

# *an interior* UNFOLDS

INSPIRED BY HIS TIME AT WRIGHT'S TALIESIN, ARCHITECT GERALD LEE MOROSCO CREATES A WARM AND QUITE CLASSICAL MODERN ENVIRONMENT IN HIS OWN PITTSBURGH ROW HOUSE.

DREAMING NOT of model trains and cowboys, but rather of room dividers and recessed lighting, a boy attracted to his grandparents' 1959 Modern home, Jerry Morosco grew up to be a Taliesin apprentice, absorbing the tenets of 20th-century design genius Frank Lloyd Wright.

Afterwards he returned to his native Pittsburgh and settled in the South Side, once a thriving neighborhood of small businesses and tidy

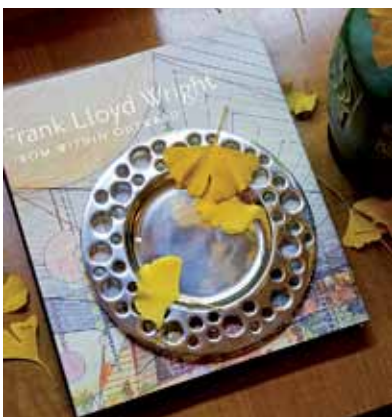
brick row houses built for Victorian steel workers and their families. After the '60s the old neighborhood declined, its storefronts boarded up as families relocated to the suburbs. But Jerry was aware of urban renewal and

the Back to the City movement, and opened his own architecture practice in the heart of Pittsburgh, in a



historic former glassworks. Soon he noticed the abandoned frame house for sale across the street. Vacant for several years, it was uninhabitable, filled with debris, windows broken, plaster walls and ceilings collapsing, its floors riddled with gaping holes. But the price was right (\$5,000) and the location perfect. Jerry's research revealed that the house was built as a four-room farmhouse in the 1840s, then floated by barge down the Monongahela River to its present site

**ABOVE:** The arrangement of objects is essential to the Wrightian expression of space. Here, the Robsjohn-Gibbins buffet that inspired much of the house is complemented by an African drum holding sumac branches, along with a sculptural painting by Val M. Cox; color in the rug is echoed in a vintage Blenko aqua glass vase and a vase by Pittsburgh artist Drew Hine. **LEFT:** Sources of inspiration: Mexican pewter, ginkgo leaves, and the catalog from the Guggenheim exhibit.



BY BRIAN D. COLEMAN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIK KVALSVIK



An open floor plan makes the small house seem larger. Adjoining areas are unified by white-oak woodwork and hand-stained ochre plaster. An important Klismos dining-room ensemble is a centerpiece; the needlepoint rug is by the painter Tim Van Campen, for Michaelian & Kohlberg.



in 1875, after a fire had opened up a lot in this block of narrow brick townhouses.

Just 16' wide and 32' deep (with a rear "tail" that includes a 14' kitchen, added in 1875), the house proved to be a challenge. Trained in preservation and restoration, Jerry intended to salvage as much of the original as possible. But structural analysis revealed serious rot conditions and insect infestations throughout, involving even the 1840s

timber framing and sills. He experimented with cables and pulleys in an attempt to stabilize the rotting framework, but realized the structure needed replacement. A torrential rain during reframing washed out a large part of the rubble-stone basement walls, nearly collapsing both this house and the neighbor's, just 36" away. Beyond the footprint, the turned wooden spindle separating the two windows on the front façade was the

**Accented against the chenille of a 1940s chair, the support bracket for the bow-front sill extension of the front windows was interpreted from the Robsjohn-Gibbings buffet. BELOW: Homeowner Jerry Morosco on the stoop of his home with his Border collie mix, Saverio.**

## Meet the ARCHITECT

*Some people (like Jerry Morosco) know what they want to do from an early age. The Pittsburgh-based architect, who specializes in restoration, had no doubt that he'd be an architect. His grandparents' 1959 house was the best of the period: open floor plan, blond oak woodwork, shuffleboard linoleum in the rec room. He loved it.*

*With a bachelor's degree under his belt, Jerry entered an apprenticeship at Taliesin, spending the next five years absorbing the genius of 20th-century architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Then Jerry went back to Pittsburgh to live and work.*

*"My appreciation for the value of a beautiful environment came to me by way of direct personal experience at Taliesin," Morosco says. "I lived for five years in an incredibly rich [design] environment, and I learned my profession within the intentional community that is the Taliesin fellowship. It is sustained upon the idea that we should always strive to create beauty if we were to remain true to our profession as architects."*

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**ABOVE:** A standing floor light in cherry (a licensed reproduction of a 1925 design by Frank Lloyd Wright) illuminates a corner of the dining room.

**MIDDLE:** A Danish Rais woodstove heats the first floor; it's surrounded by flame-finished Kirkstone. Eclectic furnishings include a vintage Eames thermoplastic chair and an African ceremonial drum.

**FAR RIGHT:** The Fab '50s preside over this corner, with its bleached mid-century side table, ca. 1955 ceramic "Oriental" lamp, a vintage Princess phone, and a ca. 1960 vase from West Germany.



single salvageable piece.

The main design challenge—one common to narrow row houses—was how to locate the stairs and bathrooms within the constraints of a very small floor plan. (Understand that the “bathroom” was originally a backyard privy.) Jerry took advantage of every square inch of space, creating a chase that runs perpendicular to the stairs from basement to attic, to allow code-compliant space for plumbing pipes, venting, and air-conditioning ducts. It made a compact “Ozzie and Harriet” second-floor bathroom possible, in a room just 6' 8" square.

HAVING ABSORBED F.L. WRIGHT’S teaching that the architect is responsible for the entire environment—architecture, landscape, and furnishings—Jerry rethought the interior of his home. Mid-century Modern furniture by the famous decorator T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings inspired the design and detailing of woodwork and built-in casework. The graceful Grecian arc of the legs of a Klismos dining table and chairs inspired Jerry to use their curvilinear vocabulary as a guide for the profile of the baseboard and window and door casings. The edges of the slab legs of a Robsjohn-Gibbings cocktail table provided the profile

**Spaces flow from dining room to rear patio. A Roseville Rosecraft Panel Vase holding a branch of autumnal ginkgo leaves rests upon a Klismos side table by Robsjohn-Gibbings.**



**ABOVE:** Fitted with a combination of open shelving and wall cabinets, the kitchen runs across the 1875 rear extension. Cork flooring and white-oak woodwork continue from the front of the house to unify the space. **RIGHT:** A ca. 1960 George Nelson wall clock keeps time above the breakfast table, lit by a prototype “Ben” series Resolute Lighting pendant designed by Douglas Varey. The custom table is set with a pair of two K65 stools by Alvar Aalto. **BELOW:** On the patio, home for a modern bird.



for the nosing of the pocket doors upstairs, while the mitered top of a sideboard, whose edges extend over the top and down the sides, was used as the profile for the vertical edges of the kitchen cabinets, making them appear to be suspended in air.

Jerry carefully drew out furniture placement for each room, incorporating both inherited pieces, such as a ca. 1940 sofa and chair set upholstered in a nubby chenille from his great-grandmother, and a

leather chair from his great-grandfather’s barber shop, along with mid-century Modern masterpieces that include a ca. 1952 drop-front secretary by Suzanne Guiguichon, an important T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings buffet, and a Klismos dining table and chairs that are the centerpiece of the open dining room. Following Wright’s philosophy of celebrating the honesty of materials, floors are made of natural cork, finished simply with carnauba wax (they’ve held up



**LEFT:** Inspired by the Robsjohn–Gibbins buffet in the dining room, the side panel of the kitchen wall cabinets flows beyond the bottom cabinet, a profile repeated along the windowsill. A vintage Frankoma green vase and a bowling trophy (it conceals a liquor dispenser with shot glasses) rest on the counter. **BELOW:** The small rear patio extends the living space outdoors, a Wrightian design that magnifies the space.



well for more than a decade); the custom millwork, trim, and casework are white maple finished with Danish oil and carnauba wax. Walls and ceilings are finished in a steel-troweled veneer plaster. Jerry decided to stain the plaster with an early recipe Wright used for projects such as

his Unity Temple: equal portions of oil, beeswax, turpentine, and pigment. Morosco chose an ochre yellow inspired by ginkgo trees in the yard. He used honed slabs of Kirkstone, quarried in the Lake District in Cumbria, England, for kitchen and bath countertops and backsplashes; the matte gray-





**OPPOSITE:** Built-ins point to economy of space in the master bedroom. The headboard's bookcase has dividers inspired by the dining room's vintage buffet. **LEFT:** A vertical tapering shaft marks the space between the stair and the second floor landing, concealing the flues for the boiler, water heater, and wood stove. **BELOW:** The use of natural materials shows an Arts & Crafts sensibility in stairs inset with cork treads and edged by white-oak nosings.

green finish complements the sunny ochre walls and golden-brown cork floors.

An essential quality of Wright's work was his ability to manipulate space, realizing that it is greater than just the walls and roof. The idea became Jerry's mantra as well: By using continuous and homogeneous planes and natural materials, he made the narrow house appear much larger,

each area opening into the next as if one were unfolding a careful piece of origami. Choice and placement of art and objects were also considered, as if that were the home's final "seasoning."

Jerry Morosco strives to remain true to his Taliesin training. He shares his home with appreciative partner Paul Ford and their Border collie-mix, Saverio. ✦

