Tonkens House

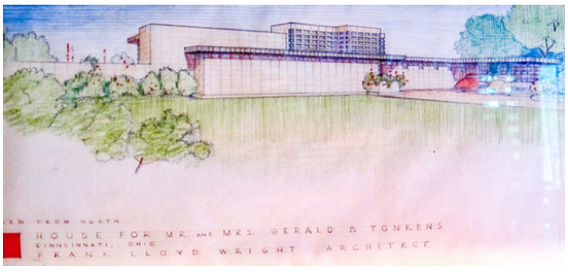
6980 Knoll Road, Amberley Village, OH 45237
Frank Lloyd Wright, 1954-57

Tonkens House, South Facade. Photograph by Matt McCachran. 2009. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

The Tonkens House is among the best examples of Frank Lloyd Wright's "Usonian Automatic" designs and the most important of the three houses he designed for Cincinnati. The clients, Gerald B. and Rosalie (Robbins) Tonkens, met in Europe during WW II where he served in the U. S. Air Force and she was a Red Cross nurse. After the war Gerald Tonkens opened a car dealership in Hamilton, OH, selling Oldsmobiles and Cadillacs.

Tokens House South Facade. Photograph by Matt McCachran. 2009. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

The Tonkenses purchased their 2 3/4-acre Amberley Village site (later expanded to four acres) at a bargain price in 1954 due to its steepness and the difficulty of bringing a driveway up to it from Section Road. Gerald Tonkens grew up in Wisconsin where he saw many Wright-designed buildings; he and Rosalie were enthusiastic clients. They first retained Wright's Cincinnati pupil **Abrom Dombar** to design their house but did not like the result and then contacted Wright. Wright's design process began in 1954 and construction occurred in 1955-57.



Perspective drawing of Tokens House, north or entrance front, by Frank Lloyd Wright. Reproduction of drawing at Tonkens House, photograph by Elizabeth Meyer (original, Frank Lloyd Wright Collection, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library?)

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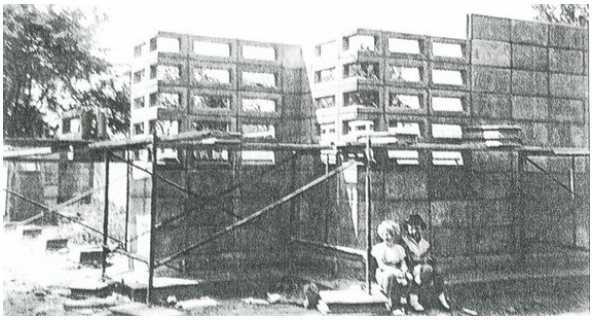
Drawings for the Tonkens House are by Wright and by Taliesin Fellow John H. Howe; Wright sent his grandson Eric Lloyd Wright from Taliesin to Cincinnati for 17 months to act as field supervisor; engineering was by Taliesin Fellows William Wesley Peters and Thomas Casey, along with independent engineer Mendel Glickman. Cincinnati builder Horace Wersel and Harvard Construction built the house. Late in 1954, Wersel accompanied Gerald Tonkens to Taliesin to confer with Wright himself. Cornelia Brierly, Taliesin's first female "Fellow," did the landscape designs and **John deKoven Hill** consulted on the interiors.



Tonkens House, construction photograph. Reproduced from Cindy Bailey Damschroder, "The Gerald B. Tonkens House" (U. Cincinnati, Master's Thesis, 1996).

Wright and the Tonkenses became close: the architect invited the clients to Taliesin on more than one occasion and Gerald Tonkens did several hours of amateur filming during the construction of the house. His filming including a visit to Taliesin with footage of Wright himself. This film remains with the house.

Tonkens House, details of corner windows. Photograph by Patrick Snadon. 2016.

Wright urged the Tonkenses to build one of his experimental Usonian Automatic houses and they proved willing "guinea pigs." Wright later called the Tonkens House the best example of the type and the first house in which the system was fully perfected. It is one of only seven Usonian Automatics designed by Wright. These houses resulted from Wright's initial experiments with concrete block, or "textile block" construction beginning in the 1920s and his desire, particularly after WW II, to create middle-class, system-built houses that would lower costs through prefabrication and client participation in the construction. These goals proved elusive in all Wright's Usonian Automatics: the Tonkenses, for example, initially wanted to spend $25,000 on their house but its final cost supposedly exceeded $100,000. All Wright's Usonian Automatics remained more in the realm of prototypes than of fully mass-produced houses.

Tonkens House, interior view of fireplace and exterior window details. Photograph by Udo Greinacher, 2016.

The Usonian Automatic system consists of modular, pre-cast concrete blocks in a variety of forms: some solid, some perforated and open, some set with glass to act as both windows and glazed shelves. The Tonkens House has 14 different block types. The blocks generally measured 1 foot wide, by 2 feet long, by 9 inches deep for walls, and 2 feet by 2 feet by 1 foot deep for ceilings.

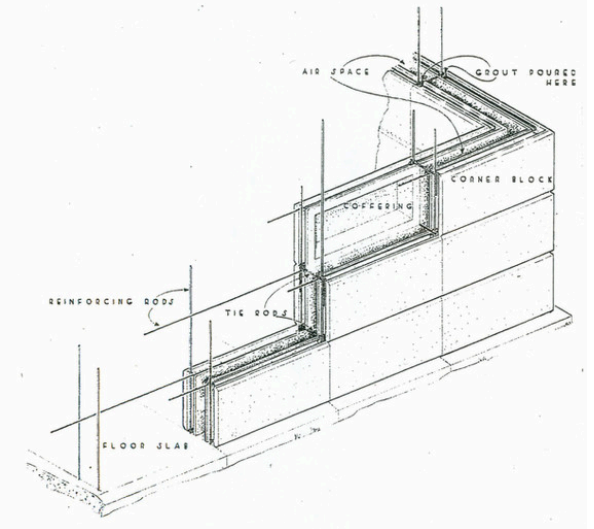
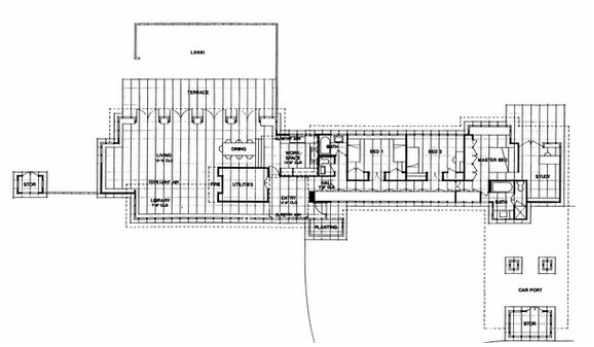


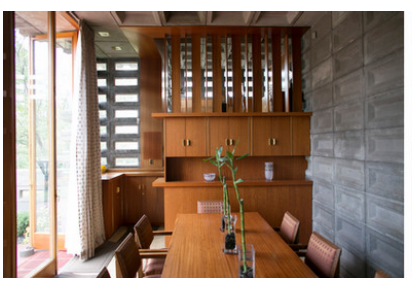
Diagram of Frank Lloyd Wright's "Usonian Automatic" construction system with concrete blocks and vertical and horizontal steel reinforcing rods. From Cindy Bailey Damschroder, "The Gerald B. Tonkens House" (U. Cincinnati Master's Thesis, 1996).

The blocks have “coffered” centers to reduce weight. The poured concrete floor slab had vertical, steel reinforcing bars set in at modular intervals; each concrete block had grooved edges to receive, or slip over, these steel rods. Horizontal rods were inserted with each course of blocks. This supposedly allowed clients to assist in the construction as it eliminated the need for skilled masonry work ("do it yourself masonry"). The walls generally had two layers of block, one outside and one inside, with a hollow air space between. Horizontal steel bars held the roof-ceiling blocks in place, creating a notably horizontal, flat-roofed composition.



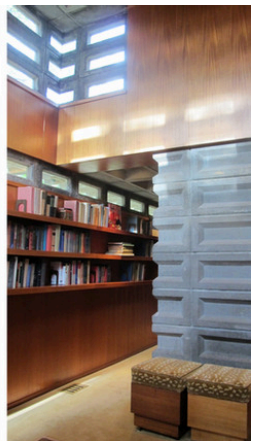
Tonkens House floor plan as built; drawing by Michael Damschroder, 1991. From Cindy Bailey Damschroder, "The Gerald B. Tonkens House" (U. Cincinnati Master's Thesis, 1996.

The Tonkens House plan consists of a spacious, open, living-dining-study area with a closet-like utility core for the forced air heating and cooling systems. A fireplace adjoins the utility core. The kitchen-work space opens to the dining area through a screen wall; beyond the kitchen is an “in-line” wing containing three bedrooms and a study, served by a long circulation “gallery” (Wright’s euphemistic term for a corridor). Wright compared this plan to a “polywog” with a “tail.”



Tonkens House. Top left: Dining Room. Top right: Kitchen. Both photographed by Patrick Snadon, 2016.
Bottom: Carport. Photograph by Matt McCachran. 2009. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

An open, covered carport and a storage room form an “L” with the bedroom wing. The main entry is on the north, between the living and bedroom wings.



Tonkens House. Top: North, or entry facade. Photograph by Alice Weston. ca. 1990s. Left: front door. Photograph by Matt McCachran. 2009. Right: entry. All from the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

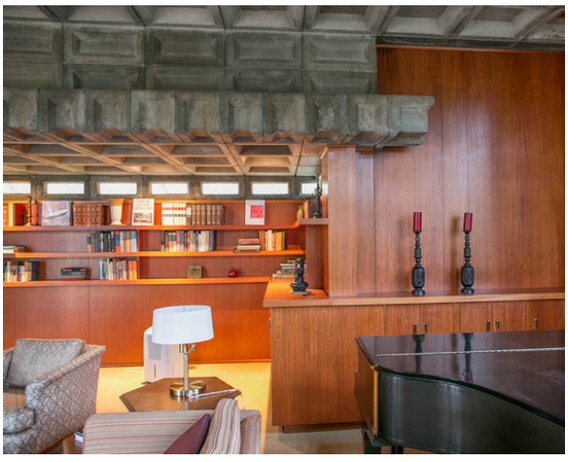
The circulation sequence is classic Wright: the mechanical core serves to compress the entry space; one moves around it into the living area, which has higher ceilings and opens to the south through four sets of double, glazed doors onto an outdoor, paved terrace and “lanai” surrounded by low, block walls.

Tonkens House. Top: "gallery"corridor from entry to living area. Bottom: south facade with patio. Photograph by Matt McCachran. 2009. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

The south wall of the house is made more transparent by U-shaped, glass-filled block piers, containing shelves, located between the glazed doors.

Tonkens House, details of block windows. Left: Study. Right: Living area window-shelves. Photograph by Udo Greinacher, 2016.

The interiors of the house are especially elegant, combining the cool gray color and texture of exposed concrete block on walls and ceilings with rich, reddish-brown Philippine mahogany paneling and cabinetry.



Tonkens House. View of living area looking north. Photograph by Udo Greinacher, 2016.

Custom, built-in furniture is enhanced by Wright-designed furniture purchased by the Tonkens from the Heritage Henredon line; Wright himself suggested specific furnishings. In 1970, the Tonkenses had the concrete block ceilings of the bedroom wing covered in gold leaf—possibly recalling an idea by Wright himself. John deKoven Hill returned in the late 1980s to assist Gerald Tonkens's second wife, Beverly, in renewing some of the fabrics.

Tonkens House. View of living area looking south east, with Wright-designed furniture and built-ins. Photograph by Udo Greinacher, 2016.

After Gerald Tonkens's death in 1990, his second wife Beverly continued to live in the house and maintained it in its original condition. A 2001 rainstorm damaged the roof and interiors, requiring significant repairs. Beverly Tonkens sold the house in 2013 to Indian-Australian documentary filmmaker, Safina Uberoi and her husband Lukas Ruecker, who have recently begun an extensive restoration of it. She has employed Frank Lloyd Wright's grandson, Eric Lloyd Wright, who originally supervised its construction, as a consultant in the work. Ms. Uberoi is filming a documentary record of the restoration.

Tonkens House. South facade, terrace, and lanai. Photograph by Patrick Snadon, 2016.

The Tonkens House has received more scholarly attention than Wright's other Cincinnati houses: this includes a 1990 National Register of Historic Places nomination form with contributions by Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer; a 1996 Master's thesis by Cindy Damschroder, and a 1997 essay by architectural historian Walter Langsam in Great Houses of the Queen City. Langsam's summation is worth quoting: "*The Tonkens House exemplifies the total harmony of client, builders, and architect that can make even a relatively small dwelling into a work of art.*"

Tonkens House. View to east from "gallery" corridor into living area. Photograph by Alice Weston. ca. 1990s. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC

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