USONIAN ARCHITECTURE PRINCIPLES

The word *Usonian* appears to have been coined by James Duff Law[1], a Scottish writer who quoted a letter of his own (dated June 18, 1903) that begins "*We of the United States… have no right to use the title 'Americans' when referring to matters pertaining exclusively to ourselves."* He had proposed "**Usona**" (United States of North America) but preferred the form "**Usonia**".[2] It was first published as a descriptive term by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1927 when he wrote "*But why this term "America" has become representative as the name of these United States at home and abroad is past recall. Samuel Butler fitted us with a good name. He called us **Usonians**, and our Nation of combined States, **Usonia***".[3] He further adopted and adapted the term specifically to his vision for the landscape of the country, including the planning of cities and the architecture of buildings. Wright proposed the use of the adjective ***Usonian*** to describe the particular New World character of the American landscape as distinct and free of previous architectural conventions.[4]

1. ORIGINS OF STYLE

Frank Lloyd Wright designed and built ±66 structures under the Usonian moniker. In general, this was a readaptation of the Prairie Style of architecture that was prevalent in Wright's earlier architectural practice, which consisted primarily of over-extended roof overhangs, pronounced low horizontality of massing and form, low to the ground to mimic the flat landscape of the Midwest. Although this style lost momentum by 1915, its influence continued well into the 1950s. Meanwhile, Wright "modernized" elements of this style, to be adapted to middle-income family budgets and to "*eliminate, so far as possible, the use of skilled labor*" so as to reduce cost in construction as well as maintenance. He called this modernization "*The Usonian Automatic*"[5], and relied heavily on local wood, stone, and glass, with flat roof and thick fascia construction with pronounced overhangs, open-plan interiors integrating kitchen-dining-living areas, and with maximum exposure and visual connection to the outdoors. More than 100 additional buildings were designed and constructed in this modernized style between 1934 and 1958, with international influence extending well into the 1990s. The most common characteristics of such buildings include most of the following[6] elements:

- ❑ one storey, horizontal orientation
- ❑ generally small footprint, around 1500sf (under 150 sq.m)
- ❑ no attic; no basement; attached carport or garage

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[1] James Duff Law, *electricscotland.com*. Retrieved May 24, 2022.
[2] Law, James D. (1903). *Here and There in Two Hemispheres*. Lancaster: Home Publishing Co. pp. 111–12n.
[3] Wright, Frank Lloyd. *Architecture: Selected Writings 1894–1940*. p. 100.
[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usonia
[5] Wright, Frank Lloyd. *The Natural House* (1954)
[6] https://www.thoughtco.com/usonian-style-home-frank-lloyd-wright-177787

- low, simple, usually flat roof
- efficient use of interior spaces
- open floor plan using a simple grid pattern, with few interior walls
- organic construction, using local materials of wood, stone, and glass
- built-in furnishings used as room separators
- skylights and clerestory windows
- often in rural, wooded settings

2. THE PIERRE BERTON HOUSE

Built in 1950 – near the pinnacle of Wright's Usonian Automatic application in the US – this building was built on the first of 10 equal radiating lot properties in the Windrush Co-operative (completed in 1954), conceived to showcase "*modern architecture houses quite faithful to the example of Frank Lloyd Wright's 'Usonian' houses*".[7] Pierre and Janet Berton held leadership positions in the co-op for some 50 years from 1954 to 2004, and the co-op was made subject to stringent conditions outlined in "Schedule A" which was an attachment that accompanied each deed. The conditions explicitly state that only one dwelling shall be on each property, all new building and additions should conform to the existing architecture, the dwellings shall only be used for residential purposes (with the exception of studio uses relating to their profession), the parcels cannot be subdivided as the co-op shall be seen as a whole, no boundaries or fences can be erected. In 2005, there was an attempt to subdivide the Berton property, but it was denied due to the conditions in Schedule "A".

As a Canadian variant of the Usonian model[8], this structure exhibits every one of the common elements of Usonian architecture and style, in pure form. The Bertons noted that the design was inspired by a 1948 Sunset Magazine publication. The building is clad in painted board and batten (that could be assembled by unskilled workers, using nominal dimension lumber that required minimal cuts), and displays a minimalist approach to ornamentation through nearly absent decoration of varnished wood for the window frames, painted wood and galvanized metal. Strong horizontality is reinforced by the use of local flagstone cut and stacked in long and narrow bands, paying homage to Wright's use of stone cut in Roman brick modules. Numerous low retaining walls and stone-clad planters using this stone pattern surround the building and create walkways and sitting areas.

The property is comprised of the main building, a garage facing the main approach to the house – and connected to the main structure by an exposed-structure wood frame supporting

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[7] Cohen, Jean-Louis. (2012). *The Future of Architecture. Since 1889.* London: Phaidon Press Limited.
[8] Kalman, Harold. *A History of Canadian Architecture, Vol 2*. Oxford University Press, Ontario, 1994.

translucent panels that create a sheltered walkway – as well as a pool with pool house, two stone outdoor fireplaces, and a sheltered inner courtyard with interlock paving surrounded by shoji screen panels and covered by wood trellis work supported on posts. Further into the gardens there is a train car mounted on a short length of track. The garage is enclosed as adapted to Canadian climate, a necessary revision of the Usonian preference for open carport.

The massing of the building complex is playful but strongly geometric. The house is oriented north-south. Proportional volumes are carved out of – or project outward from – the floor plan to address and engage the man-made surrounding landscape. According to Pierre Berton, all trees and vegetation were meticulously planned and planted to create a landscape evocative of several distinct settings from across Canada, from his various stages of life across the country.[9] Stone walls cut through the glazing to extend from the interior to the exterior and visually connect the built form to nature outside. Throughout the house, the floor plates act as platforms of livable spaces from which one can enjoy the myriad of wonderful views offered by the surroundings. Large cantilevers, reminiscent in style and intent to elements best recognized at Falling Water, juxtapose the playful articulation of the architectonic blocks against other parts that are embedded strongly into the ground, and others that sit atop of stone tiered terraces or wood decking as one circles around the building.

One striking feature of the design of this building is long overhanging eaves: during the summer months, due to the earth's 23.5º angle, the sun shines "higher" than during the winter, so an overhanging eave will block sunlight during summer months and will allow sunlight during the winter months – a natural air conditioning and heating system. During the winter months, the heat gained during the daylight hours is retained in the house, heating the house throughout the night. Large windows on the southern elevation of the building allow access for sunlight during winter months, as the south side is facing the sun during the winter.

The interior palette is mainly comprised of varnished wood, flagstone, ceiling tile (white), gypsum wall and carpet. The spaces use of built-ins and wood paneling as room dividers and separators, creating hallways and nooks in an otherwise open plan. Large windows create an almost seamless connection to the exterior from areas of most-public use, whereas the bedrooms offer high-sill windows to maintain privacy and a view to the natural landscape above grade. Throughout the house, the flooring material and pattern changes as if to reinforce the intended use of the spaces – with carpet in the more private areas, wood parquet, stone and slate in other parts of the building, and linoleum in the kitchen and bathrooms.

Most of the glazed areas correspond to the rooms that would benefit the most from the views and natural light, such as the living room, kitchen and dining room, or less public areas such as

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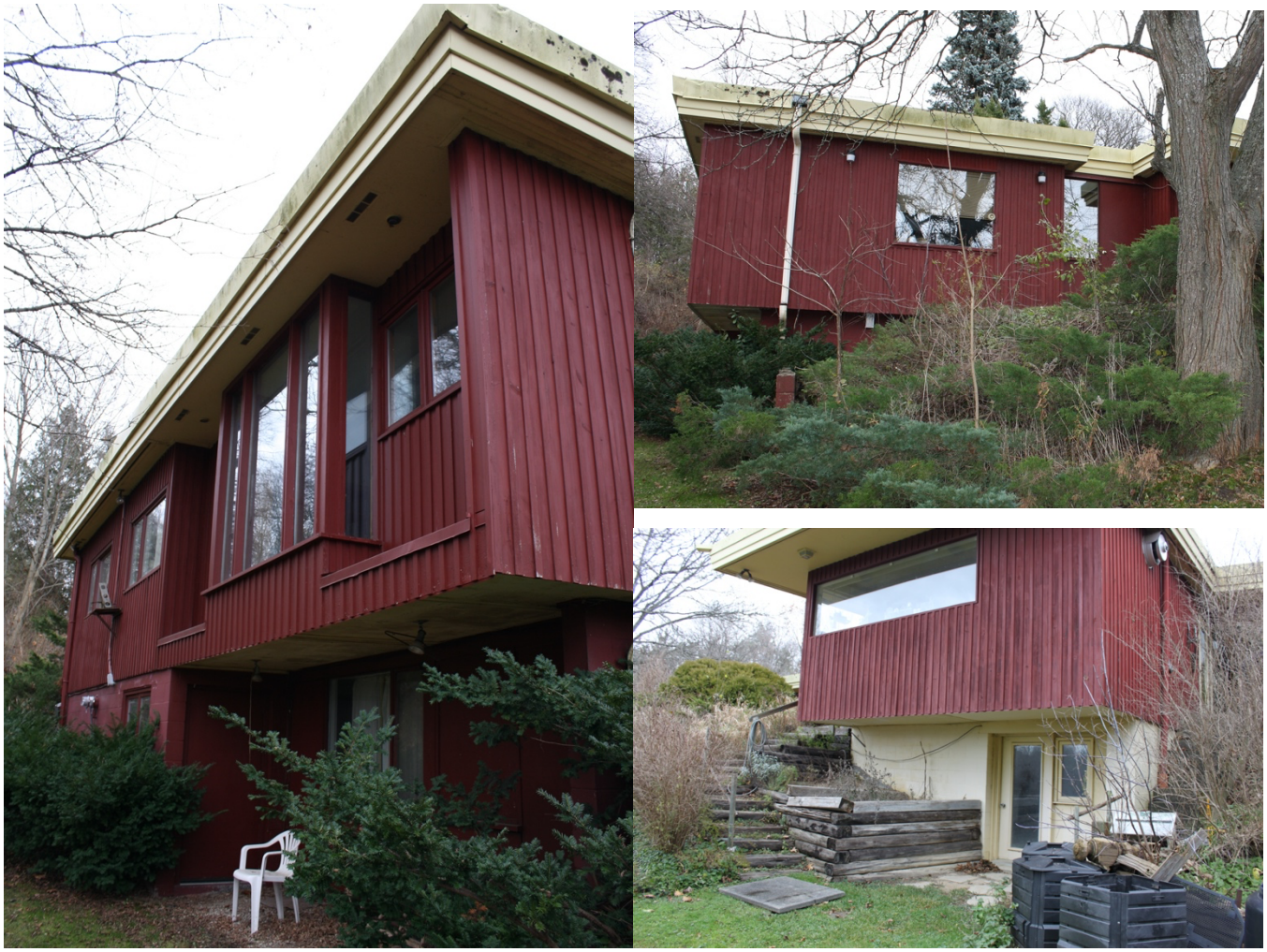
[9] The Invasion of Pierre Berton (1981) - the fifth estate, CBC/Radio-Canada

the bedrooms and the office. The oversized windows – some with low sills and extending to the ceiling – are strategically placed primarily to the west and north, while the southern portion opens to a private patio area. The east elevation was designed with smaller windows starting at a higher sill in order to guard the privacy of the spaces behind, while still providing the opportunity for light and ventilation and a view of the natural foliage canopy.

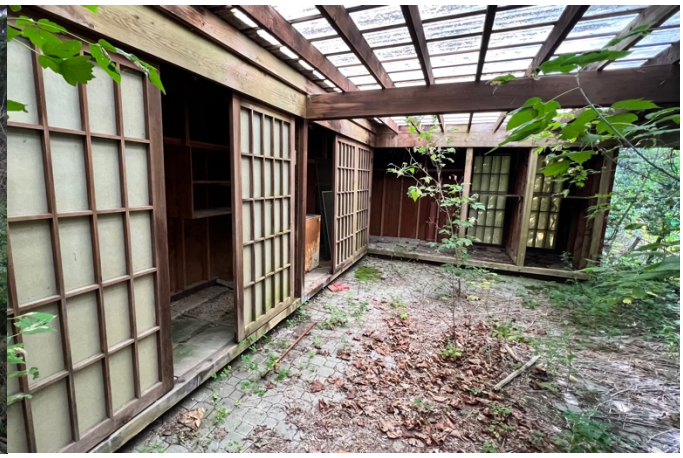
3. SELECT SITE PHOTOS

The following selection of photos illustrate the merits of the architectural design of the building and its man-made surrounding landscape. All photos were taken by Cultural Heritage staff during site visits in 2012, 2014, and 2023.

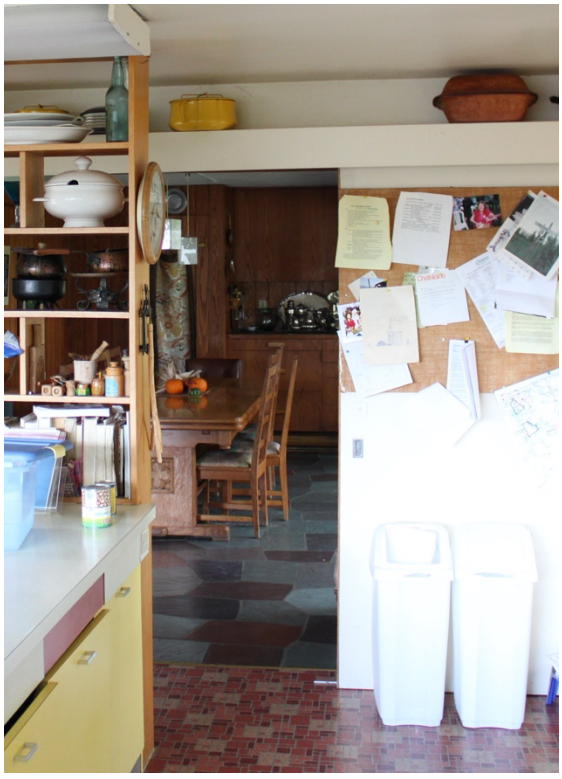


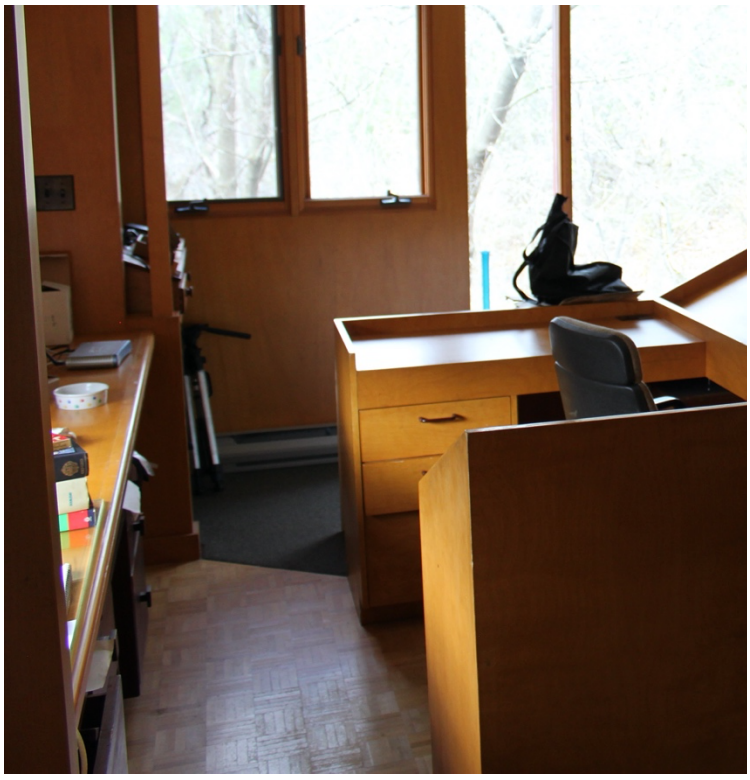
examples of extended cantilever (2012)

southern courtyard (2012)

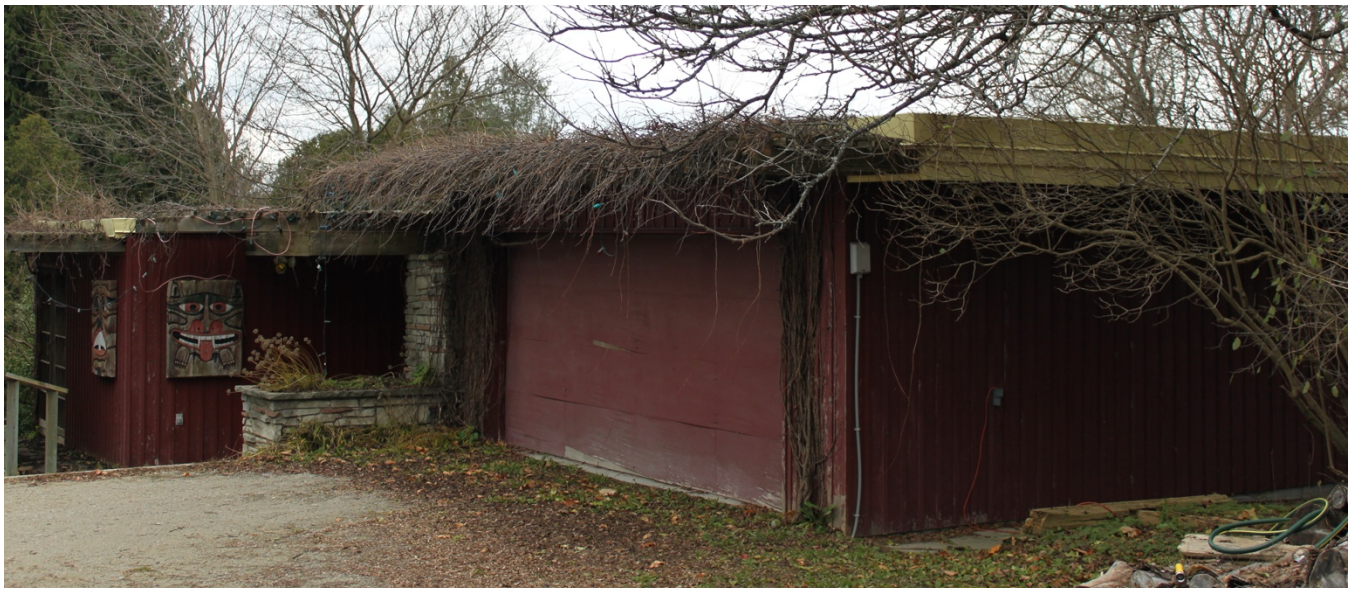


southern courtyard (2023)

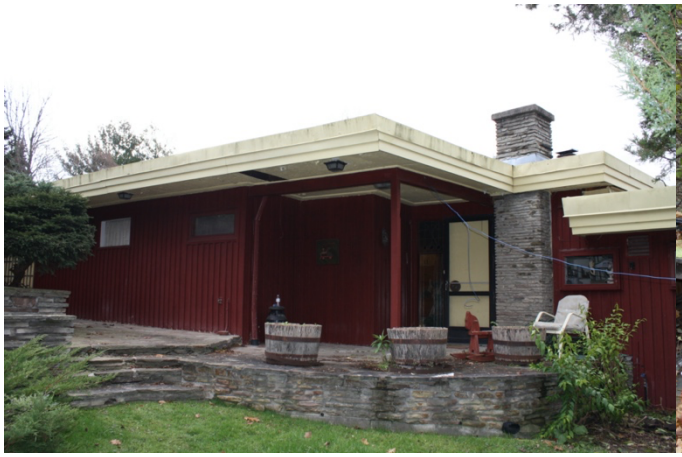




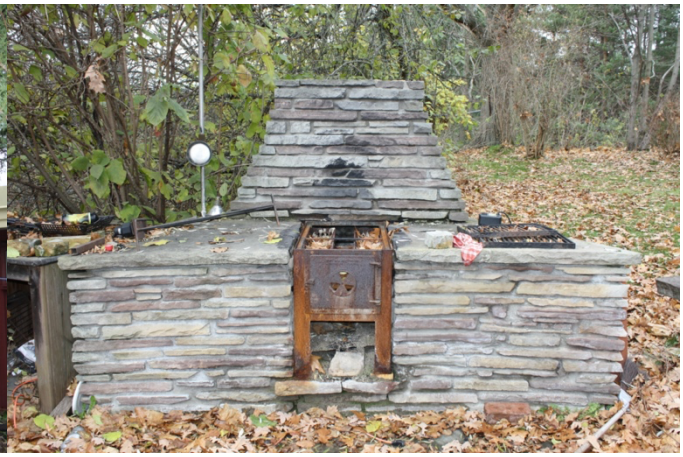
various flooring materials (2012)



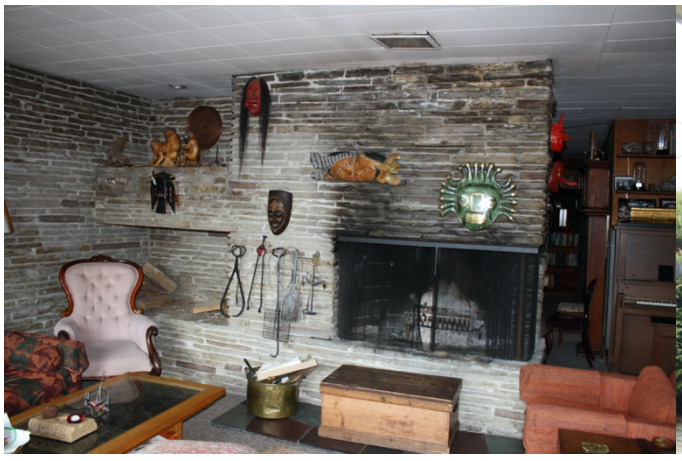
view of garage (2012)

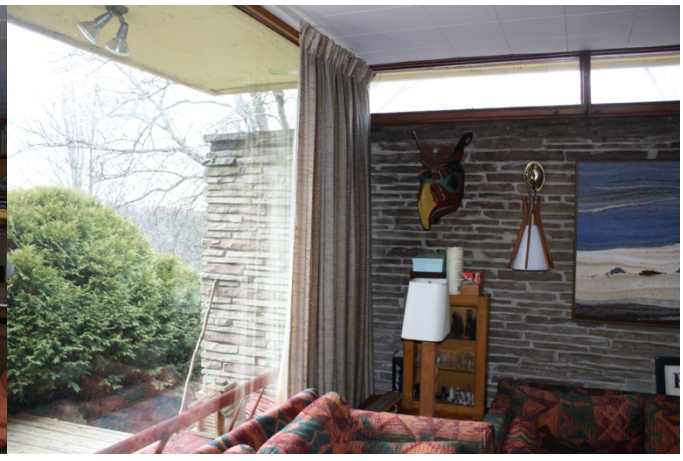


low stone work and planters (2012)



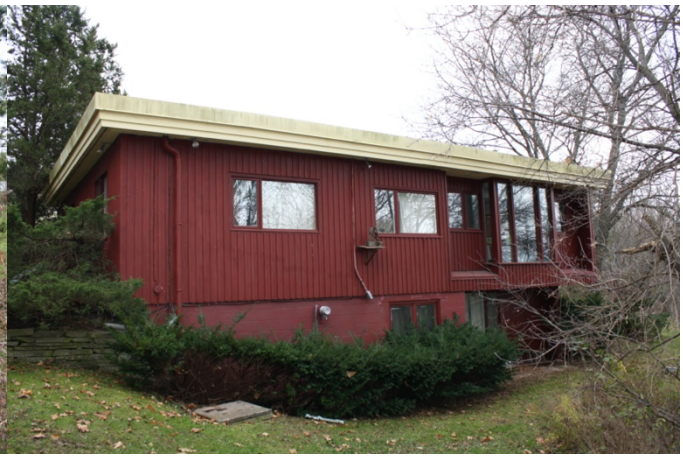
stone outdoor fireplace (2012)





fireplace and extension of wall (2012)

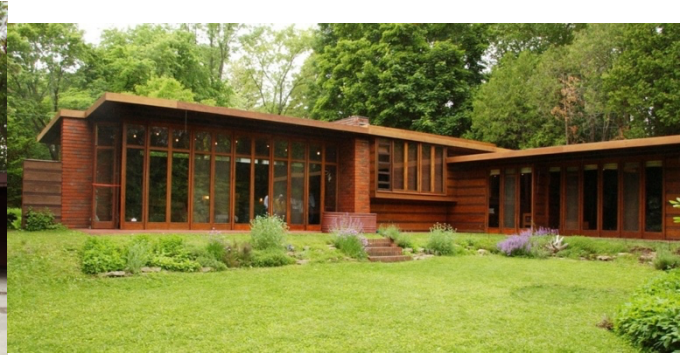
east partial elevation (2012)



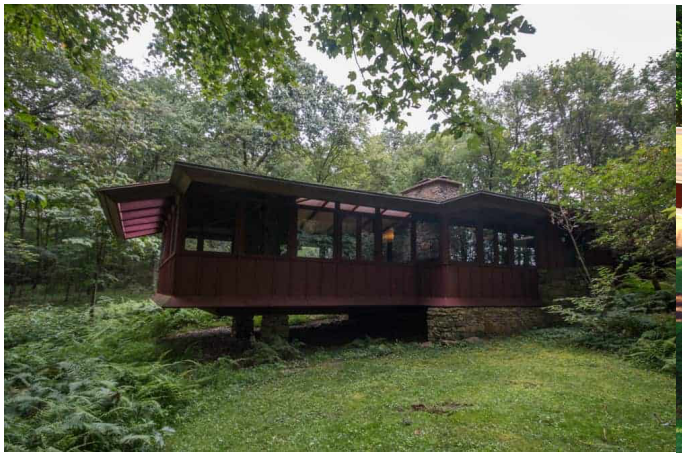
north elevation (2012)

4. SELECT USONIAN EXAMPLES

Trier House, built 1967



Herbert Jacobs House, built 1937



Balter House, Polymath Park, built 1964

Robert Sunday House, built 1957

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The Invasion of Pierre Berton (1981) - the fifth estate, CBC/Radio-Canada

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