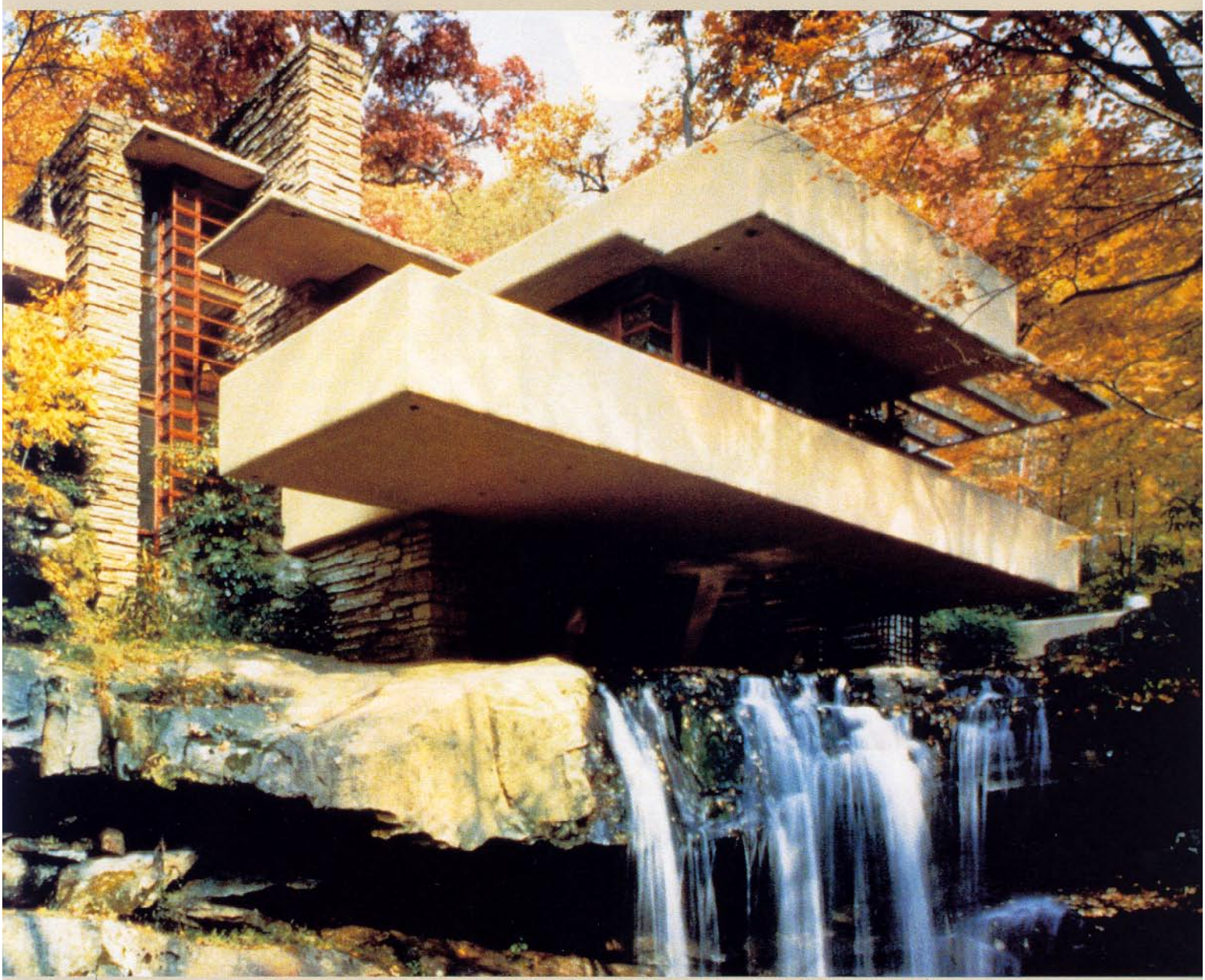
WE KNOW THEY ARE ARCHITECTURAL MASTERPIECES, BUT HOW DO FIVE GREAT HOUSES STACK UP TO THE EYES OF FENG SHUI MASTER ALEX STARK?

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

cosmic appraisal



cosmic appraisal

COURTESY OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA CONSERVANCY

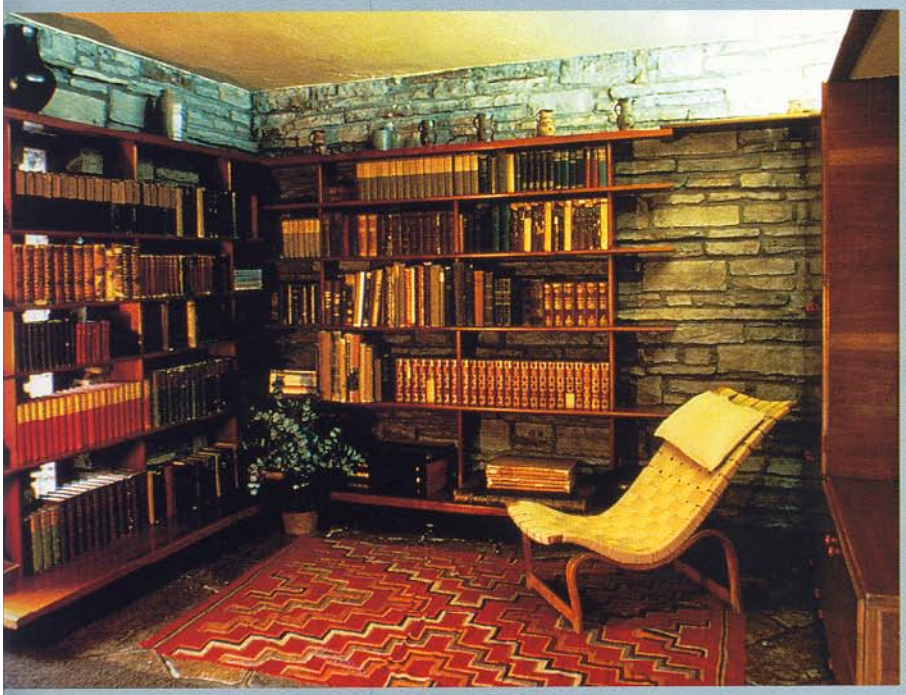
THE TERM FENG SHUI might be more commonly associated today with wind chimes than good design, but this ancient Chinese art of manipulating the energies in our homes and offices to achieve prosperity is, in fact, very much about design and placement. When Chinese farmers were first settling the land, their fortunes were inextricably linked to the forces of nature. Positioning their home in an advantageous site was the key to their survival; even today individuals and businesses in China don't make a move without carefully considering the feng shui implications. If a feng shui master says a poorly positioned toilet is flushing away wealth, changes are made regardless of cost.

With feng shui ideology beginning to filter into Western culture, *I.D.* asked Alex Stark, a Yale-trained architect and feng shui consultant in New York City, to assess five iconic houses of 20th-century architecture by Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Philip Johnson and Frank Gehry. Did these architects, who have been so influential on the material world, also get it right on a cosmic level?

Stark explains that a feng shui analysis is a bit like an MRI: You slice it many different ways to get a clear picture. The first portent of a successful house is a firm balance between the earth as the foundation and the sky as the fundamental power source. How an architect gestures toward each is key. Feng shui also examines the implications of orientation—not only how to maximize sunlight and control dampness, but also how subtler forms of energy can be brought in from the eight points of the compass. The energy of thunder comes from the east, for instance, and is associated with ancestry, new beginnings and entrepreneurship.

Internally, eight areas of the house relate to the central aspects of life: fame, marriage, children, helpful people, career, knowledge, family and wealth. These areas are determined by plotting the ba-gua, an octagonal shape, from the entryway of a structure. Feng shui masters also measure the balance of yin and yang in a space—yin being passive energy and yang being active. If you want long-term prosperity, Stark says, the optimal ratio is three parts yang to two parts yin.

Here's Stark's analysis of how these houses measure up.

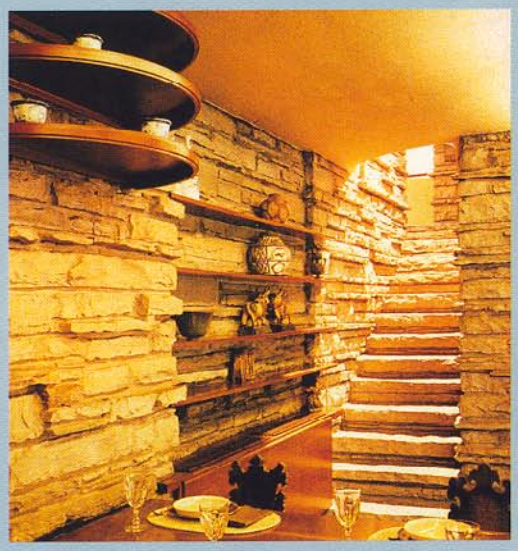


Fallingwater: *In 1935, Frank Lloyd Wright was commissioned by the Kaufmann family to build a country house, which he cantilevered directly over Bear Run waterfall outside of Pittsburgh. Fallingwater is now cared for by the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy.*

Wright clearly had an intuitive sense of the energies of nature, which are integral to feng shui. He wasn't exposed to it as a practice, but feng shui is inherent in all oriental art and architecture, which he studied. For Fallingwater, Wright actually anchored the house to a boulder, making a very deep connection to the earth. Also, the house's central structural element is a vertical one that aims toward sky. He cantilevered these beautiful terraces, allowing the home's inhabitants to experience nature.

Water is the fundamental metaphor of this structure. Water is amorphous, and Wright echoed the movement of water in the shifting planes of the house. In feng shui, water is one of the ways to attract prosperity—by having water approach the house from the left and then turn away from it and disappear underground. This is exactly what you perceive from this house. So Wright fulfilled a fundamental prerequisite for success.

Overall, the house has a very beautiful balance of yin and yang. Wright was short, so he intentionally brought the height of the ceilings down, creating a yin environment that's balanced by the brightness of the window openings. Everywhere in the house Wright worked yin-yang, both on the orthogonal axis and the diagonal. On the ground floor, the vertical solid element of the hearth is positioned diagonally across the room from the open translucent element of the



Feng shui guru Alex Stark praises the well-balanced environment in Fallingwater. By lowering the ceilings (see E. Kaufman Jr.'s study above), Wright introduces a strong yin element. However, the many large windows throughout the house balance this yin with powerful yang forces (see living room/study on opposite page). According to the ba-gua principle, Fallingwater was further enhanced by Wright's placement of the dining room (above right) in the area of Joyfulness.

Ba-Gua

Eight areas of a house relate to eight central aspects of life: career, knowledge, family, wealth, fame/rank, marriage, children and helpful people. By plotting the ba-gua from the entryway of a home, feng shui experts can analyze if the residents are encouraging or hindering these areas of life.

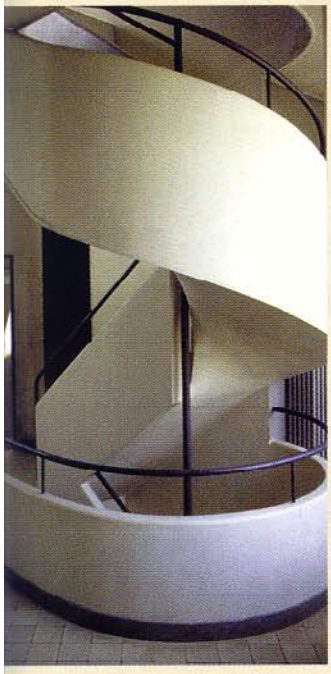
skylight and the staircase leading down to a wading pool below the house. On the other diagonal, Wright balanced the expansiveness of the back terrace with the enclosure of the entry.

In terms of the directions, ideally you want a house to face south, which represents Heaven, with a backing slope behind you. Wright placed Fallingwater in precisely the position we would have advised.

Plotting the ba-gua from the entrance: The Fire position, which controls fame, is always at the center of the far wall—and that's where Wright put the fireplace. Joyfulness is to the right; that's where the dining area is. Wright positioned the kitchen in Earth—the perfect place for it. He's got a flying terrace in Wind—that's great for prosperity. Fallingwater is brilliant from a feng shui perspective. It couldn't have been done better.

IMAGES COURTESY OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA CONSERVANCY

Perched atop slender columns that disconnect it from the earth, Villa Savoye is a feng shui faux pas. While the living room (below, right) is well-placed, Le Corbusier's arrangement of ramps and staircases foretold the financial ruin of the original residents.



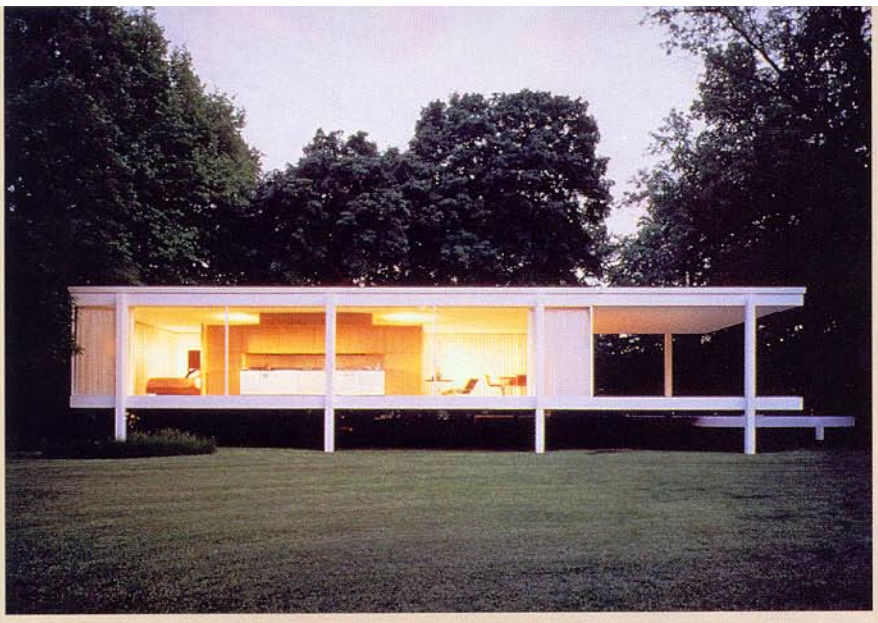
Villa Savoye: *Le Corbusier built Villa Savoye in 1930 as a weekend home outside of Paris for the Savoye family. Later used as a barn by the widowed and bankrupt Madame Savoye, the house was saved from demolition and recently restored by France's Ministry of Culture.*

Villa Savoye has big problems. First of all, Corbusier raised the house high off the ground on slender columns, disconnecting it from the earth. There's an overemphasis on the sky and denial of the earth, or the feminine aspect, creating excess yang. Not only did Corbusier yank the house off the ground, but directly underneath it he made a port for cars, the energies of which are incompatible with human life. From a feng shui perspective, that nixes the house right off. But Corbusier goes further. A ramp leading from the carport up to the living level perforates the house at its core. Vertical connectors like staircases need to be placed anywhere but the center, which corresponds to the soul, the most important position in the house. The ramp also aims straight at the main door, which is a recipe for financial ruin.

The positive aspects of the house have to do with its orientation. Corbusier placed the kitchen in the west, which isn't bad. He put the bedrooms on the north and northeast sides, which is fine. He opened up the living room to the light of the south.

Where he runs into trouble again is in the internal distribution of space. If you plot the ba-gua from the entrance of the house, the position of Fame is in a bedroom, which puts a lot of pressure on the person living there. But the real mistake is the indentation he designed at the entry, which creates a problem for partnerships. Whomever this house attracts is going to have trouble connecting with their associates. This, in fact, is exactly what happened: The prosperity of the family went down the tubes, and Madame Savoye eventually used it as a haybarn, which is one of the reasons why it was in ruin for so many years.

JEFFREY HOWE, BOSTON COLLEGE



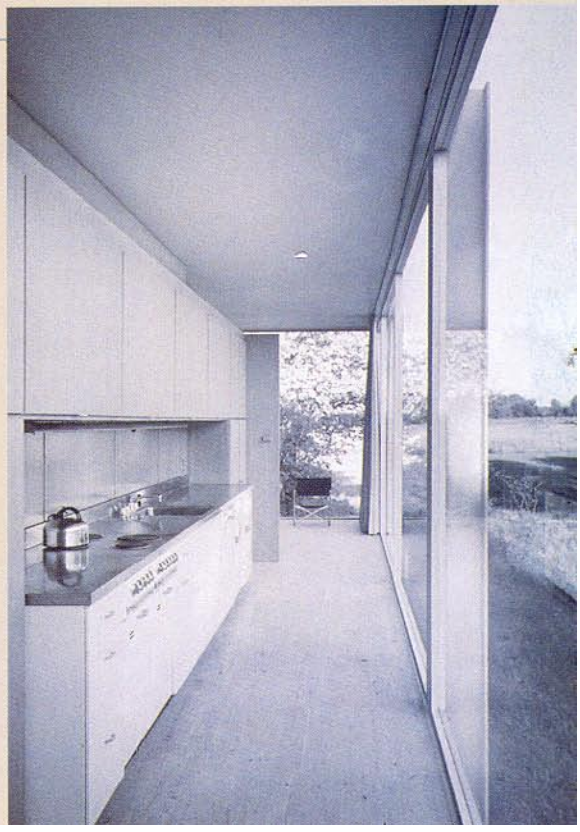
More of an observation platform for nature than a home, the Farnsworth House fails the feng shui test on many levels. The lack of curtains in the living room (above) allows all types of energy—good and bad—into the room. Also, while the kitchen's placement is good (right), it forces residents to turn their backs on a wide expanse, thereby denying their ancestry.

Farnsworth House: *Commissioned by Edith Farnsworth to build a wooded retreat outside of Chicago, Mies van der Rohe completed this house of glass walls in 1951. It was later owned by Peter Palumbo, who restored the house after a flood destroyed its contents in 1996. The Farnsworth House is now open to the public.*

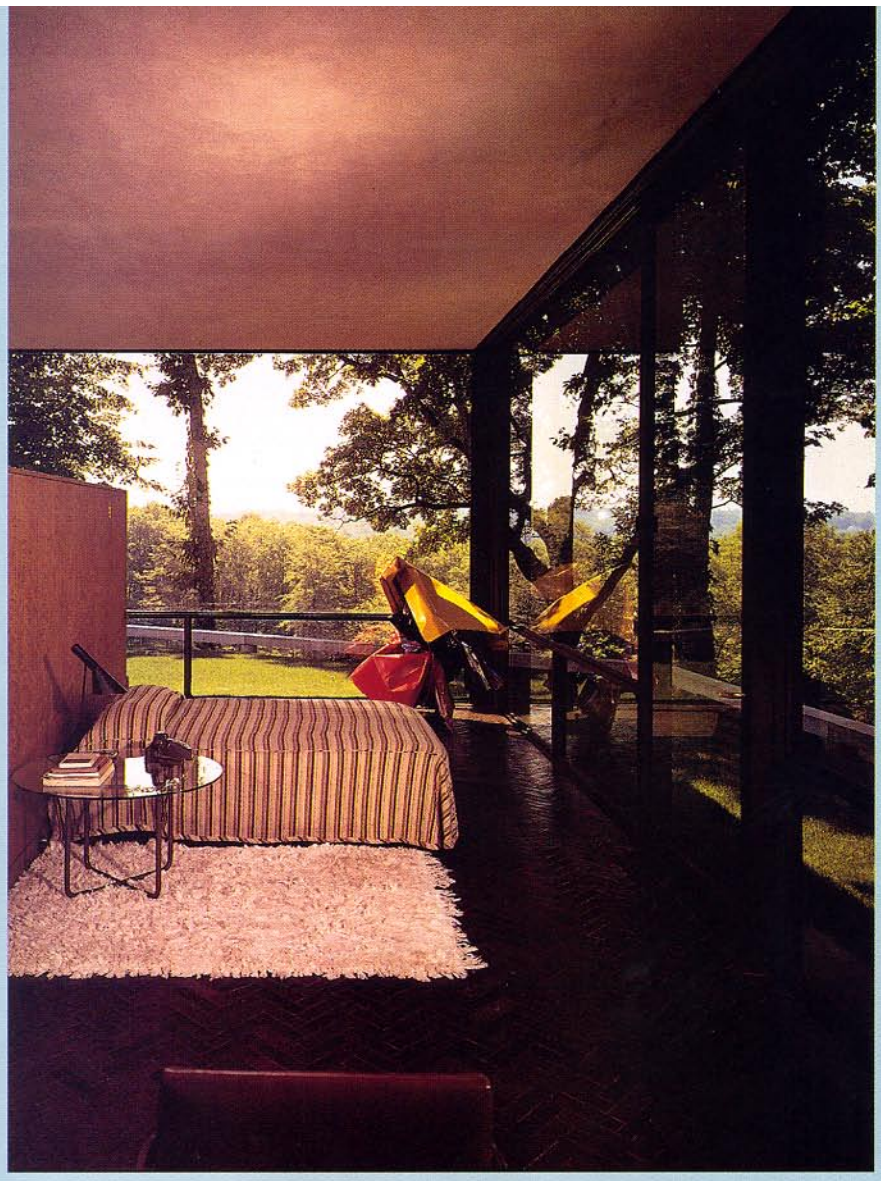
The Farnsworth House is destined for chaos. In any society, the attitude of your house and your life as it connects to the ground is fundamental. Mies disconnected this house from the ground by raising it five feet above the earth on eight columns. The only connection the house has to the earth is its utility stack—sewage! Mies also made no formal gesture to the sky. There's a flat roof, but Mies hid the fact that he sloped the roof inward at its center—a denial of the sky—to allow for rain drainage.

The house, which is really more of an attempt at a shrine, suggests loneliness. In feng shui terms, you couldn't possibly live here with a family or a loved one. First of all, you have an entry at a right angle to the approach. If you want to thrive, the approach should be sinuous. Also, because Mies wouldn't allow curtains in Farnsworth, the glass walls give total exposure to the outside. There's no enclosure—no yin—anywhere. Therefore you're not able to modulate the kind of energy brought in from all directions.

Mies also parked the bedroom in the east, which means that the moment the sun comes up, you're up. There's a view to the right side, in the area of Joyfulness, and the kitchen is in Thunder, which is fine, but you have your back to a wide expanse, thereby denying your ancestry. Mies also placed the fireplace in the center of the house. Fire in the center of a home betrays a need for purification. Of course, Mies was Germanic, and that's part of the ethos: purification through immolation. It's perverse. This may be a great observation platform for nature, but it's not a home.



IMAGES COURTESY OF THE FARNSWORTH HOUSE



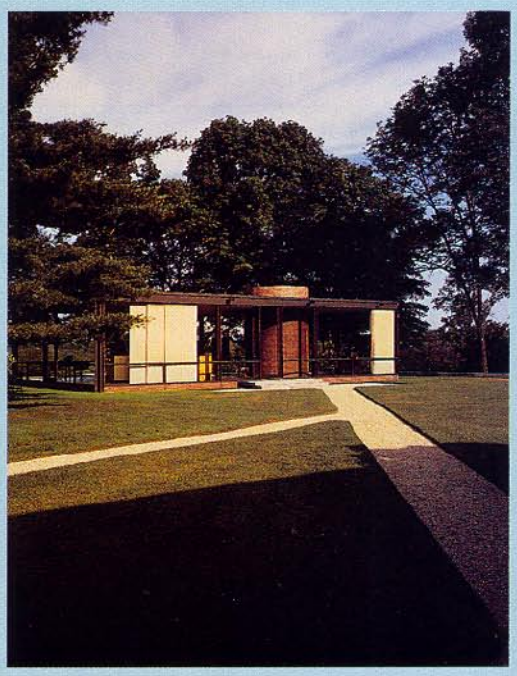
Evidence of the Glass House's feng shui success is found in the placement of the bedroom (above). By positioning the bedroom to the south and west of the house's entrance, Johnson placed the room in an area of Joyfulness, according to the ba-gua.

of a statement about planning than just a house.

Johnson perched the Glass House on the edge of a slope, with water in the distance. It rests directly on the ground, which is good. The cylindrical element inside the house is made of the same material as the flooring, so it translates earth into a gesture toward the sky, which is a beautiful thing. Also, there's more yin to begin with in the Glass House simply because of the materials Johnson chose. Even though the house has full exposure, Johnson used curtaining systems to control light to a certain degree.

Johnson also positions furniture in a different way than Mies did in the Farnsworth House. While Mies cluttered all the furniture in the center, Johnson explodes it here.

Johnson also did some very interesting things within the ba-gua of this internal space: The living room, which is the place of activity, is in the area of Fame, which is wonderful. His writing desk is in the area of Heaven, so he can marshal the helpful energy of the cosmos through his study. The bedroom shares in Earth and Joyfulness. And the dining room, with a significant tree outside in the area of Wind, is great for prosperity.

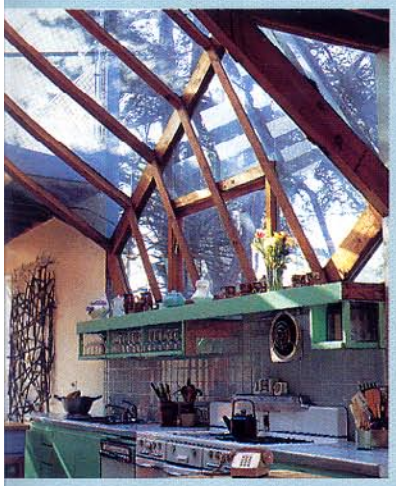


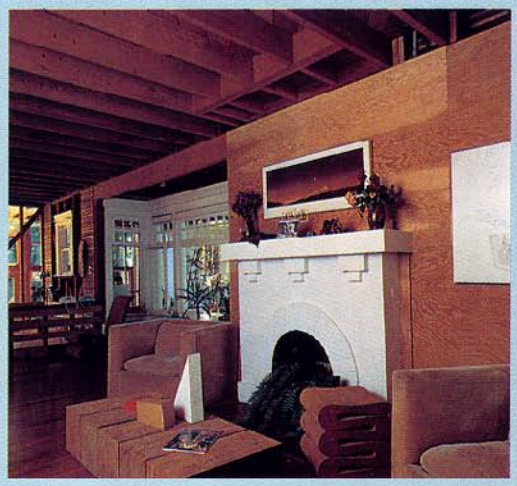
BILL MARIS/ESTO

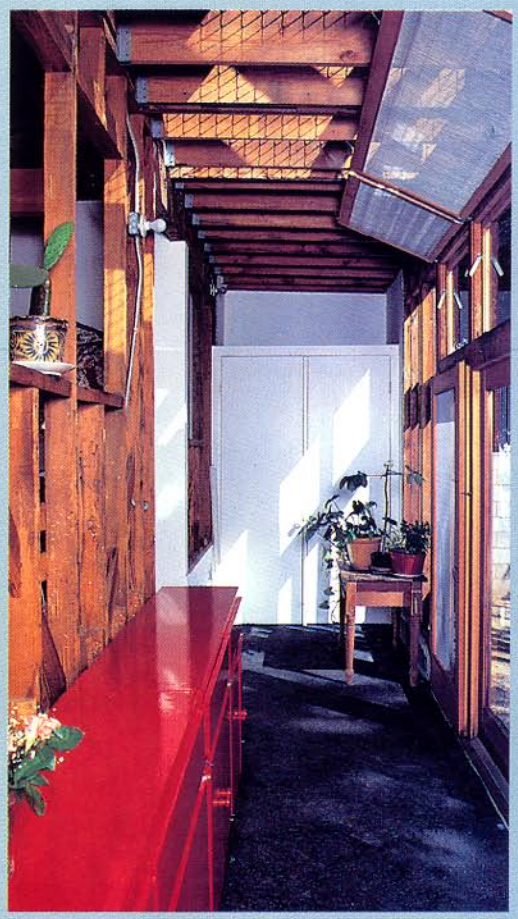
Glass House: *In 1949, Philip Johnson built the Glass House as a residence for himself in New Canaan, Conn. The rectangular structure's walls are all glass. Although completed two years earlier, Johnson's glass volume was influenced by Mies' designs for the Farnsworth House.*

Although superficially akin to the Farnsworth House, the Glass House is very different. With the Farnsworth House, there's an attempt to command the view, but no real understanding of how that works. In the Glass House, there's a dialogue between the house, the landscape and other structures on the estate, such as the guest house and the sculpture pavilion. Feng shui-wise, it's more

While Feng Shui principles don't favor the odd angles found in the kitchen (below left), living room (middle) and narrow hallways (far right) of the Gehry House, the residence's good balance of yin and yang earns it a passing grade.







Gehry House: *The Gehry House is a 1920s California bungalow in Santa Monica that Frank Gehry remodeled and sheathed in new materials—such as corrugated metal, plywood and chain-link fencing—in the late 1970s.*

This is an intensely bourgeois house in the sense that it's nonreligious. The other houses were attempting to deny conventional society and create transcendent statements, which Gehry isn't interested in doing. He was inspired by the cacophony of urban reality.

The Gehry House has a conservative interior with a flamboyant exterior of collisions, fragmentations and weird angles. It's been exploded here and punctured there, but the basic core is the old house, which has a tenuous connection to the earth. As with most suburban houses, it's about two feet off the ground. The only gesture Gehry made to the earth is a whimsical children's sandpit outside. The connection to the sky is ambiguous. By opening up the roof in some areas, Gehry enhanced prosperity, but by closing it away elsewhere, he shoots himself in the foot. Odd angles, skewed staircases and funny cutouts invite the opportunity for unexpected events—often of a negative nature. This house creates serious instability for the occupants. I wouldn't be at all surprised if their fortunes and relationships go up and down.

The floorplan also has some problems. The main entrance runs smack into the back of the seating arrangement in the living room, which is an easy way to loose personal power. There's also a very unstable connection to religious life because the Heaven area is taken over by garbage and a water closet. In terms of yin and yang, though, the ratio isn't bad. A family could possibly thrive here, but they would have to be eccentric individuals to accept the eccentricities of the house. ✦

Freelancer Hilarie Sheets doesn't want to know the feng shui truth about her New York City apartment.