

RENOVATING FRANK LLOYD (W)RIGHT

IT TOOK MORE THAN SLAVISH HISTORICISM TO UPDATE A PHOENIX MASTERPIECE.

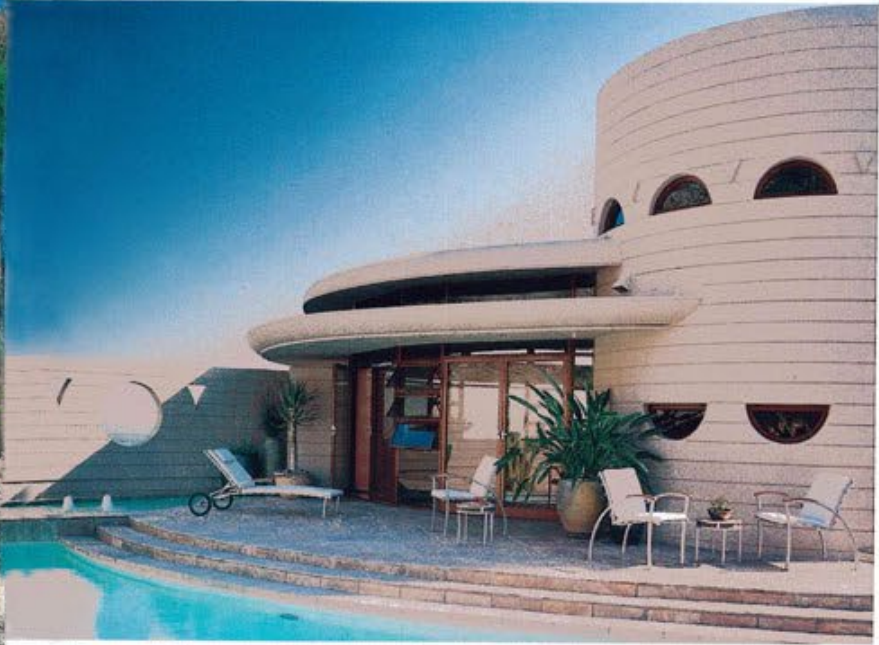
When Linda Melton bought this Frank Lloyd Wright house, its floors were covered in charreuse shag; its woodwork was speckled with cigarette burns; its exterior was a shade of orange so unsubtle, "you could see it from the airport 12 miles away." Three years later, it is an astonishingly skillful composition, a homage in the key of Wright. But Melton didn't get the house that way

by asking herself "What would *he* have done?" Instead, she turned to Dallas designer Mil Bodron for a '90s interior inspired by Wright. Bodron and Melton believed that bringing the house back to life meant not only restoring but rethinking it—and they seem to have been right.

Photographs by Tim Street-Porter.
Written by Fred A. Bernstein.

The living room is now a conversation to which Wright—and his contemporaries—have been invited.





The kitchen (below) is on the ground floor of the cylinder at left. The curved design puts a surprising amount of workspace within reach. Melton recreated Wright's cabinets but replaced the tile countertops with steel.

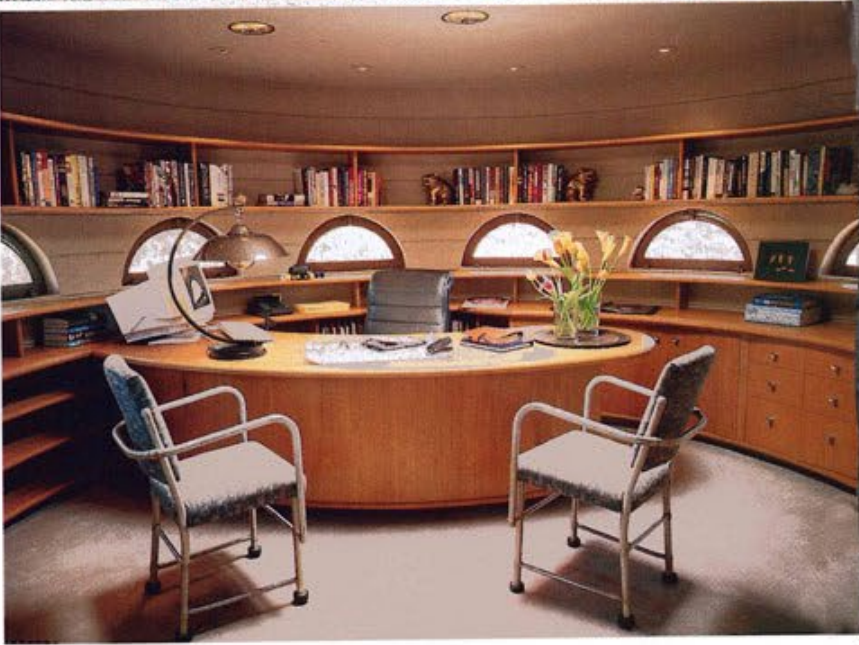
curls and swirls for satisfaction. One author described the house as a "gentle bird momentarily poised on a rock outcropping." Like Wright's most famous house, Pennsylvania's Fallingwater, Melton's dwelling treads lightly on its site. Amazingly, its supple forms are made entirely of rectangular concrete blocks. In Wright's hands, the blocks form a sculpture that is organic, nurturing and womblike.

Inside, Wright's architectural pyrotechnics aren't some vain geometric exercise, but form in the service of function. The circles, Bodron observes, "create a feeling of safety but at the same time draw the eye from one point to another. There's harmony and energy." What's more, Wright the alchemist spun circles (notoriously difficult to carve into usable rooms) into spaces people *want* to be in.

It is easy to understand why Melton was determined to rescue the building. The last house Wright designed before he died in 1959, it is also one of his most artful. One look at the floor plan (see computer-generated version on page 177) demonstrates that the structure's strengths aren't accidental. "On paper you can see how the center of the living room intersects the center of the fireplace, and the fireplace the kitchen, and the kitchen the courtyard," Bodron explains. "It's a carefully thought-out composition—not a bunch of arbitrarily placed circles."

Viewed from outside, Wright's circles are at once historical (echoing Native American kivas) and futuristic (is this the Jetsons' desert hide-away?); the house both mimics the mountains and stands aloof, needing nothing but its own

In Melton's office (right), Wright's desk and cabinets define a cozy perch. Bodron added the swoopy Fortuny lamp and Warren McArthur chairs (their aluminum, he says, "is a foil to the wood and copper").





Before moving to Phoenix, Melton raised two daughters in Monroe, Louisiana, where Bodron's father was the girls' pediatrician. She first saw the Wright house in a book decades ago and dreamed that someday she would own it. When she learned that it was on the market—after years of being abused by renters—she took to its rescue like a child saving a stray puppy. But knowing a house should be saved is not the same as knowing how to save it. For one thing,

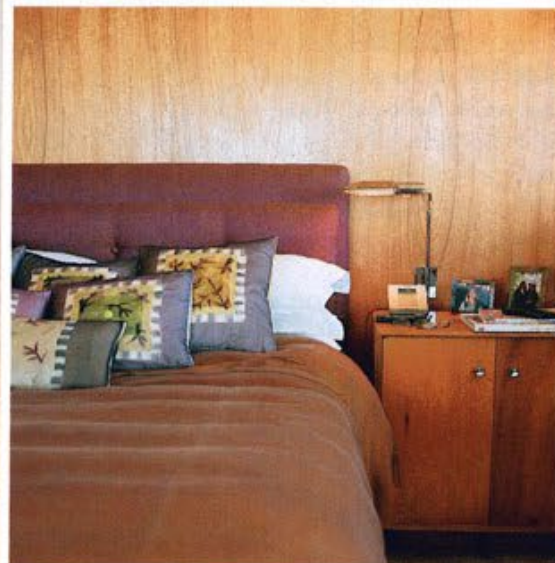
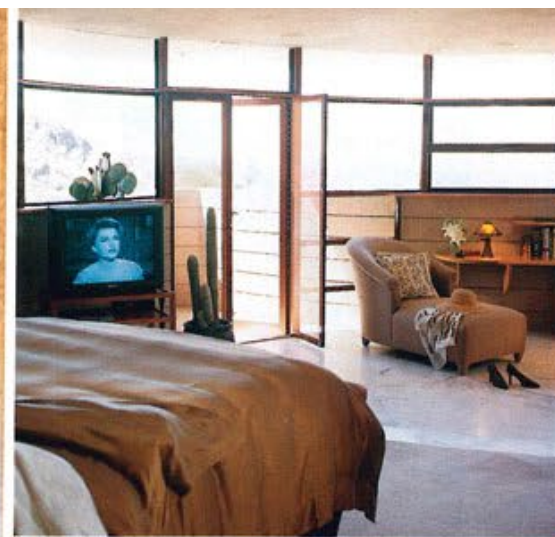
Wright's furnishings (his usual built-ins, plus a few tables) were meager. If she was going to live in the house, Melton was going to have to find ways to make the rooms a lot more comfortable—without diminishing the impact of Wright's vision.

The natural step was to turn to Taliesin West (Wright's Phoenix studio, still run by his disciples).

Melton tried working with the firm, but she found herself drawn to colors (purple) and fabrics that were not part of Wright's vocabulary. Furthermore, she was attracted by furniture designed not by Wright but by his contemporaries and successors. Melton had no intention of creating a shrine; instead, she was looking for a stylish aerie, which is why the renovation is so successful. Had she set out to create a Wright museum, Melton and Bodron—who specializes in wresting livable interiors from architecturally distinguished houses—wouldn't have had to work so hard at burnishing those qualities that make Wright's building an extraordinary place to live.

"I think she likes the house because it's full of colors she looks good in," says designer Bodron, pictured with his redheaded client Melton (flanked by her daughters, Dee Dee and Julie). In the foyer (top), '50s American pottery.



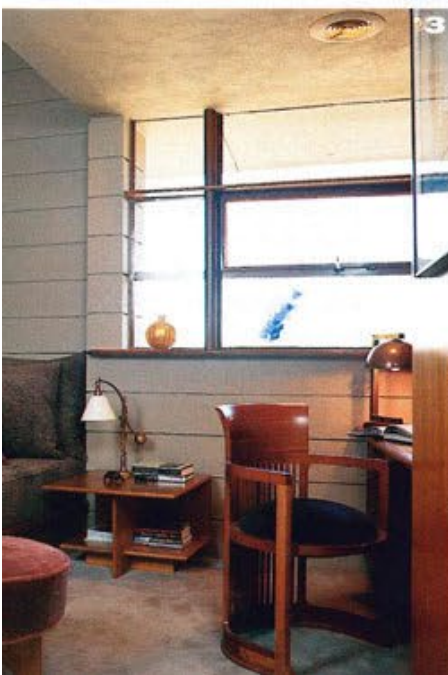


By the time Bodron got involved, Melton had begun bringing the house's surfaces to life. Miles of mahogany had been refinished. The metal trim was being coated with a coppery enamel. Those once-orange walls had been repainted a dusky, rosy desert hue of preternatural softness. And most dramatically, much of the 2,500 square feet of floor, once badly cracked concrete, was being covered in copper-colored slate. (No absentee renovator, Melton was on-site every day, washing each square paver before handing it to the mason.) Together, the new colors and textures were as harmonious as the surrounding mountains and the stirring Arizona sunsets.

Bodron worked to leaven Wright's vision with furnishings that "accommodate the human spirit and the human scale." For balance, he added aluminum chairs to a room with lots of copper, a handcrafted bronze drum to a furniture grouping with too many hard edges, a pale cut-pile rug to a hallway swathed in wood.

That not all of the pieces were Wright's was, to Bodron, a bonus: Alongside other 20th-century greats, Wright's genius would come into focus. Well aware of Melton's love of rich colors and things that sparkle, Bodron helped her select lush fabrics, like the purple velvet on the living-room banquette. When it was all in place, the building seemed to glow from within. Says Melton, "I've made it a livable house, and I don't care who criticizes me."

But does she care who praises her? Her selfishness—if that's what it is—has produced a grand gift to anyone who doesn't think that Frank Lloyd Wright's greatness should be a closed book. The fire-haired lady is the keeper of the flame.



Details **1** Wright's oversized hearth—a stunning use of concrete blocks—sets the concentric circle theme that ripples through the building. It is flanked by a set of Wright's Taliesin chairs (cherry wood "folded" like origami), plus an anthropomorphic '50s tool set and a '40s Fontana Arte torchère from a Paris apartment. Bodron had the carpets custom-woven to "avoid funky seams." **2** "Wright didn't have fluffy pillows," says Bodron, who helped Melton correct that oversight. Their sophisticated collection includes many covered in fragments of antique obis (Japanese kimono sashes). **3** Using materials rich in color and texture, Bodron turned a tiny bedroom into a stateroom that envelops rather than crowds. The stool and small table were designed by Wright for the house; the "barrel chair" is an earlier Wright design, available from Cassina. **4** The four elements of Wright's building—wood, metal, glass and concrete block—meet in Mondrianesque juxtapositions. Melton spent months finding the right color for the metal. After considering and rejecting a pinkish hue, she settled on an automotive spray paint made for a '63 Chevy. With sure-handed subtlety, Melton enriched both the interiors and exteriors by covering the windows in custom-made copper screens. **5** When Melton bought the house, she says, "It was crying to be opened up." Where a lawn had been, Melton installed a pool based on Wright's design; handmade mother-of-pearl tiles sparkle underwater. For paving, Melton used more of the living room's slate, forging a strong connection between indoors and out. Bodron furnished the patio like a second living room. Half-moon cutouts in the paving contain plants that bring the desert into the architectural composition. The peekaboo wall hides a circular carport. **MH** See Resources, last pages.

