front door to the living room, I pass a set of closet doors, and later a wall of cabinets in the small hallway outside the bath. But I don’t notice any

¿Por qué no tocas el piso?”, Me dice Peter Christensen. “Siéntelo”.

Es una petición rara. Pero soy visitante en Pope-Leighey House, la casa que Frank Lloyd Wright diseñó en Usonia en Alejandría, Virginia, y como cualquier buena invitada, hago lo que me dicen. Toco el suelo. Está caliente.

“Calefacción radiante”, dice Christensen, un antiguo docente en el lugar. “Casi no hay aislamiento en esta casa, pero no te sientes maravillosamente cómoda?” Es confortable. A pesar de las fríegas temperaturas exteriores, me quito el abrigo y me siento tentado a caminar descalzo.

Los pisos de hormigón calefaccionados son una de una serie de sorpresas que encuentro durante mi visita a Pope-Leighey House, dedicado como un Sitio Histórico Nacional en 1965. También su tamaño. La casa de dos dormitorios, un baño y un escritorio, mide 1.200 pies cuadrados, pero parece más grande en el interior, gracias a la combinación de Wright de techos altos, grandes extensiones de vidrio y una planta de piso abierto. Incluso en la cocina, donde cabe sólo una persona cómodamente, se siente ventilada, con su ventana de ranura alta que inunda el espacio con la luz.

Otra sorpresa es el almacenamiento oculto. En el corto recorrido desde la puerta de entrada a la sala de estar, pasé por un conjunto de puertas de armario, y más
of these storage spaces at first. Their hinges are barely visible, and the entryway closets don’t have doorknobs, so they blend in with the walls.

And then there are the screws. First, it should be noted that the entire house is a study in horizontality, with its flat, cantilevered roof, horizontal board-and-batten walls, and built-in bookcases with no vertical support beams. Even the mortar joints in the living room’s brick work add to the effect. The horizontal joints were raked out and the vertical ones were dyed to match the color of the brick, creating the effect of a wall of horizontal lines. Christensen’s eyes twinkle as he invites me to look at the exposed, slot-headed screws in the walls. Each one was turned to be perfectly horizontal. It’s an absolutely obsessive level of detail, and I am delighted.
“We can never do self-guided tours of this house,” Christensen says. “You could blow through here in five minutes and think you saw everything, and you’d miss most of it. There’s so much going on.”

Today, Pope-Leighey House is one of the finest examples of Wright’s Usonian houses, a series of inexpensive but well-designed residences for middle-income homeowners. It’s the only Wright site open to visitors in the Washington, D.C., area. And thanks to a recent, four-year-long effort to clean and restore the house’s cypress siding, it’s looking better than ever. The timing is good, too: June 8, 2017 marks the 150th anniversary of the architect’s birth, so Pope-Leighey House, like most other Wright properties, is gearing up to host a number of celebratory events.

For on-site director Amanda Phillips, the birthday sesquicentennial is a chance to bring new people to the house, which has a tendency to fly under the radar even among Wright fans.
“People tend to think, ‘Oh, it’s just a small little house. Is it really worth the drive to go see it?’” Phillips says. “But yes, it is! It’s a remarkable house. It’s magical. There’s always something new to learn about it, or something new to see.”

The story of Pope-Leighey House begins with one carefully worded letter. Loren Pope, a 28-year-old copy editor at Washington, D.C.’s Evening Star newspaper, had just purchased a 1.3-acre lot in Falls Church, Virginia, with his wife, Charlotte, and he couldn’t imagine any architect but Frank Lloyd Wright designing their house. On August 18, 1939, he wrote the architect a letter. Aware of both Wright’s popularity as an architect and his colossal ego, Pope laid it on thick:

The board-and-batten walls, bookcases, and ribbon of clerestory windows emphasize horizontality.

Las paredes de listón, las estanterías, y la franja de ventanas acentúan la horizontalidad.
“Dear Mr. Wright,” he began. “There are certain things a man wants during life, and, of life. Material things things of the spirit. The writer has one fervent wish that includes both. It is for a house created by you.”

He continued: “I feel that you are the great creative force of our time. And if you had never built a building I’d still feel that you are one of the great Americans as a man.”

Pope attached details explaining the lot, including its size and topography, and the position of the trees and the small stream running through it. He described the climate and prevailing winds. He included a list of his and Charlotte’s desires, including a terrace, space for their books and their radio phonograph, and a study. Most importantly, he included his budget: $5,500, or the equivalent of about $86,000 today.

Fifteen days later, Wright responded: “Of course I am ready to give you a house.”

A series of designs followed. Wright made adjustments after his original design went well over the Popes’ budget, and construction finally began on July 18, 1940. The couple moved into their new home in March of 1941.

That Frank Lloyd Wright- the architect behind Fallingwater, a grand house built over a waterfall in southwestern Pennsylvania, as well as the soaring Guggenheim Museum in New York-would design a house on such a modest budget might surprise some. Most stories about Wright do not hint at an altruistic streak.

Frank Lloyd Wright - el arquitecto de Fallingwater- una gran casa construida sobre una cascada en en el sudeste de Pensilvania, así como el famoso Museo Guggenheim en Nueva York- diseñaría una casa con un presupuesto tan modesto que podría sorprender a algunos. La mayoría de las historias sobre Wright no indican una racha altruista.
“Oh no, he wasn’t an easy man,” Phillips says during my visit to the house. “He was very complicated.”

Ashley R. Wilson, who as the National Trust’s Graham Gund Architect serves as the architect for the Trust’s 27 Historic Sites, puts it a little more bluntly when I ask her about it a few days later: “As arrogant as he was, he truly believed that anybody and everybody should be able to afford good architecture,” she says. “And he worked to give that to people. He really did care”.

That belief falls at the very heart of Pope-Leighey House and the other Usonian houses Wright designed. He achieved their lower cost by using locally sourced materials when possible, and by reducing the footprint without sacrificing comfort. To make the houses feel bigger, he used high ceilings, open floorplans, compressed corridors, and efficient storage space. Instead of garages, he opted for less-expensive carports. And he designed custom furniture at a slightly smaller scale so that rooms appear larger. Even the radiant heating system frees up a small amount of extra space by removing the bulk of a radiator.

“The real genius of Wright comes from understanding his mastery of creating interesting, functional, comfortable spaces,” Christensen says.

“The living room and dining room flow seamlessly together with the kitchen tucked off the hallway.

La sala de estar y el comedor fluyen conjuntamente con la cocina escondida en el pasillo.
And the Popes felt immediately at home in their new space. But their time there was short. Exhausted by the grind of the newspaper business, Loren Pope sought a career change, and both he and Charlotte were seduced by the idea of living on a farm. Just five years after moving into the house, they listed it for sale. By then, word had traveled about the Falls Church property, and the newspaper ad led to a flood of inquiries to the couple’s real estate agent. Most people who called were just trying to sneak a glimpse of the fabled house. So when Robert and Marjorie Leighey called to inquire about it, they had to prove they were serious buyers. They viewed the property that evening, and three months later, in February of 1947, they moved in.

Robert, a patent examiner for the United States Commerce Department, and Marjorie, who later did extensive missionary work in Japan, enjoyed living in the house for years. Then came a serious blow: In 1960, Virginia’s Department of Highways began planning for an extension of Interstate 66, which would cut through Falls Church. More specifically, it would cut through the living room of their house. The couple fought the plans, drawing the support of a number of arts, architecture, and preservation groups, as well as Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall. Loren Pope wrote a passionate letter to The Washington Post in protest. And in 1964, the National Trust for Historic Preservation became involved in the fight, as well.

“[The house] was only 23 years old,” Wilson says. “But they recognized it was important.”

Despite these efforts, the highway expansion carried on. Marjorie Leighey received a formal notice to vacate the property in September of 1963, just two months after her husband died. Soon it became clear that the only way to save the house would be to physically move it. Several new locations were considered, but one stood out above the rest: the 126-acre estate of Woodlawn, a National Trust Historic Site in near by Alexandria, Virginia. The property, with its flat topography and thickets of trees, closely resembled the land around Pope-Leighey’s Falls Church location, and National Trust personnel would already be on hand to care for and maintain the house.

“La genialidad de Wright consiste en entender su dominio para crear espacios interesantes, funcionales, y confortables”, dice Christensen.

Y los Popes se sintieron inmediatamente en casa en su nuevo espacio. Pero sería por corto tiempo. Exhausto por la rutina del negocio de los periódicos, Loren Pope buscó un cambio de carrera, y tanto él como Charlotte fueron seducidos por la idea de vivir en una granja. Apenas cinco años después de mudarse a la casa, la pusieron en venta. Para entonces, la noticia se conocía alrededor de la propiedad de Falls Church, y el anuncio de periódico llevó a una avalancha de demandas al agente de bienes raíces de la pareja. La mayoría de las personas que llamaron sólo estaban tratando de conocer la fabulosa casa. Por eso, cuando Robert y Marjorie Leighey llamaron para preguntar al respecto, tuvieron que probar que eran compradores serios. Ellos vieron la propiedad esa noche, y tres meses después, en febrero de 1947, se mudaron.

Robert, examinador de patentes del Departamento de Comercio de los Estados Unidos, y Marjorie, quien más tarde hizo extensa obra misionera en Japón, disfrutaron viviendo en la casa durante años. Entonces vino un golpe serio. En 1960, el Departamento de Carreteras de Virginia comenzó a planear una extensión de la Interestatal 66, que cortaría a través de la Iglesia de Falls Church. Más específicamente, cortaría a través de la sala de estar de su casa. La pareja se opuso a los planes, y atrajo el apoyo de numerosos grupos relacionados con las artes, arquitectura y preservación, así como al Secretario del Interior Stewart Udall. Loren Pope escribió una carta apasionada al Washington Post en protesta. Y en 1964, el National Trust for Historic Preservation también se involucró en la lucha. “La casa tenía sólo 23 años”, dice Wilson. Pero reconocieron que era importante.

A pesar de estos esfuerzos, la expansión de la autopista siguió adelante. Marjorie Leighey recibió una notificación formal para desocupar la propiedad en septiembre de 1963, dos meses después de que su esposo muriera. Pronto quedó claro que la única manera de salvar la casa sería moverla físicamente. Se establecieron
On July 30, 1964, Marjorie Leighey formally transferred the house to the National Trust, retaining the right to live there for the rest of her life. Shortly thereafter, it was taken apart piece by piece, stacked onto a flatbed truck, and transported 13 miles to Woodlawn, where it was reassembled. It was dedicated on June 16, 1965.

But that wasn’t to be the house’s final site. After cracks appeared in the concrete floor and the roof developed leaks, a series of structural analyses and studies in the late 1980s and early ‘90s indicated that the clay soil it was placed on during the 1965 relocation was unstable. Further, some of the roof drainage systems had been incorrectly installed during the house’s reassembly. In 1996, it was once again disassembled, moved, and reassembled, this time just 30 feet upslope from its second location.

El 30 de julio de 1964, Marjorie Leighey formalmente entregó la casa al National Trust, conservando el derecho a vivir allí durante el resto de su vida. Poco tiempo después, fue distribuido pieza por pieza, apilado sobre un camión de plataforma plana, y trasladado a 13 millas de Woodlawn, donde fue reensamblado. Fue dedicado el 16 de junio de 1965.

Pero eso no debía ser el sitio final de la casa. Después de las grietas que se observaron en el piso de concreto del tejado, una serie de estudios estructurales y estudios realizados a finales de los años ochenta y principios de los noventa indicaron que el suelo arcilloso en el que se colocó durante el año 1965 era inestable. Además, algunos de los sistemas de drenaje del techo habían sido instalados incorrectamente durante el reensamblaje de la casa. En 1996, una vez más fue desmontada, movida, y rearmada, esta vez sólo 30 pies arriba de su segunda ubicación.

La tercera vez ha demostrado ser la correcta. Hoy Pope-Leighey House se parece mucho a como era cuando los Popes se mudaron hace 76 años, a pesar de que no todos sus materiales originales permanecen. Durante los traslados se reemplazaron los cimientos de la losa y la losa de relleno de hormigón coloreado. Y debido a que el mortero original hizo difícil separar y reutilizar los ladrillos, los ladrillos y el mortero nuevos se usaron para recrear las paredes de ladrillo originales, el hogar, los escalones y los jardineras.

Workers reconstructing the roof in 1996.
Docent Peter Christensen.

Constructores reconstruyendo el techo en 1996.
Profesor Peter Christensen.
The third time has proven to be the charm. Today Pope-Leighey House looks much as it did when the Popes moved in 76 years ago, despite the fact not all of its original materials remain. The slab foundation and colored concrete topping slab were replaced during the relocations. And because the original mortar made it difficult to detach and reuse the bricks, new bricks and mortar were used to recreate the original brick walls, hearth, steps, and planters.

“It’s been jimmed with a lot, but I think that’s part of its preservation story,” says Wilson.

Still, the exterior wood-tidewater red cypress that Wright chose for its durability, density, consistent color, and termite-resistant oils—is almost all original. It looks brand new, thanks to a recent conservation effort.

The wood conservation project started in 2011, when Jablonski Building Conservation completed a building assessment and treatment report. (That work was funded by a grant from the federal Save America’s Treasures program.) Years of deferred maintenance had left the wood looking worn and dull. Dirt, dust, and debris were caked on its surface, and its raised grain suggested past pressure-washing treatments.

But no one knew for sure the best way to clean and maintain the cypress. Wright didn’t leave specific instructions. And there was minimal documentation at other Wright sites to use as guide. So following the building assessment, the National Trust began an investigation. Wilson and Audra Medve, who at the time was the preservation manager at Pope-Leighey, enlisted architectural conservators Pamela Kirschner and Andrew Fearon, along with researchers from the University of Pennsylvania, to help. They studied letters, photos, and other documentary sources to better understand the house’s materials. Kirschner conducted an in-depth comparison of products that could be used to clean and protect the wood, testing 10 different treatments and rating them for qualities such as longevity, saturation, and historical accuracy.

“Se ha mimetizado con el lote, pero pienso que eso es parte de su historia de preservación,” dice Wilson.

Sin embargo, el ciprés rojo, madera que Wright eligió por su durabilidad, densidad, color consistente y aceites resistentes a termitas es casi todo original. Parece nuevo, gracias a un reciente esfuerzo de conservación.

El proyecto de conservación de la madera comenzó en 2011, cuando Jablonski Building Conservation completó un informe de evaluación y tratamiento del edificio. (Ese trabajo fue financiado por una subvención del programa federal Save America’s Treasures). Años de mantenimiento diferido habían perdido la madera que parecía desgastada y aburrida. La suciedad, el polvo y los escombros estaban endurecidos en su superficie, y su grano elevado sugería tratamientos anteriores de lavado a presión.

Pero nadie sabía con certeza la mejor manera de limpiar y mantener el ciprés. Wright no dejó instrucciones específicas. Y había documentación mínima en otros sitios de Wright para usar como guía. Así que después de la evaluación del edificio, el National Trust comenzó una investigación. Wilson y Audra Medve, que en ese momento era la encargada de preservación de Pope-Leighey, reclutaron a los conservadores de arquitectura Pamela Kirschner y Andrew Fearon, junto con investigadores de la Universidad de Pensilvania, para ayudar. Ellos estudiaron cartas, fotos, y otras fuentes documentales para comprender mejor los materiales de la casa. Kirschner realizó una comparación en profundidad de los productos que podían utilizarse para limpiar y proteger la madera, probando 10 tratamientos diferentes y calificándolos en calidades como longevidad, saturación y precisión histórica.

Mientras tanto, Oak Grove Restoration, con sede en Laytonsville, Maryland, introdujo a los holandeses (listones de madera estrecha) en espacios donde la madera estaba agrietada o dañada, lo que ayudó a estabilizar el revestimiento.
In the meantime, Oak Grove Restoration, based in Laytonsville, Maryland, inserted Dutchmen (narrow wood slivers) into gaps where the wood was cracked or damaged, which helped to stabilize the siding. Using the results of her testing, Kirschner created an affordable three-step process for cleaning and protecting the wood: First, spray the siding with D/2 Biological Solution, a biodegradable liquid that cleans

The hallway is compressed to save space and the clerestory windows provide ventilation. El pasillo fue comprimido para ahorrar espacio y las ventanas proveen ventilación.

Usando los resultados de sus pruebas, Kirschner creó un proceso asequible de tres pasos para limpiar y proteger la madera: En primer lugar, rocío el revestimiento con D / 2 Biological Solution, un líquido biodegrad-
the wood and removes mold, algae, and other biological growth. (“This is preservation dream stuff,” Wilson says, citing its environmentally friendly ingredients and its ability to clean and remove stains.) Then apply Bora-Care, a biological deterrent with an active ingredient of borate salts, which keeps wood-destroying organisms such as termites, carpenter ants, and fungi at bay. Finally, brush on TWP 1530, a water-repellent preservative that protects wood from mildew, UV damage, and general weathering, while also aiding in color retention.

With this plan of attack, timing was everything. Once the wood was cleaned, it couldn’t be left exposed, so all the work had to be completed within 60 days. For the finish to be effectively applied, the temperature had to be between 50 and 90 degrees, meaning this work couldn’t be done in the middle of summer or winter. Plus, the wood moisture content had to be below 11 percent between treatments, meaning there would be a wait time between coatings of the finish. This was not a one- or two-person job. So Wilson called upon National Trust staff and interns, plus students from the University of Mary
The bedroom used by Loren and Charlotte Pope’s children.

Washington’s Center for Historic Preservation. More than a dozen volunteers showed up.

“People love Pope-Leighey House,” Wilson says. “It wasn’t hard to get excited volunteers out there to help.”

The work was completed by the summer of 2015, and it cost the National Trust a grand total of $13,000, thanks to the volunteer labor and a $10,000 donation to Wood lawn from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund. The hope now, Wilson says, is that her team’s research can be replicated at other Frank Lloyd Wright sites with wood siding.

“This is such an easy, preservation-friendly, economical solution;’ she says. “And honestly, anybody with a wood house can use these same products and these same steps.”

El dormitorio de los niños Pope.

espera entre los recubrimientos del acabado. Esto no era un trabajo de una o dos personas. Así que Wilson llamó al personal de National Trust y a los pasantes, además de estudiantes del Centro para la Conservación Histórica de la Universidad de Mary Washington. Aparecieron más de una docena de voluntarios.

“La gente ama a Pope-Leighey House”, dice Wilson. “No fue difícil animar a los voluntarios a ayudar.”

El trabajo se completó en el verano de 2015 y le costó al National Trust un total de $ 13,000, gracias a la mano de obra voluntaria y a una donación de $10,000 a Wood-lawn del Jessie Ball duPont Fund. La esperanza ahora, dice Wilson, es que la investigación de su equipo puede ser replicada en otros sitios de Frank Lloyd Wright con revestimiento de madera.
With its cypress siding looking as good as new, Pope-Leighey House stands ready for the upcoming Frank Lloyd Wright sesquicentennial celebrations. Amanda Phillips and her team, including volunteer docents such as Peter Christensen, are gearing up for new in-depth architectural tours of the house, as well as Twilight Wine & Cheese tours starting in May. And on June 8, Wright’s actual day of birth, there will be a big picnic at the site.

“Frank Lloyd Wright was obsessed with picnics;’ Phillips says. “Who knew?” As it turns out, being one of Wright’s apprentices (or “fellows,” as he called them) meant pick the location, and the fellows would bring food. Then he would have a captive audience to listen to his thoughts and ideas.

As we sit in the living room talking about Wright’s work style and the upcoming events, I encounter yet another one of his surprises: As the sun moves across the sky, the shadows created by the cutout pattern in the clerestory

“Esta es una solución fácil, fácil de conservar y económica”, dice. “Y honestamente, cualquiera con una casa de madera podría usar estos mismos productos y seguir estos mismos pasos.”

Con su fachada en ciprés sana y renovada, la Casa Pope-Leighey está lista para las próximas celebraciones del sesquicentenario de Frank Lloyd Wright. Amanda Phillips y su equipo, incluyendo docentes voluntarios como Peter Christensen, se preparan para nuevos tours arquitectónicos en profundidad de la casa, así como tours de vino y queso Twilight a partir de Mayo. Y el 8 de junio, el día real de nacimiento de Wright, habrá un gran picnic en el sitio.

Frank Lloyd Wright estaba obsesionado con los picnics—dice Phillips. “¿Quién lo sabía?” Como resulta ser uno de los aprendices de Wright (o “compañeros”, como él los llamaba) significa escoger la ubicación, y los compañeros traían comida. Entonces tendría una audiencia cautiva para escuchar sus pensamientos e ideas.

Opposite: Pope-Leighey House; From top: Architect Ashley Wilson, former intern Rie Yamakawa, docent John Marshall, and former Silman engineering fellow Tenzin Nyandak in the main living space; A close-up of the geometric window design.
windows move down the walls and across the space as if in a carefully choreographed dance.

“It’s a little animated light show,” Christensen says, as he switches on a lamp. I sit back, feeling completely at home, and I enjoy the performance.

Mientras nos sentamos en la sala comentando el estilo de trabajo de Wright y los próximos eventos, me encuentro con otra de sus sorpresas: a medida que el sol se mueve a través del cielo, las sombras creadas por el patrón de corte en las ventanas se mueven por las paredes y se deslizan por el espacio como en una danza cuidadosamente coreografiada.

“Es un pequeño espectáculo de luces animadas”, dice Christensen, mientras enciende una lámpara. Me siento como en casa, y me gusta el espectáculo.