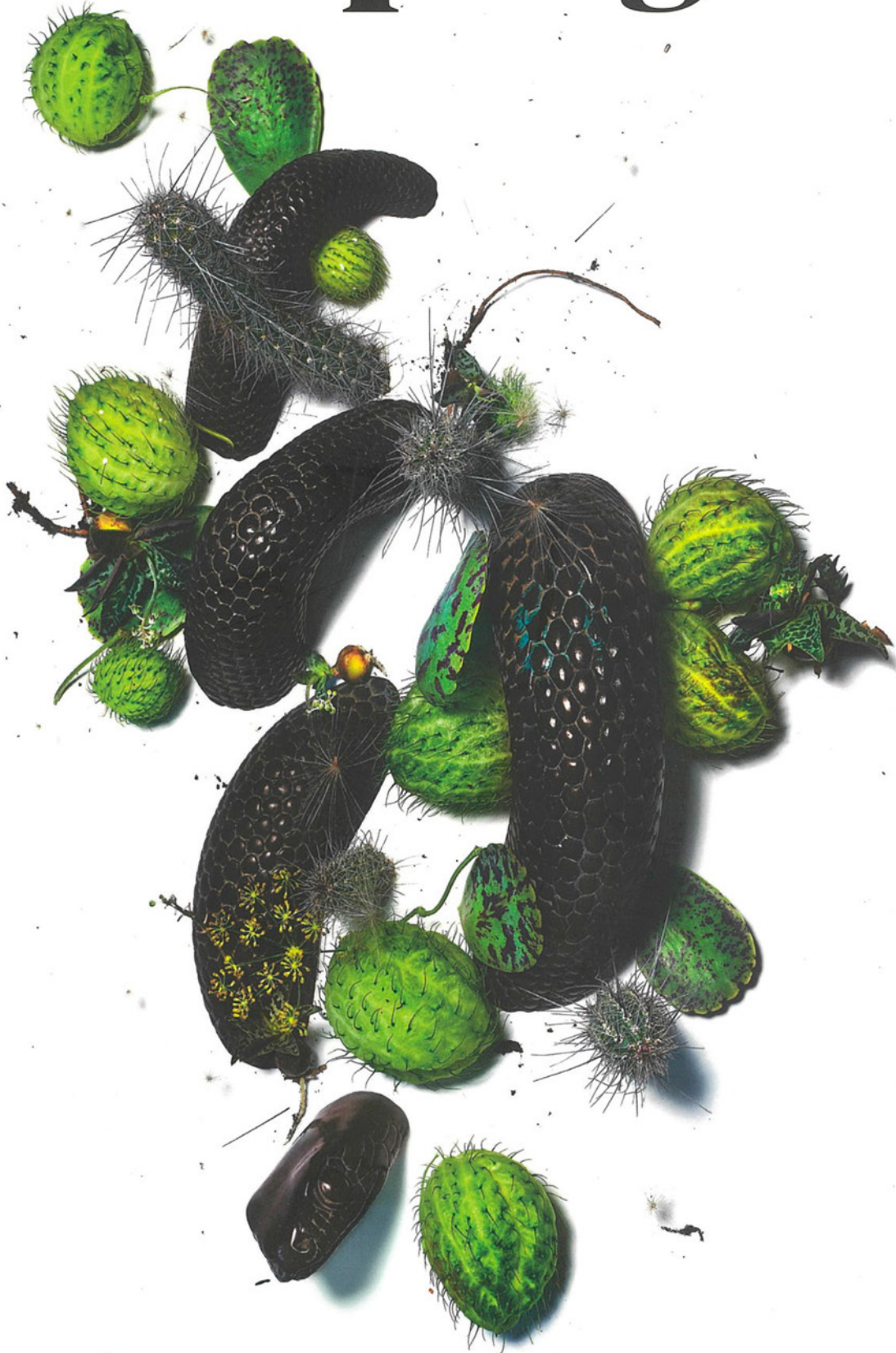
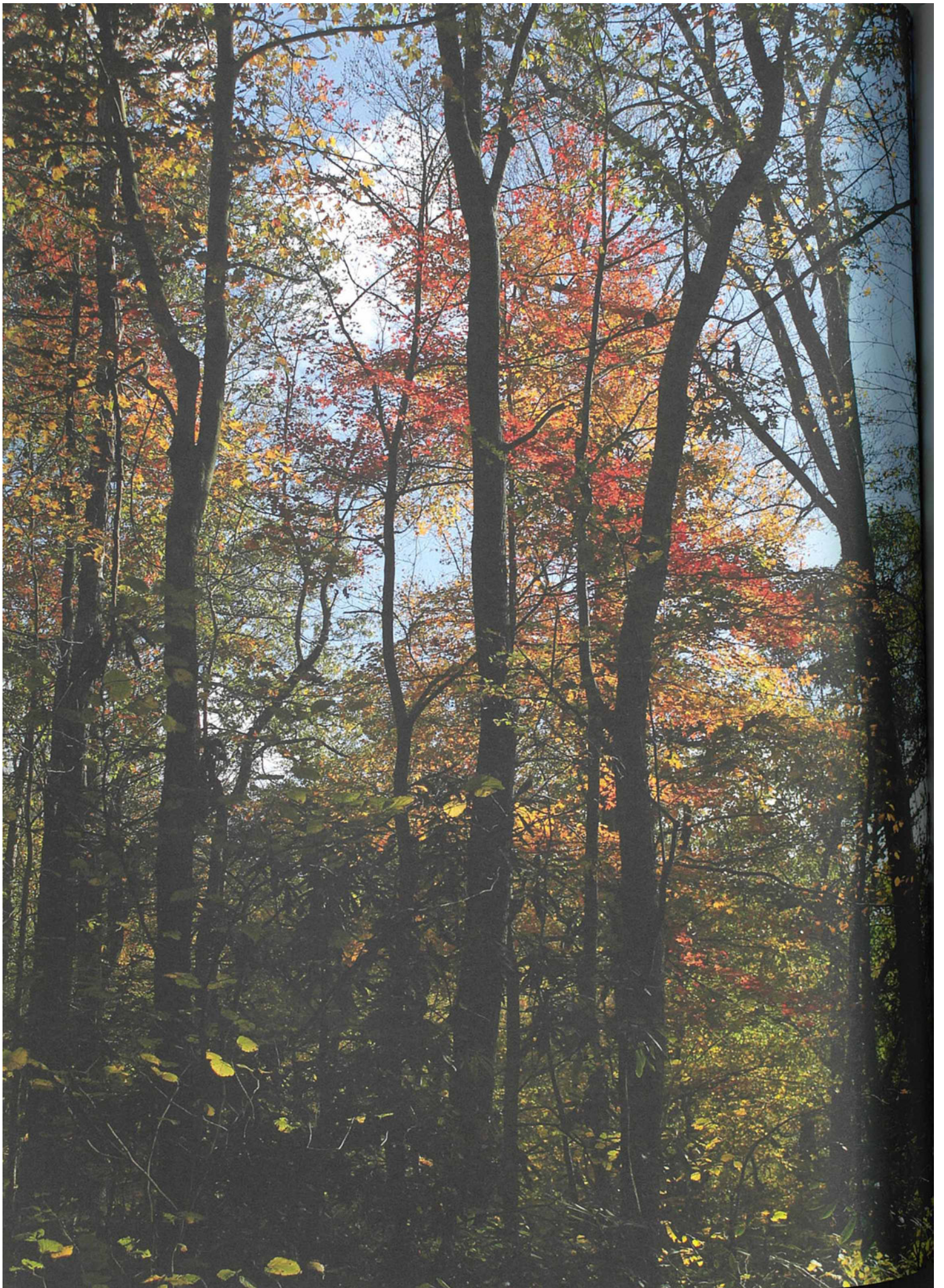


THE ART OF GARDENS, PLANTS AND FLOWERS

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A NATURAL HOUSE

Photographs and words – Miria Harris



Landscape designer MIRIA HARRIS has been fascinated with Fallingwater ever since she discovered a paperback on her father's bookshelves. Thirty years later she pays a pilgrimage to Frank Lloyd Wright's masterpiece where building and nature exist side by side

*'Have you the courage not simply to look
at the waterfalls but to live with them?'*

Frank Lloyd Wright

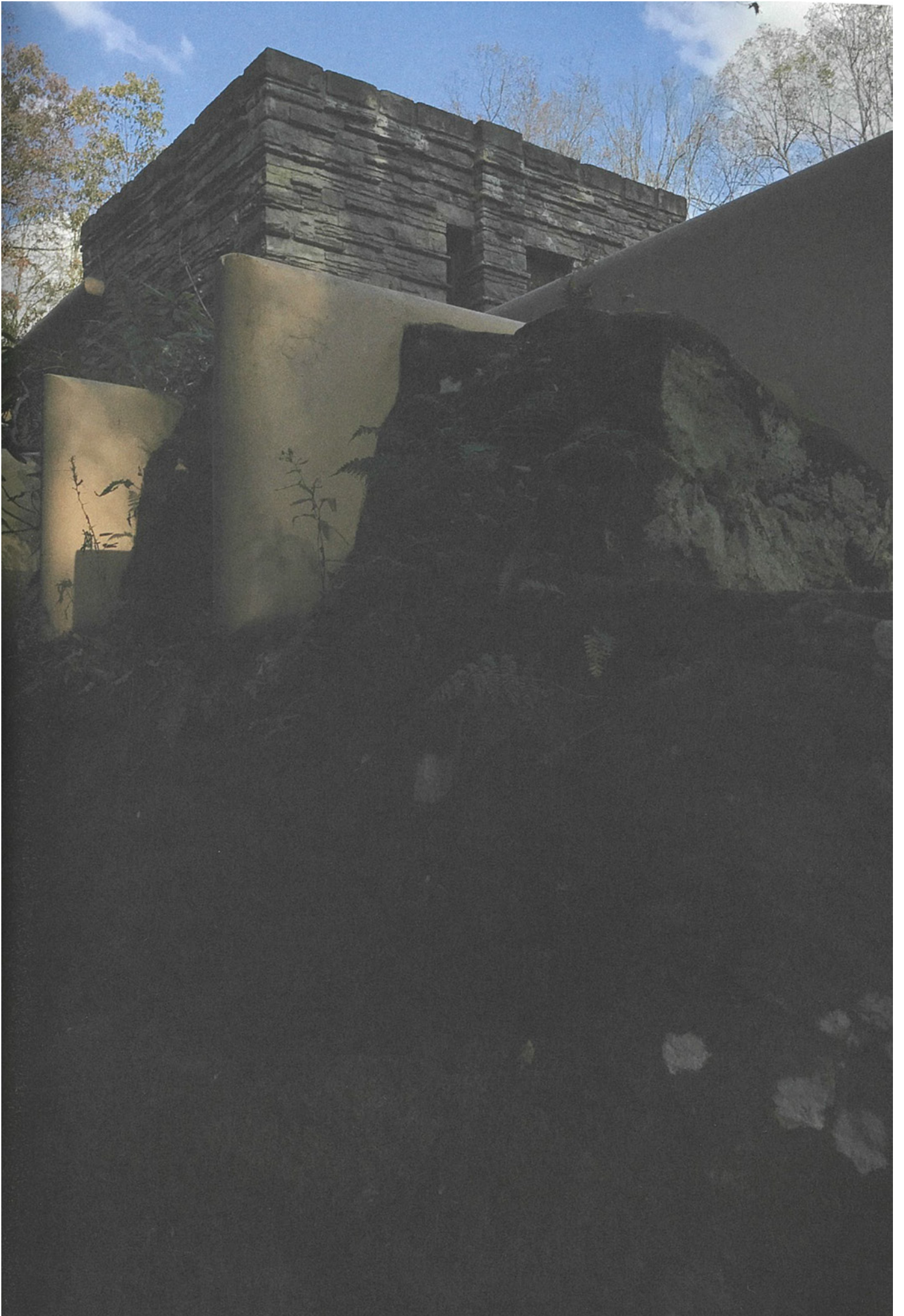
IT ALL STARTED WHEN I FOUND AN UNASSUMING PAPERBACK in my dad's study titled *The Natural House* – its front cover featuring a rock with a window in it. What was a Natural House? I picked up the copy, read it from cover to cover and so began my interest in modern architecture and its relationship with nature.

Thirty years later, rounding the corner of the downward track that winds its way through woodland rich with wild rhododendron, sweet birch, sugar maples and native dogwoods, a worry flits through my mind. Perhaps I've come all this way and it will just look like the photos. Of course, it wouldn't be a disappointment if it did, so much as a confirmation that Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic design, Fallingwater, is as beautiful in real life as it is on paper or on film. But I had come a long distance, and I wanted it to be more than a photo opportunity. I wanted it to mean more.

We had driven all the way from New York through the Pennsylvanian landscape awash with autumn colour – from neon pinks and flame reds to russet oranges and butter yellows. It had taken us two days to get there. The last stretch, the drive from Pittsburgh, seemed endless, taking us through the industrial hinterland of the steel city into the Laurel Highlands and one-horse towns populated with creepy houses made even more creepy by their early Halloween adornments. I thought there would be more of a fanfare when we got there. After all, this was one of America's most famous architectural landmarks, but a discreet, all-too-easily-missed sign signalled the turn-off.

We were visiting Fallingwater as part of a guided tour – the only way you can access the house and an attempt to make the experience feel less like a museum. There were 12 of us in the group; 12 disciples I thought to myself, Mr Wright would probably have liked that. I was at the front of the group obviously not wanting my first view to be obscured by someone else's camera lens. With perfect timing, the sky began to clear and the sun started to shine just as the house flickered into view. I had thought it would reveal itself instantly, a man-made object jutting out in stark opposition to the irregularity of the natural landscape, cutting across the vertical accents of the trees and hills with its horizontal cantilevered planes. But it didn't. Nature had the upper hand; Fallingwater was entirely humbled by its surroundings. It was cinematic the way the view gradually unfolded, like a camera lens pulling in and out of focus. It was clear that this was organic architecture, neither camouflaged by nor subsumed into, a landscape, but having an intelligent conversation with it.

I knew the story well. Edgar J. Kaufmann, a wealthy Pittsburgh department store owner, had commissioned the house as a weekend retreat. He had originally proposed a site downhill, on the banks of Bear Run stream, so as to enjoy the view of the water cascading down. So he was taken by surprise at the proposal (notoriously drafted three hours before a long-awaited design meeting) that the house should be built around the waterfall, not looking at it. I also knew that Wright was a master at manipulating landscapes, a 20th-century Capability Brown, who would plant acres of trees if it meant that the view from a house would be improved. As a landscape designer, I was looking to be inspired by the design of the house and its surroundings. I knew I wasn't coming to see a garden, but I was curious to see whether there was any formal landscaping or any noticeable man-made earthworks around the house. I wanted to try to understand what role, if any, landscape design had played at Fallingwater.



What struck me straight away, as we stood on the driveway at the entrance to the house, was the soundscape. The rustling of leaves, the gurgling of running water, the vibrations of wildlife, the air itself, quiet but not noiseless, was as much part of the landscape experience as any vista. In fact, I heard the water before I saw it, the sight of the waterfall surprisingly concealed in the approach to the house. Much has been made of the house being inserted into the landscape, but it was the sound of the landscape that was most unexpected and profound. Wright once described Fallingwater as being 'shaped to the music of the stream' and declared that in looking at the design you could hear the waterfall. Certainly, this synesthetic conceit is such that if it were possible to turn off the sound of nature, I believe that you might still hear it, just by looking.

Once inside the house, the sound of the landscape, a muted but ever-present soundtrack, was not the only thing that served to remind us all of Fallingwater's unique location. We were told how the stone floor was treated with varnish to make it appear like wet bedrock, how water constantly permeates the house in ways, both invited and not, and we took note of the boulders breaking through the floor. We were shown how the windows along an entire corner of the house opened up to offer a seamless view of the landscape beyond. We saw sections of the building where concrete and stone literally merged with the surroundings or adapted to them, and where part of the concrete roof trellis of the carport bends to accommodate a sugar maple tree that must only have been a sapling when the house was completed in 1937. We saw an area where the water run-off from the hillside enters the house and becomes a water feature – a miniature parody of the larger falls – and were told how the covered walkway up to the guest house becomes a man-made cascade when it rains heavily. The theatre of the architecture was such that moving through the interior of Fallingwater felt more akin to traversing a wooded landscape than a house, with shafts of light interrupting our passage and the influence of the landscape most definitely present at every turn.

So what of the role of plants at Fallingwater? I knew well of Wright's interest in plants, and that landscaping had always been an integral part of his practice. I began looking for transitional 'designed' internal or external spaces – green moments that bridged the built environment with the wild in actual rather than metaphorical ways. New planting, or cultivated garden areas in any formal sense, turned out to be minimal. A lone white Japanese wisteria planted by Wright to wind its way along a concrete pergola attached to the guest house, a container garden on one of the terraces, some planters visible when looking down onto the house (a 'green roof' before that term had even been coined) and an area of oriental lilies planted by the Kaufmanns outside the guest house were the only discernible additions to an otherwise wild surroundings. Within the house, the only garden interventions were simple and unostentatious; some white petunias here and there in custom planters and a few scented pelargoniums in a tiered window-box system that acted as a privacy screen in one of the bathrooms. These were all small green interventions though, and seemed quite minor compared to the more subtle manipulations of the internal environment that kept encouraging connections with the outside.

Kaufmann was once asked to sum up Fallingwater in a word – the word he chose was 'romance'. I've always known that the reason I became a landscape designer was because I like the unpredictability of working with plants and nature. When we make a garden, we are trying to create an atmosphere and a feeling, to embrace memory and to work in tandem with time. I like that landscape design isn't static, and that nature doesn't always do what you expect or want it to. It feels like there is *romance* in all of that. Fallingwater is however, anything but static, and that's what I think Kaufmann was trying to say. It moves and changes so much in tune with nature that it becomes part of it. The experience of the house is more than just architecture in harmony with the landscape. I think it's architecture as a kind of landscape design, a building that is very much a cultivated landscape – an interior garden of sorts, albeit one made of concrete, metal, glass and stone. It's very much a Natural House. •



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