

Fay Jones' Stoneflower

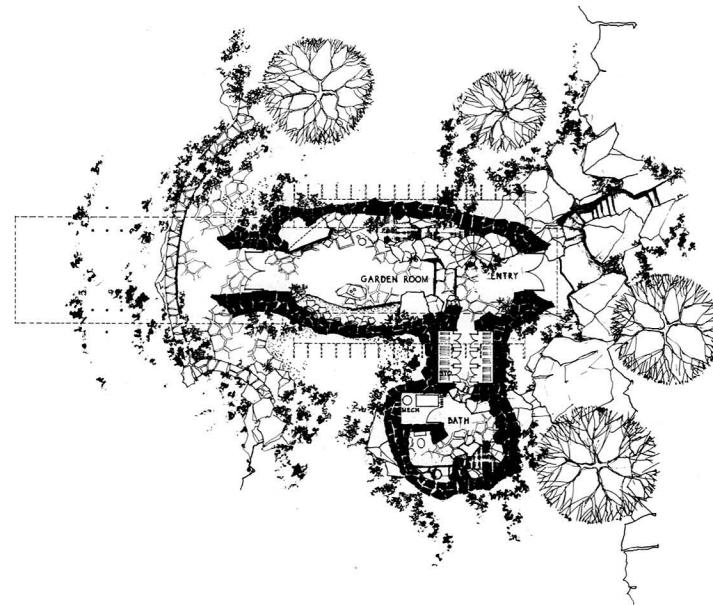
Eden Isle, Arkansas

Richard W. Longstreth

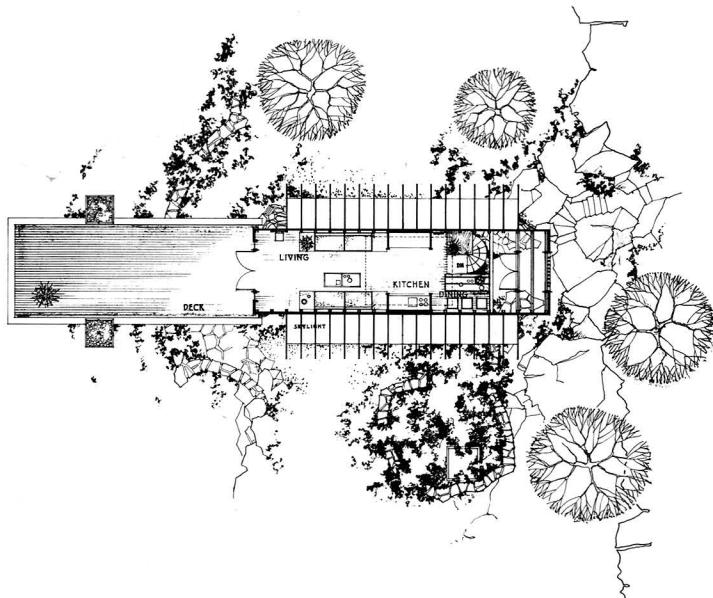
Among the numerous buildings designed by Fay Jones in the central United States during the past quarter century, some of the most remarkable have been born out of highly constrained programs. Jones can impart a sense of vitality to the most extravagant of projects, but his keen imagination is never more forcefully expressed than when it must respond to limitations that many colleagues would consider inhibiting. Jones has also been unusually consistent in his use of a design vocabulary. At a relatively early stage in his career, he developed a repertoire that he has continued to experiment with and refine ever since. Both these facets of his work are well illustrated in Stoneflower (1964-1965), built on Eden Isle, Arkansas. The program presented myriad challenges. The solution bears close resemblance in character and detail to recent work, especially Thorncrowne Chapel near Eureka Springs. Acclaimed at the time it was completed, the residence merits no less attention today.

The clients, Curt Goodfellow and Robert Shaheen, were landscape architects who had collaborated with Jones on several projects. Goodfellow (married with children) and Shaheen (bachelor) wanted a summer house and a year-round weekend retreat that would double as an office where they could work and receive clients. Both parties desired a

1. Stoneflower, ground floor plan



2. Stoneflower, second floor plan



also hoped that manufactured products—furniture, fixtures, and appliances—could be kept to a minimum and, preferably, be hidden from view. The budget was low. Costs were projected at around \$15,000; these increased some \$10,000 when more of the construction was contracted than was initially planned. Perhaps the most demanding requirement was that the house be built out of 2x4 and 2x12 lumber cut in stock lengths, which Goodfellow and Shaheen had purchased for other purposes and were now anxious to use.

The house's basic design idea is simple: two large, multi-purpose spaces, one placed above the other, with a low service wing to one side (Figures 1-2). The owners performed much of the masonry work themselves at a considerable cost savings. Jones designed all the furniture, thus reducing the presence of manufactured goods. In other respects, the scheme is quite unconventional.

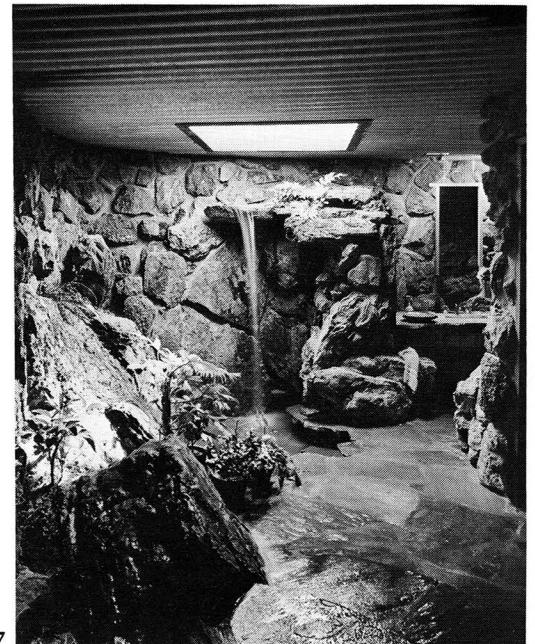
The lower section is a free-form cave built of local field stone. Its mass is considerable, yet, from the exterior, this space hardly appears to be part of the house at all (Figures 3-4). Resting amid boulders, it suggests more a natural outcropping which has been slightly trimmed to accommodate a new-found structure above. The upper section offers total contrast to its base. The nar-



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- 3. Stoneflower, entrance elevation
- 4. Stoneflower, lakefront elevation
- 5. Stoneflower, garden room
- 6. Stoneflower, garden room
- 7. Stoneflower, bathroom

row, soaring box with broad eaves is counterpointed by the horizontal thrust of the projecting deck, which is almost as long as the house proper. The duality that exists between lower and upper sections offers a response to the setting. Just as the base suggests a great rock formation, the main block suggests a tree, with its parasol-like roof extending out to mingle with the branches. Yet the composition also entails defiance. With the base being scarcely noticed, the tall, solid

block above and the outstretching, open deck engage to stand assertively on the terrain, dominating the immediate landscape. These bold, clearly man-made forms are the most conspicuous facets of the exterior and the ones by which it is remembered.

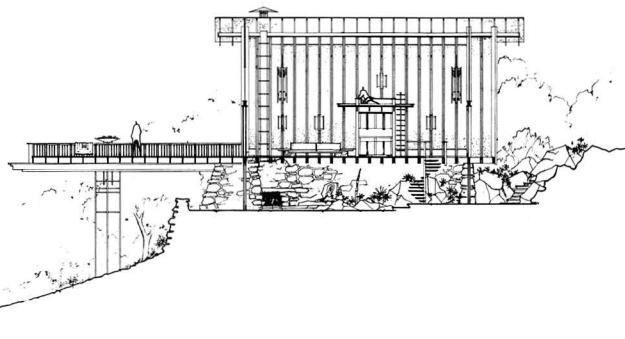
Inside, both lower and upper sections play an important role with the differences between them emphasized. The garden room and adjacent wing form a

cavern—cool, secluded, intimate (Figures 5-7). Here space is not as important as are the effects of texture and diffused light. Much of the illumination comes from skylights which direct the eye to fragments rather than to the room as a whole. Only the paired joists in the main area tie the space together and offer some clue as to the nature of the room above.

The ascent — from cave to cathedral — is abrupt, using a tight circular stair that becomes, in

effect, a neutral element which is not visually integrated with either space. At the same time, the transition between floors is carefully orchestrated. The stair lies in an open well; thus part of the grand upper room is visible from the bottom, and more is apparent with each step up (Figure 8). Then, right at the top of the stair, the space contracts. The dining table, placed along one side, transforms a potentially ceremonial approach into a casual one (Figure 9). This piece also serves as a bar-

- 8. Stoneflower, longitudinal section
- 9. Stoneflower, stair and dining area
- 10. Stoneflower, living area looking toward the kitchen
- 11. Stoneflower, living area looking toward the deck



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rier, channeling movement into a low, linear kitchen area. Only after walking beyond the kitchen does the space open, and only then does it become clear that the upper floor is one large room (Figure 10). This kind of perceptual manipulation is Jones at his best. The simplest of components, an open kitchen corridor with a sleeping loft above, is used to generate an intricate, unfolding spatial sequence.

The big room is also a cave of sorts, with the long sides unfenestrated save small clerestory windows (to prevent the visual incursion of neighboring houses). But the cave is concurrently a lofty arbor, its details delicate and precise. At either end, the walls become glass from floor to ceiling (Figure 11). This juxtaposition offers pronounced contrasts between light and dark zones. Furthermore, it reinforces the space's linear emphasis, especially in the direction of the

deck and the lake beyond. Finally, unlike the amorphous spatial quality of the ground floor, this level possesses a rigorous geometric order with columns of paired 2x4 posts, spaced twenty-four inches on center connected with 2x4 diagonal braces under the roof.

The conceptual basis for this use of pervasive, unifying geometry stems from Frank Lloyd Wright, who has long been a source of inspiration, and under whom Jones

studied at Taliesin in 1953. Throughout his career, Jones adopted Wright's credo of designing an organic architecture where all the parts have a clear relationship to one another, where even the smallest details reinforce the scheme as a totality, where the building makes reference to the land on which it rests, where natural materials contribute to both the abstract order and to the ambience, and where geometry, developed from natural forms, is employed to achieve these ends.

However, in Wright's work and in that of many disciples, geometry often becomes an end unto itself. With Jones' buildings, on the other hand, geometry remains subordinate. As conspicuous as the rectilinear organization is in this house, it is never allowed visually to consume the contents. The grand space is first and foremost read as a living space disciplined by geometry, not a geometric exercise into which living components have been woven.



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The same approach is evident in Jones' furnishings. His partiality to total design, where as many of a building's accouterments as possible come under the controlling hand of the architect, is also inherited from Wright. But, again, Jones pursues this objective in his own way. Here, and in many of his other houses, the furniture is relatively unobtrusive. The sofas and side tables in the living area are carefully tied to the adjacent kitchen wall units, adding to the room's cohesiveness and reinforcing

its linearity. These elements are deliberately modest in appearance. Straightforward and practical, they possess a vernacular quality, as if they had been fashioned by a resourceful handyman. In contrast, the chandeliers and wall sconces are intricate and ornamental. The complex geometry of such fixtures is often the most overtly Wrightian aspect of Jones' work. Yet it is precisely these attributes that make the lights stand as isolated decorative embel-

ishments, not as a phalanx in an omnipresent order that dominates the scheme. Artificial lighting thus assumes a traditional role in Jones' architecture that is quite unlike its visual function in many buildings of the period.

Domesticating abstract conceptualizations is a tendency by no means unique to Jones. This aim has long been a potent force in American modernism. After World War II, it became an



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especially popular concern among young architects who sought alternatives to the austere formalism of the International Style—alternatives that were considered more compatible with American tastes and traditions. Among the most creative practitioners in this genre were Californians: Harwell Hamilton Harris in Los Angeles and William Wurster and Joseph Esherick in the Bay Area. These men also played a key role in resurrecting the reputations of an earlier generation on the West Coast whom they regarded as heroes, most notably the Greene brothers and Bernard Maybeck. Both old and new work done in this vein had a decisive impact on Jones. (He applied for and almost accepted a position at the University of Texas school of architecture because Harris had just been appointed the director.) The commitment to reflecting regional qualities; the extensive use of wood; the rustic, frequently infor-

mal, character; and the soft, subtle orientalism of houses by Harris and others in California has imbued Jones' designs since the 1950s (Figure 12). What sets his work apart is the synthesis of geometric order with these more identifiably domestic facets. At Stoneflower, the means used to achieve this integration is structure.



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Fully exposed, the structural system of the main room becomes the basis for its expression (Figure 13). The components are simple. The part each plays in the network is easily understood. The repetition of identical units along the length of the room modulates both its form and space. Set at close intervals, the units' total effect is decorative, yet they cannot be mistaken for decoration. They further help to dramatize the space, but the system is not a dramatic one, unlike those sometimes developed in postwar modern

houses. The structure is allowed to speak for itself, clearly and unpretentiously, providing the very essence of the design in the process. The combination of these characteristics is unusual in America's wooden architecture. Among the most distinguished examples is the interior of St. John's Presbyterian Church in Berkeley (1910) by Julia Morgan (Figure 14). In both cases, the imperatives of economy (and, here, the available lumber sizes), rather than specific precedents led to the solution.

However, the designs share a common theoretical base: the rationalist notion of structural determinism in Gothic church architecture advanced by Viollet-le-Duc in the mid-nineteenth century. Stoneflower is consummate modern interpretation of Viollet's belief that structure comprises the basis for organization to Gothic architecture, that every part of the fabric is essential to the structure's integrity, and that this matrix forms the fundamental spirit of the work.

If the house embodies rationalist logic, it also carries strong subjective overtones that strike a harmonious chord with popular culture. Consciously or otherwise, Jones often exaggerates forms, stretching them out in a manner that intensifies their emotional impact. From below, a slightly blurred image of Stoneflower bears affinity to the sort of design *Playboy* might have liked to present as the ideal bachelor's retreat. Much as with the distorted perspective render-



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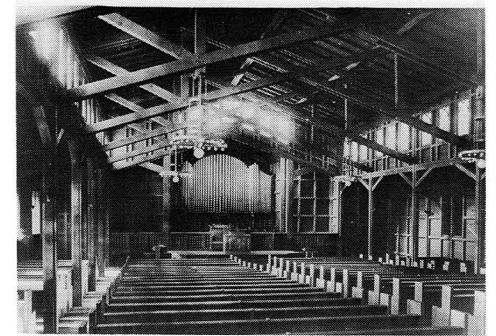
ings for the wide-track Pontiac produced in the 1960s, exaggerated dimensions are posited as a virtue. Jones also plays with popular exotica, here transforming the bathroom into a grotto. In the minds of many people, such features may seem a little bizarre, but are nonetheless very appealing, at least to observe. Perhaps for these reasons, the dwelling was chosen as the subject of a feature article in *Life* ("Escape House") shortly after construction was completed. Ap-

propriately, a full-page advertisement for General Motors cars is on the preceding page.

But in Jones' work, exaggeration and exotica are not simple reflections of popular taste. They are active contributors to complex high art package and assume a new meaning within that context. In this respect, the architect owes a major debt to Bruce Goff, with whom he taught at the University of Oklahoma from 1951 to 1953. (Jones declined the offer from

Norman to accept the one at Norman.) Goff's free spirit, his love of experimentation and fantasy, his pursuit of unorthodox solutions, and his flair for drama are all present in Jones' buildings. Both men's work is eclectic, drawing from many sources, while it represents no less a metamorphosis into something very distinct.

Goff and Jones have long practiced in communities remote from the centers of architectural



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development. Many of their clients, too, fall outside the conventional boundaries of persons who commission a designer so devoted to the refinements of his art. Many architects of comparable ability could never work, let alone flourish, under such conditions. (It is hard to imagine Richard Meier or Frank Gehry creating houses in the Ozarks for owners of car dealerships, feed lots, and discount stores.) Jones, like Goff, is an anomaly in the American heartland. His staunch independence may require these circumstances, but he has not worked in isolation. Small town, down home culture is an inherent part of his own. The place, the man, the work are inseparable.

12. Harwell Hamilton Harris, Johnson house, Los Angeles, 1948
 13. Stoneflower, night view from deck
 14. Julia Morgan, St. John's Presbyterian Church, Berkeley, 1910, sanctuary