

◀ American modern pitchers  
Masca

# The Wright house

**Interiors** | Manitoga, the historic home of designer

Russel Wright, is an inspiration in how to fuse the natural and the man-made. *By Jennifer Krichels*

One evening in June, architects and designers converged at New York's One World Trade Center to celebrate a new book about skyscrapers. Russel Wright, the mid-20th-century designer known for his brightly coloured table settings, might have seemed a quaint topic of conversation compared with the grand surroundings, on the 64th floor of the tallest building in the western hemisphere. But one artist in attendance, Stephen Talasnik, had recently completed a sculpture installation in the grounds of Manitoga, Wright's country home in Garrison, New York. And an architect at the party, Celia Imrey,

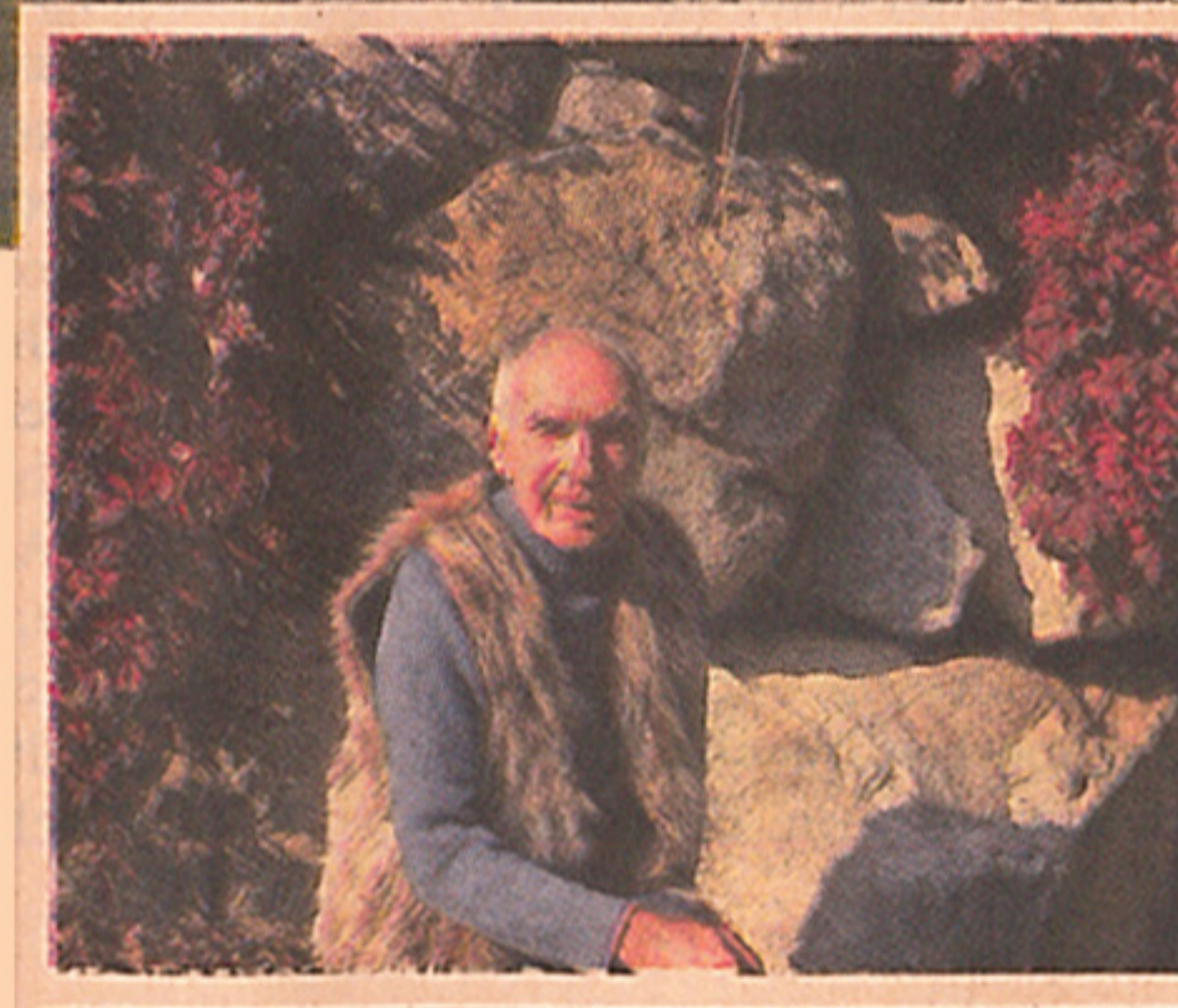
recently joined the historic landmark's board of directors, bringing her expertise in exhibit design from projects including the Louvre's Lens satellite in France. Manitoga is a small property with increasing support from the international design community.

Wright has a loyal following of collectors and cognoscenti — he was once the most famous designer in the US thanks to his reasonably priced furniture and tabletop designs, which caused stampedes in department stores in the 1940s. Often, though, collectors of Wright's ceramic platters and melamine soup bowls are unaware of the home he worked on for decades.

"There are very few people who have

the complete picture of the man and his life's work at the site he developed over 34 years," says Allison Cross, who became Manitoga's executive director in 2013 after working with institutions including Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. Wright's is a rich history, whose layers are tied by a design pedagogy he wanted to share with anyone who visited his house.

The non-profit organisation charged with the property's care has worked to raise Manitoga's profile. Creating more of a connection between the designer's highly collectable work and his private home life could be a saving grace. The property suffers from stormwater issues — there have been floods at the



Top: Manitoga's dining area  
Tara Wing

Above: Russel Wright in a wolfskin jacket  
Manitoga Archives

▶ Residential tableware  
Masca

site, an unintended consequence of Wright's idealistic landscaping scheme that nested the house in the side of a rock face. The 75-acre plot was desolate when he and wife Mary — his business partner and a designer — bought it in 1942. It had been a quarry, and the deforested land was strewn with industrial waste. But Wright saw the potential to shape the property, which he did, stone by stone. After Mary's death in 1952, Wright designed the house as a retreat for himself and his daughter, and an example of the modern living style he and Mary espoused.

"We look forward to the day when living room, dining room, and kitchen will break through the walls that arbitrarily divide them, and become simply friendly areas of one large, gracious, and beautiful

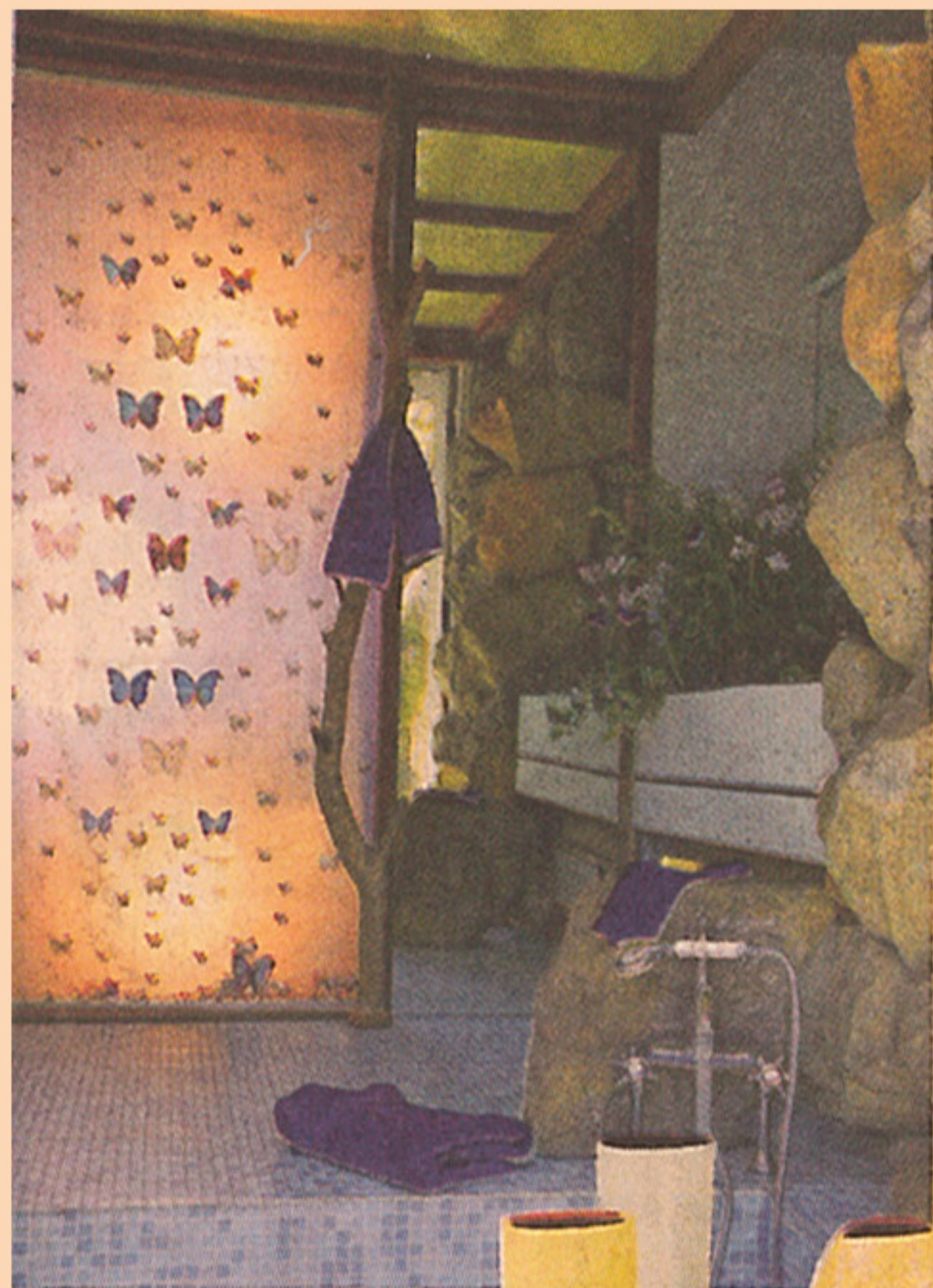
room," they wrote in their 1950 book *Guide to Easier Living*.

The philosophy became a manifesto of a design-for-all approach to American houses — one still championed by today's lifestyle celebrities. Dishwashers were still rare in the 1950s, so the Wrights taught housekeeping as a science. Chores could be simplified when broken into easy-to-manage steps: one chapter describes how to serve dinner as a buffet, out of a single casserole dish, allowing guests to fill their own plates and even help with the dishes. (In one of many strokes of merchandising

genius, they added that the buffet would work best with sturdy, stackable ceramic plates like Wright's.) Martha Stewart, the domestic doyenne, has been vocal about the inspiration she took from the designer early in her career. In his heyday, everyone knew Wright's name,







▲ Ann Wright's bathroom  
Tara Wing



▲ Russel Wright's studio  
Manitoga Archives



▶ The guest room  
Tara Wing

▶ Collection of 15 vessels  
Wright, Chicago



just as they knew the brand name Betty Crocker.

Like Stewart's ambitious housekeeping goals, Wright's house is at once inspiring and, at times, less than easy. Outdoor spaces conjure scenes of summer parties — the kind that would have inspired isolated American suburbanites to throw a buffet soirée — but we also know anyone at the home in early spring was enlisted to switch winter linens, cushions and even cabinet doors to the summer styles Wright assigned with meticulous care. Guests from the Rockefeller and Vanderbilt families might have found novelty in washing their own dishes. However, cleaning the stone floors and unfinished wood surfaces could have been difficult. Wright argued that massive stones dividing the living and dining areas must appear naturally stacked, not mortared, but allegedly ceded the point when a portion of the wall fell, nearly hitting a child.

But Dragon Rock, as Wright's daughter Ann named the house, is not a prototype of how the rest of us should live. It was, and still is, a private place never meant for the spotlight as the Glass



▲ Panoramas of the site, in the 1950s, and in 2012 — Rob Penner Photography

House or Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater are. The designer knew most of his well-heeled guests, not to mention middle-class homeowners of the time, would not want to live with birch bark-veneered doors or a rough-hewn granite staircase. Instead, he wished it to be an inspiration, showing an easier, more carefree life than Americans had ever known.

The house is a decades-old answer to a current question: how are we to merge the man-made with the natural? As today's residences adopt more technology, and designers use computers to aid their work, the question is as important now as it was in Wright's era. Homeowners seek signs of nature and evidence of the human hand in their lives as other areas of life become digitised, codified.

At Manitoga, Wright shows us industry need not contradict nature. He worked with engineers, and the latest ceramics and plastics, to improve how a butter dish or platter felt when held and used. In the same way, he used Manitoga as a laboratory for experiments in surface, material and form. Entering the

designer's studio is a tactile experience from the first touch of a doorknob made of a palm-sized stone. Sunlight is diffused in unexpected ways, first through chainmail curtains that create a patterned shadow on the wooden sill, then through room-dividing acrylic panels that sandwich maidenhair ferns and Queen Anne's lace found in the grounds. In a stonewalled bath, the same effect is achieved with butterfly wings brought back from Taiwan and Brazil (the topic of an ongoing conservation conundrum). An insulation scrap from Dow Chemical or lemon-shaped cardboard tube slices set in acrylic become mesmerising biomorphic patterns. Some measures seem almost temporary, like a diffuser of burlap fabric pinned between ceiling joists to filter light from the fluorescent tubes over Wright's Formica desk-top. Connections to the woods are made whenever possible.

▶ Spun aluminium cocktail set — Masca



▲ American Modern tableware — Masca

ble, through large windows and tree trunks stripped of bark and brought indoors as support columns. White pine needles are pressed into the green plaster of the studio ceiling to echo trees overhead, and hemlock needles embedded into a wall create a continuous surface of botanic texture as the eye passes from indoors to out. Some of the more experimental surfaces deteriorated even before Wright's death in 1976, but he is said to have enjoyed these failures as much as the successes.

"Here, he lived out the idea of the process of design. This was his testing ground," says Cross, whose directorship has brought new interest in the property from designers. "It's not finished, and it will never be finished. It's an ongoing design problem to explore."

Former Manitoga board member James Zemaitis, curator of decorative arts at Indianapolis Museum of Art, is optimistic the ageing property has great potential to influence visitors. "The populism of Russel Wright during his heyday still translates well today," he says.

Zemaitis, who previously worked in Sotheby's 20th-century design department, points out that though Wright's designs fail to fetch high prices at auction (outside of some very rare pieces), an auctioneer's lament is a novice collector's (or even a museum curator's) gain. Vintage Wright pieces can be bought on eBay for just £50.

The availability of these classic modern pieces could make it possible for Manitoga to launch satellite shows in cities such as New York that would bolster restoration work at Dragon Rock. With the Manitoga foundation set to receive two major collections of Wright's commercial designs in the near future, it is a plan that could bring new life to his most private work.

