



"I believe a house is more a home by being a work of Art."

Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Natural House*, 1954



The John E. and Catherine E. Christian House, "Samara," view from ravine, 2012. Image: April Befort.



John, Linda, and Catherine "Kay" Christian in the living room of their home, "Samara," 1960. © The John E. Christian Family Memorial Trust, Inc.

## Frank Lloyd Wright's **SAMARA:** A Mid-Century Dream Home

▼ The 1950s were a time when the notion of hiring an architect to design your dream home was still a possibility for a middle income family. Kay and John Christian truly enjoyed the dream home Frank Lloyd Wright created for them. It was comfortable enough to lead a private lifestyle and raise their daughter Linda, yet flexible enough to accommodate family celebrations, holiday parties, and social events from time to time. Fully integrated into the professional and social life at Purdue University, Dr. Christian, a professor, and his wife, who had been social director of the university union, often hosted buffet dinners, lectures, and receptions for their colleagues, students, and guests.

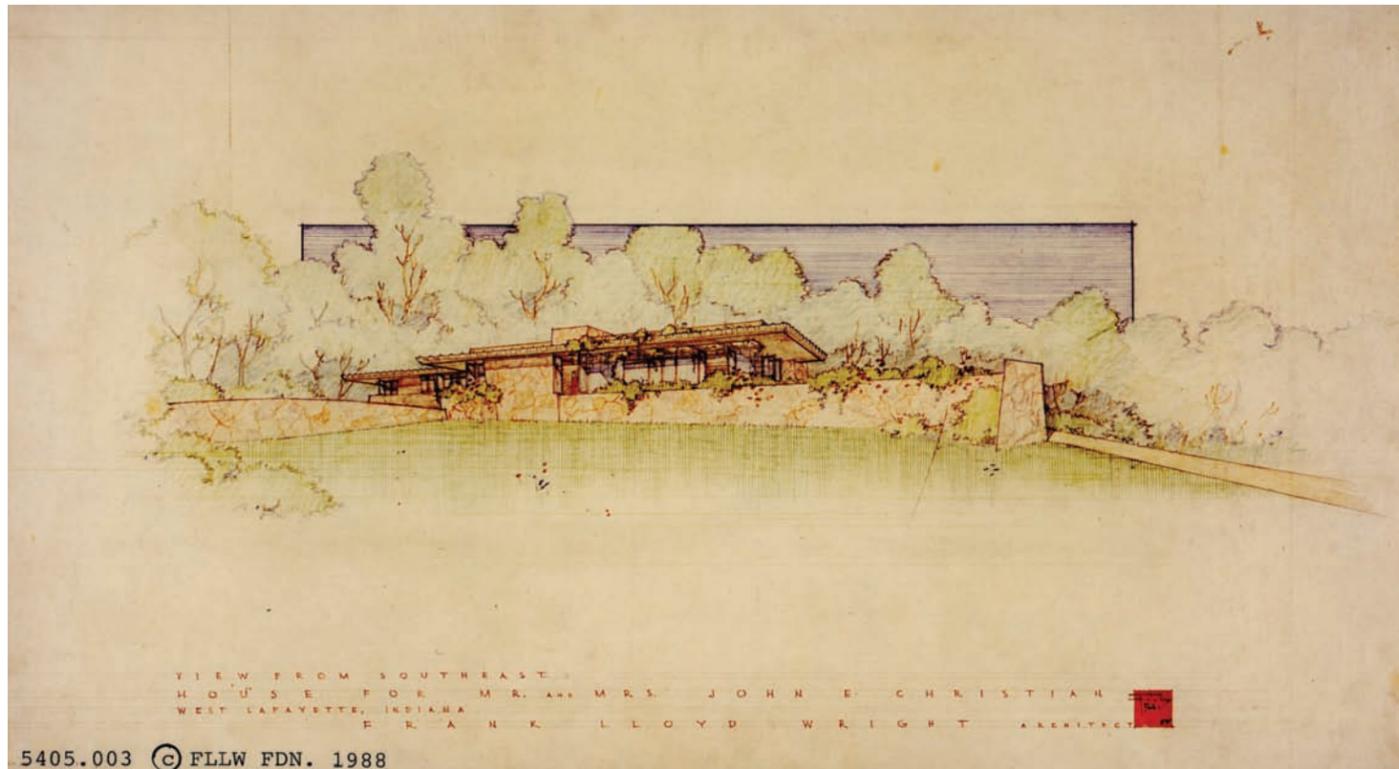
▼ Using a copy of Tyler Stewart Rogers's *Plan Your House to Suit Yourself* as her guide, Kay approached the task of putting to paper her family's needs—and wants—for their dream home. They had been following the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, then in the "crowning decade" of his career although he was in his eighties, and absorbed his words and his work in books and magazines before exploring his designs firsthand. They were sure he was their architect; he needed more convincing. During a series of memorable meetings between 1950 and 1952, and in a flurry of correspondence, Wright accepted the commission and asked for the Christians to provide topographical maps and photographs of their West Lafayette site.

## PLANNING SAMARA

Busy with larger projects in various locations across the country, Wright was unable to see for himself the dramatic setting his clients had chosen and, in fact, never saw “Samara” (a name derived from the winged seeds of pine trees that were scattered about the property) before his death in 1959. Instead, he relied on his clients to keep him on task, and sent an apprentice, Edward Kipta, from his Taliesin Fellowship, to supervise the local contractor. As part of their initial package to Wright, Kay included a 28-page document, “What We Need for How We Live,” which offered Wright insight into the Christians’ aspirations for their dream home. While Wright provided for a majority of their requests for furnishings and storage in private areas of the home, he ultimately convinced the Christians that an open plan for living would meet their desires for both formal and casual activities.

Samara was one of a series of dwellings in Wright’s “democratic” Usonian style, modular in construction and with a limited palette of materials. These structures were meant to be affordable to the average person, but they typically cost more than a home of the period. Still in the early stages of his career at Purdue, Dr. Christian struck a deal with his architect to accept designs for furniture and fixtures for their home with the understanding that all would be completed as funds

became available. Over the next fifty years, the family held true to that promise, adding perforated wood clerestory windows, copper fascia, accent lighting, and dining furniture of Wright’s design to slowly complete their dream home. In this way, the home evolved with the Christians, who added their personal collections of artwork, souvenirs, books, and furnishings to the interior.



Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), Presentation perspective, The John E. and Catherine E. Christian House, Copyright © c.1954. The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Arizona.

The construction of the home was documented in photographs and home movie footage, and included all phases: the laying of radiant heat flooring, installation of the fireplace, walls erected, and windows set in place. Once complete, the documentation continued with each of young Linda’s birthday parties and the family’s annual Christmas dinners (including Kay’s thematic tabletop decorations) captured by Dr. Christian. These records, along with a collection of rare books, correspondence,

furnishings, and artwork comprise the archive of the John E. Christian Family Trust, organized four years after Kay Christian’s death in 1986. Many of these items are included in the exhibition *Frank Lloyd Wright’s Samara: A Mid-Century Dream Home*.

Living in a Wright home often meant sharing it with the public, and the Christians’ experience at Samara was no different. They slowly came to realize that Wright devotees, architecture students, and general passersby would come alone or in groups from far and wide to experience their dream home, one of six designs Wright completed in Indiana. Even at a young age, Linda Christian realized that her family’s home was special. The floor-to-ceiling corner windows (a trait of Wright’s Usonian designs that provided great views both day and night), the dimmable rheostat lighting, and the cantilevered fireplace were among the curiosities that made the home seem less ordinary than those of her friends. In winter, the radiant heat of the concrete floor warmed the house and feet of those in it, and the flat roof was a hit for summertime sunbathing.



(top) The John E. and Catherine E. Christian House, “Samara,” living room view of banquette sofa, Samara, 2007. © Alexander Vertikoff. Courtesy of Samara.

(bottom) Linda Christian, right, and her cousin John Spooner celebrating their fifth birthday, 1957. © The John E. Christian Family Memorial Trust, Inc.





Patinated copper fascia, The John E. and Catherine E. Christian House, "Samara," 2012. Image: April Befort.

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This exhibition is organized and toured by ExhibitsUSA, a national program of Mid-America Arts Alliance. © 2012.

MID-AMERICA ARTS ALLIANCE IS GENEROUSLY FUNDED BY:

The Brown Foundation of Houston, Inc., Capitol Federal Foundation, Cooper Foundation, C. Kendric and Mary Ann Fergeson, Terrence and Catherine Ferguson, Francis Family Foundation, Gilbert M. & Martha H. Hitchcock Foundation, Houston Endowment Inc., Inasmuch Foundation, Kirkpatrick Family Fund, Nancy and Peter Meinig, Missouri Arts Council, Muriel McBrien Kauffman Foundation, Richard J. Stern Foundation for the Arts, Ross and Marianna Beach Foundation, Inc., and the William T. Kemper Foundation, Commerce Bank, Trustee. Mid-America Arts Alliance works in partnership with the state arts agencies of Arkansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas; the National Endowment for the Arts; the National Endowment for the Humanities; and the Institute of Museum and Library Services.