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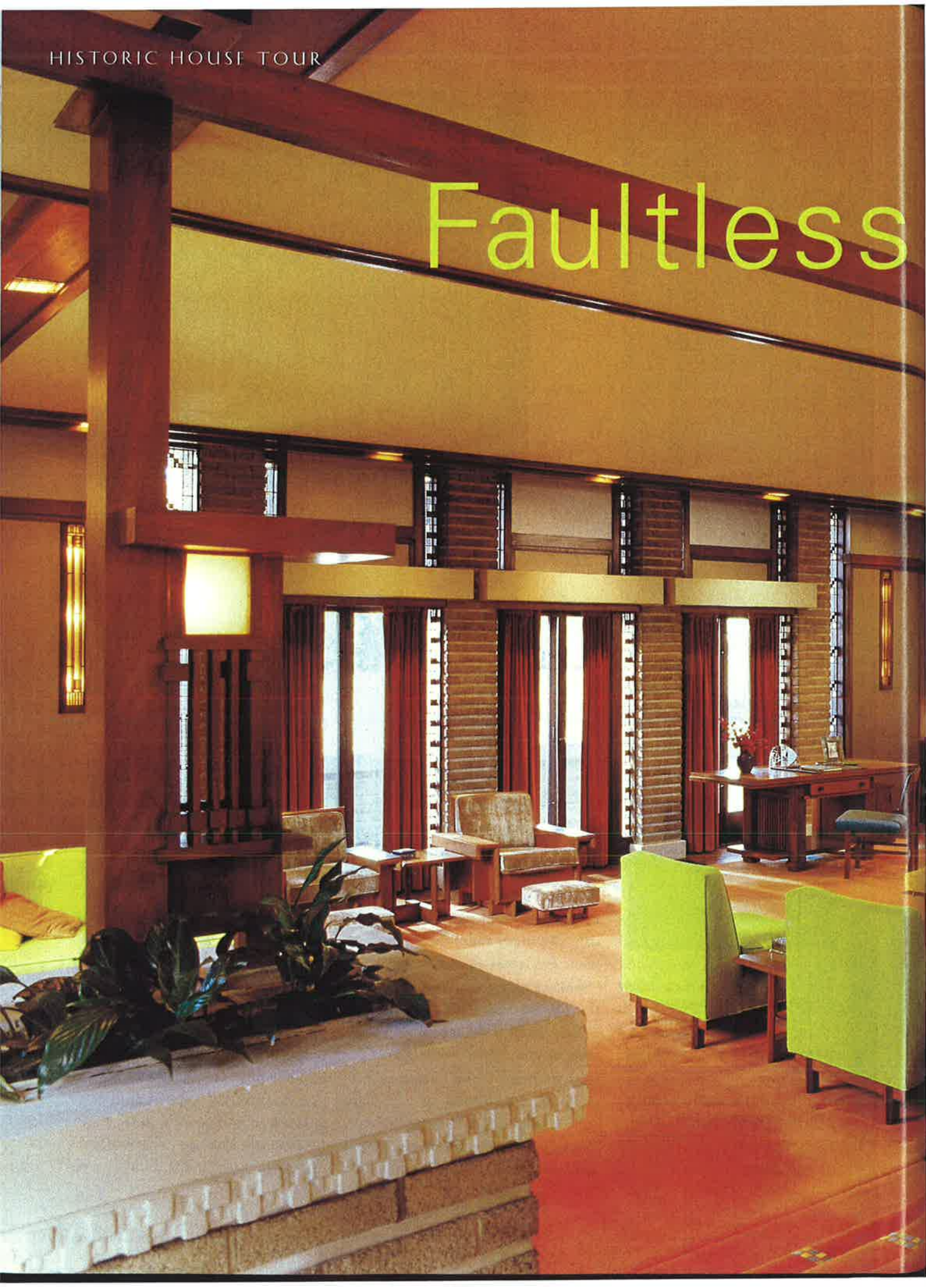


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HISTORIC HOUSE TOUR

# Faultless



# pedigree

THIS MILWAUKEE HOUSE WAS DESIGNED BY  
FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT IN 1916 AND REDECORATED  
UNDER HIS DIRECTION IN THE 1950S.

BY BRIAN D. COLEMAN  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CRAIG DUGAN,  
HEDRICH BLESSING

IN THE SPRING OF 1955, it took uncommon perspective for Barbara and Bob Elsner to purchase this older house, located on a tree-lined street of substantial homes by then considered unfashionable. The Bogk House, east of downtown, is the only private residence in Milwaukee designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Mrs. Bogk had been a fastidious housekeeper; to avoid soiling the interior, she'd never even lit a fire in the hearths! The house was thus in near-original condition on the day forty-seven years ago when the Elsners saw the "For Sale" sign.

Barbara and Bob wrote to Mr. Wright soon after they moved in, asking for decorating advice. Nearly 90 years of age, Mr. Wright was at Taliesin, his home and studio, in



The imposing brick and concrete façade bears some resemblance to Wright's Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, a contemporaneous commission. **OPPOSITE:** Flowing space characterizes Wright's interiors. Vertical windows are in counterpoint to the horizontal design.



**OPPOSITE:** The central hearth is surrounded by built-ins.

Tasseled footstools were designed at Taliesin during the 1960s. Vibrant Sixties colors warm the room. **RIGHT:** Under-eave decoration includes Maya-inspired heads in concrete. Wright looked to both Mayan and Japanese motifs in his architectural designs.



**ABOVE:** Armchairs designed by the Taliesin studio complement Wright's abstract carpet design. **LEFT:** Stylized storks grace the interior fountain. (Fresh water is pumped through a separate line from Lake Michigan.) **FAR LEFT:** Recessed lighting behind art glass plays off horizontal brickwork with raked mortar joints.

Wisconsin. He responded in characteristic brief style, saying he was glad they were preserving the house. He suggested that they look at the line of furniture he was then producing for Henredon. Following his advice, they purchased several sofas, chairs, and side tables—which did indeed harmonize with his 1916 design.

The interior was in need of repainting. At first Barbara consulted a local decorator who recommended a “more contemporary” scheme: white walls and a turquoise ceiling. (Remember, this was the Fifties.) Another designer suggested replacing the “awkward” windows with “nice picture windows.” But Barbara remembered the Arts and Crafts sensibility of the house where she was raised. (She ruefully recalls her mother

throwing away all the Stickley furniture after World War II.) Her instincts told her not to tamper with the Master's unified design. So Barbara did some research.

Paint analysis revealed Wright's 1916 colors for the interior. Walls were restored to the original gilt tones of silver and gold, and the ceiling was painted with the original pale celadon. Then Bob and Barbara had an architect from Taliesin visit to help them remodel the kitchen.

The 1916 carpets, designed by Wright in a Secessionist pattern of abstract squares and rectangles, were an integral part of the interior design. By the 1960s, they were badly worn. Mrs. Wright herself stepped in, helping the Elsners coordinate the carpets' reweaving and selecting an updated palette: the ground a bitter-sweet orange, with accents in bright blues, pinks, and yellows. The vibrant Sixties colors beautifully complemented the Prairie house.

Barbara and Bob commissioned a pair of armchairs, along with a group of tasseled footstools, from the Taliesin studio. Word was out about this house, and Wright scholars from near and far began to come by. A visiting researcher helped Barbara get in touch with Mrs. Bogk's daughter, who had

**RIGHT:** A detail of the table shows inlaid ebonized squares, a motif repeated on the edge of the built-in buffet. The Ming dynasty scroll is original to the house.

**BELOW:** The carpet and tile designs date to 1916; the recolored carpet was rewoven under Mrs. Wright's direction in the early 1960s.



**LEFT:** This is part of the desk designed by Wright for the living room. Gold, mirrored squares catch the light in the narrow windows, echoing the inlay in the edge of the desk.



A change in levels defines the space. Sofa and center table are part of Wright's 1950s collection for Henredon. The dining table and chairs were Wright designs interpreted by George Niedecker for the original owner.

retired to Florida. Barbara was able to purchase back from her the original dining-room table and chairs.

Mrs. Bogk had commissioned Wright to design her home after visiting her friend Mrs. Coonley's Wright-designed masterpiece in Riverside, Illinois (1907). For Mrs. Coonley, Wright designed everything—the house, art glass, furniture, even her hostess dresses. But Mrs. Bogk considered Wright “too severe” for her taste and had engaged George Niedecker, a Milwaukee “interior architect” and frequent Wright collaborator, to interpret some of Wright's interior designs. Wright's dining-room chairs were updated by Niedecker,

who replaced “dust-catching spindles” with caned insets, and added corresponding caned panels to the dining-table design.

Frank Lloyd Wright had become a passionate interest for Barbara Elsner by the time public interest in his work was revived. She was honored last fall by the Wright Conservancy with a special award for her stewardship of the Bogk House. Barbara says she has loved meeting people who appreciate Wright's genius and want to safeguard his work for the future. ✦

