Boulter House

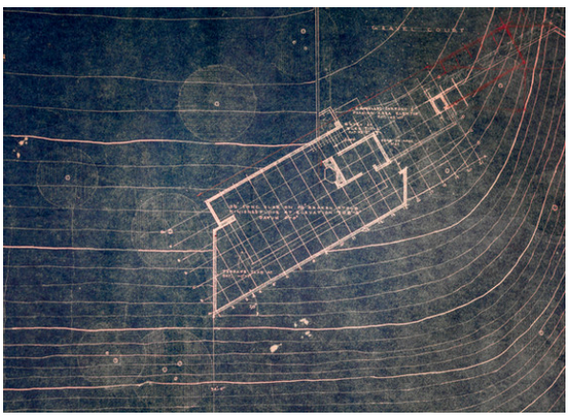
1 Rawson Woods Circle (Clifton), Cincinnati 45220
Frank Lloyd Wright, 1953-56 with later additions by Wright in 1958-59;
Modifications by Benjamin Dombar in 1979
Carport enclosed 1990

Boulter House from the south-east, Cincinnati, OH (Clifton neighborhood), by Frank Lloyd Wright, 1953-56. Photograph by Alice Weston. ca. 1990s. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

The Boulter House is an unusual and highly effective Usonian design on a steeply sloping site. The clients were Cedric G. and Patricia Boulter, both Classics scholars at the nearby University of Cincinnati. In 1949, Patricia's parents, Henry J. and Frieda Neils, built a house by Wright in Minneapolis, MN. The Boulters contacted Wright late in 1953 and by early 1954 had sent him a list of requirements, a site survey, and site photographs.

Boulter House, from the south. Photograph by James M. Browne. 2007. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

The lot is a steeply sloping half-acre in Cincinnati's Clifton neighborhood, in the middle of a block of mostly Tudor and Colonial-style houses, but with two, early Modernist residences as well. Like so many Cincinnati Modernist house sites, the Boulter's was a "leftover," considered difficult to build upon. Wright sent preliminary designs in September of 1954 and revised plans in March of 1955. Wright's Cincinnati pupil **Benjamin Dombar** supervised construction and completed the house in 1956.



Boulter House, site plan drawing by Frank Lloyd Wright, 1954. DAAP Library, Cincinnati Modernist Collection.

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Boulter House from the north-east. Photograph by Erissa MacKaron, 2003. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

Typical of Wright's designs, the site determined the planning. The architect angled the house into its steep lot on a diagonal. It faces downhill to the south-east, with the driveway, carport, and entrance at the upper, northeast corner. The house is constructed of concrete block walls with wooden framing elements of Douglas fir and redwood. The nearly solid "rear" wall faces north-west and backs into the uphill slope, acting partly as a retaining wall.

Boulter House, detail of the south front. Photograph by Erissa MacKaron, 2003. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

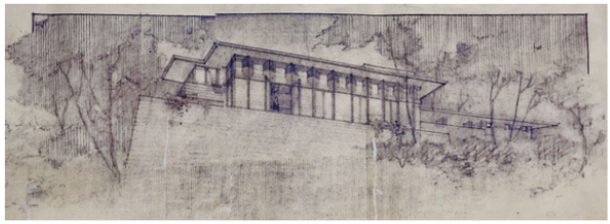
The south-facing "front" has continuously-glazed, 10-foot high windows and double doors that open onto a concrete-block terrace with angled ends and dramatically battered walls.

Boulter House, detail of battered terrace wall from the south. Photograph by James M. Browne, 2007. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

The finished house contains around 2,700 square feet of space laid out on a four-foot module. The expansive windows and terrace make it seem larger. It is a Usonian plan ("US-onian": Wright's visionary term for his smaller, suburban dwellings for middle-class Americans). Wright's Usonians are usually of one story with a bedroom wing attached to large, open living spaces. Due to the limited size and steepness of the Boulters' site, however, their Usonian is unusual in having a second story or "mezzanine" containing the bedrooms, as if Wright's typical "in-line" bedroom wing has been folded back atop the house. This solution works brilliantly outside and in.

Boulter House: Left: detail of "frieze" windows from the south-east. Photograph by Alice Weston. ca. 1990s. Right: detail of "frieze" windows from interior of mezzanine, looking south-east. Photograph by James M. Browne. Both from the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

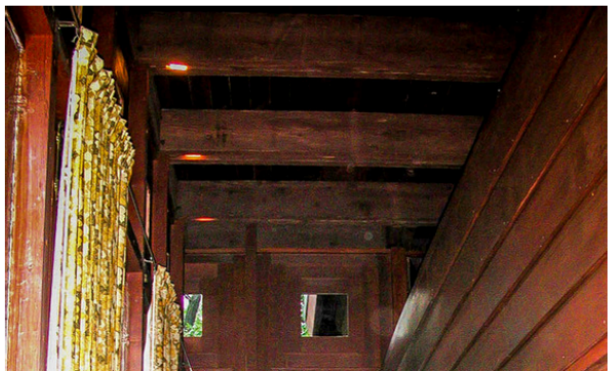
On the main, south-east facade, the mezzanine is indicated by a continuous row of square windows within receding wooden frames, abstractly echoing a classical frieze. In fact, the composition of the main facade, with its masonry podium-terrace, the vertical framing of the window wall, and the horizontal "frieze," all creatively recall the compositional elements of a Greek temple and perhaps poetically reflect the Boulters' interests in Classics.

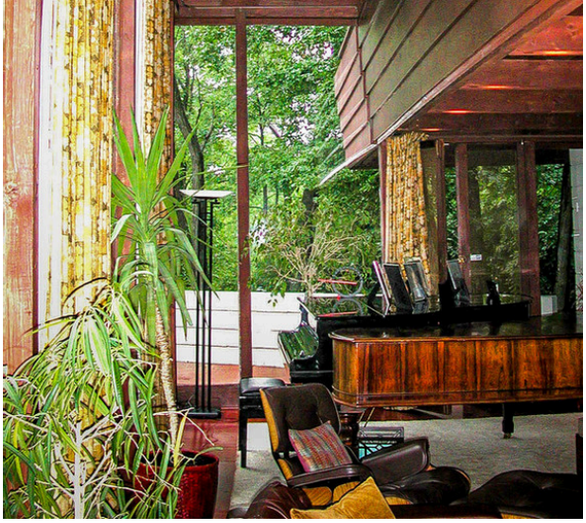


Boulter House. Perspective view from south, by Frank Lloyd Wright, 1954. DAAP Library, Cincinnati Modernism Collection

Boulter House, detail of "frieze" windows on south front. Photograph by Alice Weston. ca. 1990s. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

Environmentally, the "frieze" and the deep overhang of the flat roof help shade the main facade in summer while allowing sunlight to penetrate in winter. The Boulter House resembles an orthogonal version of Wright's "solar hemicycle" houses, where curved, glazed and shaded facades promote passive heating and cooling. Wright's earliest solar hemicycle house, the second Jacobs family house of 1944 in Middleton, WI, resembles the Boulter House, including its glazed, south-facing main facade; its solid, earth-sheltered north front; and its second-level mezzanine.





Boulter House, interior view looking east with mezzanine balcony cantilevered through the glass wall. Photograph by Erissa MacKaron. 2003. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

In the Boulter House the bedroom mezzanine is suspended above the open living area by iron tension rods from the roof. The exposed joists are doubled, with small electric lights between them. The mezzanine contains three bedrooms and a study on the west with a cantilevered, outdoor porch. The "corridor" for the bedrooms is along the balcony edge of the mezzanine, thus eliminating the closed, first-story bedroom corridors or "galleries" of most Usonians.

Boulter House interiors: view up suspended staircase from entry; view from mezzanine down suspended staircase to entry; east end of living area with original built-in seating and bookcases under the mezzanine. Photographs by Erissa MacKaron. 2003. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

The mezzanine also creates an effective spatial sequence below. One enters on the north-east, into a small space containing both the tension-suspended staircase to the mezzanine and four steps down into the open living area—a precursor of popular "split-level" house plans of the 1960-70s. The mezzanine divides the living area into an intimate, lower-ceilinged space with continuous, built-in seating and bookshelves along its north wall, while to the south, beyond the mezzanine, the space rises to its 15-foot roof height and flows through the glazed wall and doors onto the south terrace. It is a brilliant Wrightian sequence that moves from compressed entry, into expansive horizontal space, into tall vertical space, and then into nature.

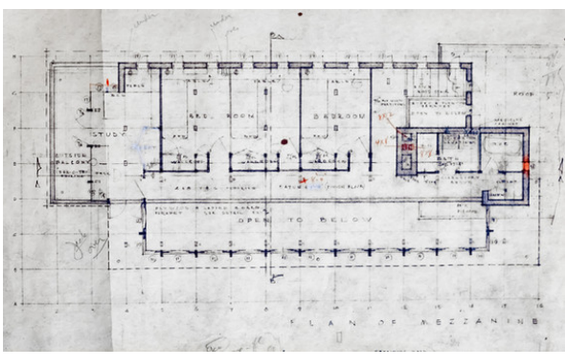
Boulter House, view from south-east showing south terrace and glazed wall with doors. Photograph by James M. Browne. 2007. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

The living space is 44 feet long by 18 feet wide; its floors are of poured concrete with hot-water, radiant heating. They are painted "Taliesin Red" and incised with the four-foot design module of the house. At the east end of the living area is a masonry core, adjacent to the entry, that contains a chimney and hexagonal fireplace, behind which is the small, kitchen / "work space." Further east, is the carport connected originally to a storage room, but Wright's 1955 plans showed a possible "future maid's room" expansion. In 1958-59, Wright did plans for the Boulters to enlarge this storage area into a "guest house" (and children's play room). In 1979, Wright pupil and the Boulters' supervising architect Ben Dombar further modified this eastern wing by adding shelving and storage.

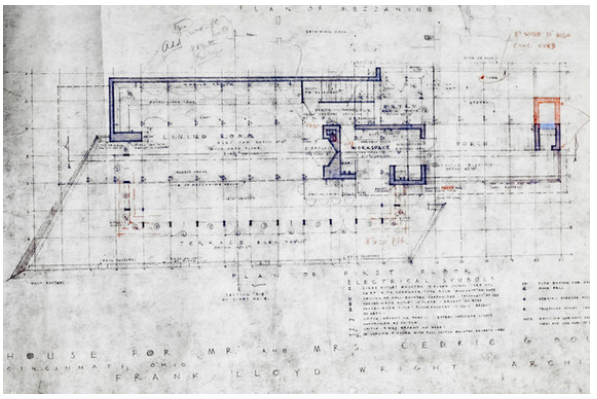
Boulter House from south-west showing main house on left and later remodeling-infill of original carport on right. Photograph by Erissa MacKaron. 2003. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

The second owners enclosed the carport in 1990 and did structural restorations to the house; the third and current owners, Chuck Lohre and Janet Groeber, have maintained the house carefully, doing needed restoration work, sensitively updating the kitchen-work space, re-landscaping, and making the house more energy-efficient. The Boulter House is impressively intact, including Wright's custom furniture and built-ins, along with Wright-designed fabrics and Wright furniture purchased by the Boulters from Heritage-Henredon.

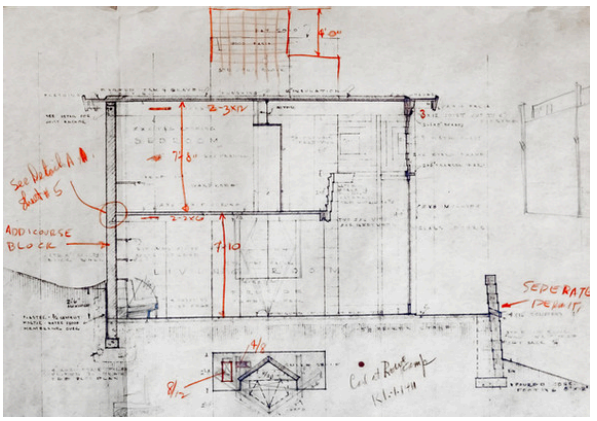
[The DAAP Library has a set of Wright's "1954 "preliminary" designs and his 1955 "revised" plans for the Boulter House; Ben Dombar used the latter to build the house and they contain his red-penciled modifications. Also Wright's 1958-59 plans for the "Guest House" (and play room) additions. Also included are Ben Dombar's 1979 plans for modifying the "Guest House" wing.]



Boulter House, second floor plan, by Frank Lloyd Wright, 1955. DAAP Library, Cincinnati Modernist Collection.



Boulter House, first floor plan, by Frank Lloyd Wright, 1955. DAAP Library, Cincinnati Modernist Collection.



Boulter House, section drawing, by Frank Lloyd Wright, 1955. DAAP Library, Cincinnati Modernist Collection.

All drawings in DAAP Library, Cincinnati Modernist Collection

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