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The front of Rakhaus, which was constructed in 1952 by members of the Taliesin Fellowship.

Architect's restoration honored for getting it Wright

By Ann van Buren

IRVINGTON — Few, if any, designers are more revered for their integration of philosophy and innovation of style than the 20th-century architect Frank Lloyd Wright. So it is understandable that Irvington resident Earl Everett Ferguson found it “a little humbling to work up the gall to mess with an original Usonian creation.”

Nonetheless, he applied for and accepted the challenge to rehabilitate “Rakhaus,” the circular stone structure in Bedford that was built, stone by stone, in 1952, by original members of the Taliesin Fellowship, a group of designers and architects who lived and worked directly with the master. This past November, Ferguson was honored to earn the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Westchester Hudson Valley Design Award for the renovation of the building.

An architect for 40 years, 26 of which have been in Irvington, Ferguson credits his staff — project manager Mike Ryan, production manager Aliexsa Dawkins, and construction manager Skip Geiger of Geiger Construction — for much of the success of the project, which was completed in 10 months. Although his firm designs new businesses and residences, historic preservation is integral to Ferguson’s practice. With the modesty of someone who is successful at working with a team, the architect expressed his wish that the Taliesin Fellowship would approve and joked, “I hope we got it Wright.”

“Preserving the noteworthy art of important architects or architectural genres can reinforce our valuation that we are living or working in a special place that reflects our history and serves as a background to the present,” he said, adding that “It fosters civic pride, advances education, and sustains aesthetic benefits to our communities.”

Understanding the terms used to describe this venture is an education in itself. While the origins of the word “Usonian” are disputed, Usonian principles are well understood. “We honored the historical integrity of the Usonian genre throughout the project... simple, organic, open to the natural elements,” Ferguson told the Enterprise. The prototypical Usonian home is a practical, single-story dwelling that is built around a garden and connects the interior world with the natural world outside. “It was the kind of project that energized our staff with creative inspiration and deep dedication to its suc-



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Earl Ferguson at his office.

cess,” he said of his effort to achieve the Usonian effect.

The Taliesin Fellowship is comprised of people who studied with Wright or with his followers to realize his various principles of design. There are two Taliesin communities, built in the early ‘30s. The original is located in Spring Green, Wis., and Taliesin West, in Scottsdale, Ariz., was built in 1932. Both are active campuses for the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture and apply Wright’s approach of learning by doing. Student projects include actual houses that dot the landscape of both locations.

“Rakhaus” was built by early members of the Taliesin Fellowship who lived and studied with Wright in Arizona. Irene and Nathan Buitenkant, the original owners and inhabitants of the Bedford property, and other members of the Fellowship, shared in Wright’s philosophy and camped out at the wooded building site while they all participated in the chores of daily living, harvested local materials, and built the house.

Made from natural elements such as wood and glass, as well as stone that came from the rocky site, the structure is situated so that it reaps the benefits of passive solar heating and light and gives its inhabitants a sense of being one with the surrounding landscape. The process of cooperative construction and the effort to create a building that is in harmony with the natural setting are major principles of the Fellowship.

While the current owner of “Rakhaus,” Edward Rakowicz, did not participate in the actual reconstruction of the house, he

worked with Ferguson’s team to revive it after years of neglect. The goal of the \$1,200,000 endeavor was to remain true to the structural, aesthetic, and functional ideals set forth by members of the Fellowship while modernizing the home to today’s standards.

To achieve this, Ferguson’s team dismantled and rebuilt the entire home. Although members of the Buitenkant family inhabited the space for decades, by the time Rakowicz bought it, the mortar was crumbling and much of the structure was in disrepair. Ferguson made the decision to remove what he called “inharmonious” additions to the original plan. He chose to add a clerestory, a feature that is seen in many of Wright’s original designs and which allows greater entry for light. These upper windows offer passive solar heating to help warm the building in the winter, even as they open for ventilation and provide an escape for the warm air that rises and collects in the summer months. The new structure features Wright’s signature concrete flooring, equipped with radiant heating as well.

While the renovation does include an addition that reflects the practices of the late 20th century in its increase in size, Ferguson’s design is true to Wright’s practice of using simple and unadorned lines. The structure is ensconced in the landscape, rather than perched on top of it.

While respecting Wright’s principles, Ferguson’s team modernized them by using state-of-the-art building materials to assure energy efficiency. This component has become crucial to today’s architecture, given

the costs and consequences of energy consumption. Coincidentally, energy conservation was touted in another renovation, by Hastings architect Peter Gisolfi, an AIA honoree in 2011 for his work on Goodhue Memorial Hall at the Hackley School in Tarrytown.

All in all, it was a good year for Ferguson, who has lived in the village with his wife, Claudia, for 25 years. The couple celebrated their silver wedding anniversary and Ferguson’s 70th birthday as well. They have two daughters — Kate, who attends Indiana University, is a graduate of Irvington High School where her sister, Jenny, is a junior. Ferguson also has two sons from a previous marriage and four grandsons who live with their families in Atlanta and Philadelphia.

While Ferguson has designed hundreds of projects over the course of his career, including celebrity homes and landmark commercial developments, when asked to name the most notable preservation work he has done in the Rivertowns he cited three projects in Irvington: the 19th-century Beltzhoover Tea-house on Halsey Pond (1999); the preservation and adaptive reuse of the McVickar House (2006), listed on the National Register of Historic Places and now the home of the Irvington Historical Society; and the preservation and restoration of the Daniel Chester French sculpture and monument site on Broadway, honoring Washington Irving (2000), also listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The award-winning architect is also very proud of his 2005 private residence in Irvington for clothing designer Eileen Fisher, as well as the design of her offices, design studios, and showrooms in Irvington and in Manhattan. Fisher’s Bridge Street headquarters received a 2009 High Honor Award from the Westchester/Hudson Valley chapter of the American Institute of Architecture. Additionally, the firm’s work on this project was selected, from among dozens of candidates, to be one of only nine recipients of the “Good Design is Good Business” award from Architectural Record magazine. It was the only firm on the East Coast to receive recognition in 2011.

Ferguson continues to forge ahead with his indomitable energy. Currently, his plans for a quad building for faculty offices and meeting spaces on the campus of Mercy College are under review by the Dobbs Ferry Planning Board.