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REAL ESTATE

Living In and Trying to Sell a Frank Lloyd Wright House

By JILL P. CAPUZZO AUG. 18, 2017



Frank Lloyd Wright houses may be architectural masterpieces but finding a buyer isn't always easy. Take a tour of Tirranna, on the market in New Canaan, Conn., for \$7.2 million. By LINDA JAQUEZ, GUGLIELMO MATTIOLI and KAITLYN MULLIN on August 18, 2017. Photo by Jane Beiles for The New York Times. Technology by Samsung.. [Watch in Times Video »](#)



In mid-September, [Frank Lloyd Wright](#) aficionados are expected by the busload in New Canaan, Conn., passing through a gate with the name “Tirranna” carved into the metalwork, to tour a 6,917-square-foot hemicycle house largely designed by America’s master architect.

They'll examine the mahogany cabinetry, admire the mitered glass windows that erase the barrier between inside and outside, snap photos of the swimming pool that cantilevers out over the Noroton River, and wander the 15-acre grounds.

Although [the house](#), one of Wright's last grand works, is for sale at \$7.2 million, it is unlikely that any of these visitors will be putting in offers. Rather, the visit to Tirranna will be a high point of the [Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy's](#) annual conference, which this year takes place in [New York City](#) and commemorates the 150th anniversary of the architect's birth, a milestone being marked by numerous special events around the country, including a major retrospective at the [Museum of Modern Art](#).

For Doug Milne, the Houlihan Lawrence associate broker who has the listing, inviting conference participants was in keeping with the support of the conservancy exhibited by Tirranna's last owners, who have died, and also a good opportunity for exposure.

"Who knows? There may be some well-heeled people who could afford it, or it might trigger something. A lot of it is word of mouth," said Mr. Milne, 65, noting that few people have seen the house since Ted and Vada Stanley bought it in 1992 and spent two and a half years restoring it.

For brokers like Mr. Milne, marketing these houses offers unique challenges, including the need to become a Wright expert, to devise a strategy for separating potential buyers from sightseers, and to develop a convincing argument for why someone should pay a premium to live in a house with small bedrooms and a snug kitchen, cinder-block walls, cement floors, narrow doorways, a carport instead of a garage and, quite likely, no air-conditioning.

For potential buyers, it means becoming the steward of a legacy, which includes instant membership in an exclusive, sometimes intrusive, society of Wright enthusiasts.



The living area at Tirranna has one of Wright's trademark hearths with hanging kettle.

Credit Jane Beiles for
The New York Times

“It’s like dealing with a group of theater critics. You’ve got to put on a good performance to generate accolades, and if you don’t, you’re going to hear from them,” said Paul Penfield, the owner of a Wright house in Ohio that was designed for his parents in 1953 and is now for sale.

In his lifetime, Wright designed about 450 buildings, 380 of which remain standing, according to Barbara Gordon, the executive director of the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, a nonprofit organization in Chicago.

While people are most familiar with his public projects like the [Guggenheim Museum](#), or his showcase houses like [Fallingwater](#) in western Pennsylvania, Wright designed more than 300 houses, most of which incorporated natural surroundings and materials into a design of clean, angular lines, with an emphasis on public spaces.

About 45 Wright properties have changed hands in the last five years, Ms. Gordon said. The process is not easy, with many going on and off the market over many years, as owners try to find buyers willing to assume the responsibility while appreciating what they are getting.

“These houses may not have the number of bedrooms or baths and the large, open kitchens that people demand now,” Ms. Gordon said, “but the livability comes with the warmth and light, and that special feel you have being in these homes.”

Here are the stories of five Wright houses that have recently changed hands or are now on the market.

A Tough Sale in an Obscure Location

Fred Taber knew he had his work cut out for him in late 2012 when he was approached to sell the three-bedroom Eppstein House in Galesburg, Mich. One of four Wright houses built for scientists from Upjohn in a 70-acre compound known as the Acres, the 2,250-square-foot house had been largely neglected for more than 15 years. The roof leaked, the boiler had rusted out, the 60-year-old wiring needed updating, and the pool surrounded by a chain-link fence was an eyesore.

Mr. Taber, a Realtor with Jaqua Realtors in Kalamazoo, spent two years encouraging the owner, who lived in Washington State, to get the 1953 house in livable shape before putting it on the market. The next task was arriving at an asking price. It made no sense to compare it to other 1950s ranch houses in Galesburg, where the current median listing price of a house is \$112,000, according to Realtor.com, or to Wright houses in Chicago or Madison, Wis.



Wright's 1953 Epstein House in Galesburg, Mich., is owned by Marika Broere and Tony Hillebrandt. It can be rented for a night on Airbnb. Credit Marika Broere

"This house is in a small community. Most people don't even know these houses are here," said Mr. Taber, 46, who finally settled on \$475,000.

Mr. Taber created a [blog](#) for the house, and held several open houses, which typically drew two audiences: locals "who would come through and say how horrible it was and that it looked like a prison," and Wright fans who would try "to show they knew more about the house than I did."

In July 2016, Marika Broere and Tony Hillebrandt of Ontario, Canada, bought the house for \$368,000. They have spent almost as much again rebuilding the roof, updating electricity and plumbing, re-staining the woodwork, double-glazing the windows, adding air-conditioning and removing the pool.

Self-described house "hobbyists" who have bought and renovated several properties in Canada, the couple became interested in Wright houses after moving to North America from the Netherlands 12 years ago, but never imagined they would own one. "Would you believe it if somebody told you that someday you'd own a Rembrandt?" asked Ms. Broere, 60. "For us, this is first an amazing piece of art, and second, it is a home."

This fall, they will begin [renting the house](#) on Airbnb for about \$310 a night.



The 1960 Cooke House in Virginia Beach sold last November for \$2.3 million. The 3,000-square-foot house has a 70-foot semicircular great room.

Overcoming a Recalcitrant Owner

Misty Brownell calls the sale of the Cooke House in Virginia Beach last November “the highlight of my 14-year career.” The 3,000-square-foot passive solar house, completed in 1960, included a 70-foot semicircular great room with a 40-foot sofa designed by the architect, a spa and sauna, and a bank of windows looking out on Crystal Lake. Her challenge was not the house, which was in great shape, or the location, also great, but the 91-year-old homeowner, who was ambivalent about letting it go.

The house had been on and off the market for about 15 years without receiving a single offer when Ms. Brownell, a Realtor with Atlantic Sotheby’s International Realty, received the listing in March 2016. The owner had a magnificent art collection, and Ms. Brownell spent several months convincing him to put it in storage. “With a house of this magnitude, you really needed to remove all that stuff to see the house. This was the work of art,” Ms. Brownell said.

Having succeeded in her request, Ms. Brownell created a [video](#) to demonstrate what living in a Wright house might be like. And she did extensive research on the architect, and the market for his houses, which prompted her to lower the asking price to [\\$2.75 million](#) from \$3.75 million.



Cooke House in Virginia Beach sold last November for \$2.3 million. The 3,000-square-foot house has a 70-foot semicircular great room.

She limited showings to those who could produce proof of available funds. “This was not a sightseeing event,” she said. Within eight days of putting the house on the market in August 2016, she had not one but two offers, both shy of the asking price.

“I said, ‘I don’t have anyone willing to pay \$2.75 million, or \$2.5 million, but I do have the only offer you’ve ever had in 15 years,’” Ms. Brownell said. The owner finally settled on a \$2.3 million offer, which, with concessions, ended up being \$2.2 million, but not before he learned the intentions of the prospective buyer, a local businessman who had been interested in the house for the last 30 years.

“It was no different than if he had a daughter, and the buyer wanted to take her hand in marriage,” Ms. Brownell said.

Committed to a Cause

Tirranna’s \$7.2 million asking price, if achieved, would set a record for the highest price ever paid for a Wright house. The current leader is the Storer House in [Los Angeles](#), which sold for [\\$6.8 million](#) in 2015. But the [Meier House](#), a 1917 Prairie design in Iowa, sold for \$125,000 in 2013.



A sitting area at Tirrana has the original gold leaf, red floors and Wright built-ins. Credit Jane Beiles for The New York Times

Also known as the Rayward House for its original owners, who commissioned the first and main phase, completed in 1956, it is set in a wooded glen. With seven bedrooms and eight bathrooms, the house is being sold by a [foundation](#) established by the owners, [Ted Stanley](#), who died in 2016 and his wife, Vada, who died in 2013. Mr. Stanley was a founder of the Danbury Mint, a [Connecticut](#) collectibles manufacturing company now called [MBI](#).



The interior courtyard of Tirrana, which has seven bedrooms and is set on 15 acres. Credit Jane Beiles for The New York Times

When their son Jonathan was told he had a bipolar disorder after a psychological breakdown in 1988, the couple decided to dedicate their fortune to mental health research. They donated more than \$800 million to the [Broad Institute](#), a biomedical research cooperative in Cambridge, Mass., which will also receive the proceeds from the sale of TIRRanna. Jonathan Stanley said he had no qualms about his would-be inheritance going to fund research.

“How can you complain about a guy who spent 2 percent of the money he made in his life and gave the rest to charity?” asked Mr. Stanley, 51, a board member of the Treatment Advocacy Center in Arlington, Va. “My dad loved me a lot, and what happened to me deeply affected him and gave him a cause for his charity.”

The house went on the market for \$8 million in January, drawing attention from prospective buyers in New York, Los Angeles, Australia, Saudi Arabia and London, said Mr. Milne, who reduced the asking price in May. The median asking price for houses in this New York City suburb is currently \$1.794 million, according to [Realtor.com](#).



You can spend a night at Wright’s Penfield House in Willoughby Hills, Ohio, or buy it for \$1.3 million. It has been in the same family since the 1950s. Credit Eric Hanson

Letting Go of a Family Legacy

Paul Penfield remembers Wright’s long silver hair and the coat he wore draped over his shoulders when he met with his parents in 1957 to discuss designing his second house for them in Willoughby Hills, Ohio. That house was never built, but what is now called Penfield House, built in 1955, along with the blueprints for the second, a farmhouse and

30 acres, has just been listed for sale with Howard Hanna Real Estate for [\\$1.3 million](#). It had been put on the market for \$1.7 million about three years ago.

“My wife, Donna, and I are getting ready to retire, and my children have busy careers of their own and they don’t want to manage the property,” said Mr. Penfield, 72.

Mr. Penfield was drawn back to Penfield House in 1983 after his mother died and he inherited the property.

He undertook a five-year restoration project that was completed in 2004, at which time the Penfields, who live in another midcentury modern house nearby, began renting out the [three-bedroom house](#) for \$275 to \$300 a night. The 1,730-square-foot house, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is booked through early November.



The Sweeton house in Cherry Hill, N.J., completed in 1950, has been the home of Dan Nichols and Christine Denario since 2008. CreditTony Cenicola/The New York Times

Channeling Wright

Two out of three of the bedrooms in Dan Nichols’s 1,500-square-foot Wright house in Cherry Hill, N.J., have been out of commission since he jackhammered the floors to get at the radiant heating pipes that recently sprang a leak. “We’ve got this really cool heating system, but like everything with a 66-year-old house, eventually they need repair,” said Mr. Nichols, 51.

This is just one of the many projects Mr. Nichols, an architect with Ragan Design Group in Medford, N.J., has taken on since purchasing the Sweeton House in 2008 for \$350,000. Completed in 1951, the house cost the Sweeton family \$24,000 to build, plus a \$1,500 commission to Wright.

The [Sweetons](#) had requested something to fit their “unpretentious lifestyle,” according to a letter from J. A. Sweeton to Mr. Wright. The same could be said of its current owners.

“My wife and I are very solidly middle class,” said Mr. Nichols, whose wife, Christine Denario, is a mental health clinician and a yoga instructor. “Some can throw money at the work and then move on. We’ve had to pay as we go, setting our priorities and working on it incrementally.”

Tucked behind an office building off a busy highway, the house will likely never be a tourist destination. “Considering where it is, it has to survive as a house. And has to be desirable for the next owners to live in,” Mr. Nichols said.

With that goal in mind, Mr. Nichols has worked diligently to make the house more livable, adding a second bathroom behind a folded corner door, building a sliding library ladder to access the high upper cabinets in the kitchen, and carving out space for a washer-dryer and a computer station.

“It’s like a puzzle for an architect. I think, ‘If Wright were redoing this kitchen, what would he do?’” said Mr. Nichols, who has pored over the correspondence between the Sweetons and Wright that he inherited with the house.

“The house is just plain old fun to live in,” he said. “The way the light plays on it. The way the moonlight shines in. The blur between inside and out. It’s really neat.”