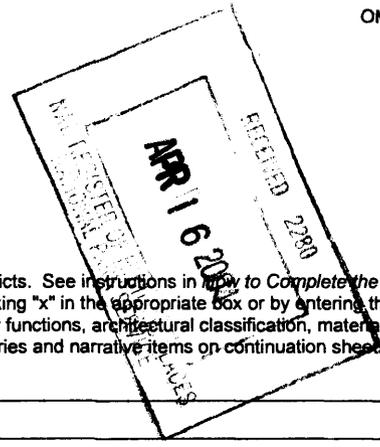


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.



1. Name of Property

historic name Neils, Frieda and Henry J., House
other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 2801 Burnham Boulevard not for publication N/A
city or town Minneapolis vicinity
state Minnesota code MN county Hennepin code 053 zip code 55416-4331

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Nina M. Archabal 4/6/04

Signature of certifying official Nina M. Archabal Date 4/6/04
Nina M. Archabal, Director and State Historic Preservation Officer, Minnesota Historical Society
State or Federal agency and bureau _____

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title _____ Date _____
State or Federal agency and bureau _____

4. National Park Service Certification

- I hereby certify that this property is:
 entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain): _____

Signature of the Keeper Edson W. Beall Date of Action 5/26/04

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
		sites
		structure
		objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Domestic, single dwelling

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Domestic, single dwelling

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Modern Movement/Wrightian

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete

walls Marble

roof Wood shingle

other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or a grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Period of Significance

1950

Significant Dates

1950

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Wright, Frank Lloyd, Architect

Halverson, Lyle (Madsen Const. Co.)

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Frank Lloyd Wright Archives,

Scottsdale, AZ

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property .5 Acres

Minneapolis South, Minn. 1967
Revised 1993

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

1.	<input type="text" value="1"/> <input type="text" value="5"/>	<input type="text" value="4"/> <input type="text" value="7"/> <input type="text" value="4"/> <input type="text" value="9"/> <input type="text" value="7"/> <input type="text" value="0"/>	<input type="text" value="4"/> <input type="text" value="9"/> <input type="text" value="7"/> <input type="text" value="8"/> <input type="text" value="1"/> <input type="text" value="5"/> <input type="text" value="0"/>
	Zone	Easting	Northing
2.	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
3.	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
	Zone	Easting	Northing
4.	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title	<u>Jane King Hession</u>		
organization	_____	date	<u>1/16/04</u>
street and number	<u>5400 Kellogg Avenue</u>	telephone	<u>952/929-0440</u>
city or town	<u>Edina</u>	state	<u>MN</u>
		zip code	<u>55424</u>

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

- A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name	_____		
street & number	_____	telephone	_____
city or town	_____	state	_____
		zip code	_____

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503

United States Department of the Interior
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**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Neils, Frieda and Henry J., House

Name of property

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Section 7 Page 1

Description

The Frieda and Henry J. Neils House, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, is a one-story L-shaped Usonian house. The house sits on a double lot with mature trees on the southeastern shore of Cedar Lake in the Cedar Isles Dean neighborhood of the city of Minneapolis. A wooded swath of city-owned parkland, originally platted as a 60-foot wide extension of Burnham Boulevard, runs between the property and Cedar Lake.

The L-shape plan of the house typifies the organizing social and spatial concepts of Wright's Usonian designs. One wing is composed of the active areas of the house including the living and dining rooms, "workspace," or kitchen, and maid's quarters. The second wing, which is organized along the north/south axis of the entrance "gallery" or hallway, consists of the more private areas of the house including three bedrooms and two bathrooms. The rooflines of the house are complex. The asymmetrical gable roof has strong lines, cantilevered gable ends, deep overhangs, and prominent fascia boards. On the west, one continuous gable plane extends the full north/south length of the house. Here the deep roof overhangs shelter an outdoor walkway that runs from the carport on the south to the secondary entrance and maid's quarters of the house to the north. Over this portion of the house, the roof plane further extends nearly to the ground. On the east, the gable roof is broken into three distinct sections of different lengths and heights over the carport, the bedroom wing, and the living room wing of the house. The roof over the three-stall carport is supported by three piers; two rectangular piers that define the stalls, and a third irregularly shaped four-sided pier, which houses a storage space. The roof dramatically cantilevers in two places: beyond the carport to the south; and beyond the living room to the east. The strong vertical mass of the double chimney visually anchors the house to the site and marks the intersection of the two wings

The house rests on a concrete slab. The bearing walls (both on the exterior and interior) and the chimney are constructed of thousands of various sized blocks of cull marble laid in a horizontal pattern. Mortar is raked in the horizontal joints, but remains flush on the vertical joints. The edges of all blocks are roughly chipped away. The walls of the house cant inside and out and are thicker at the bottom than at the top. The roof is sheathed with cedar shingles. The redwood fascia board of the roof edge is set back at a 30-degree angle and finished with applied wood blocks in a dentil pattern. Soffits are finished with stucco. All windows and doors are aluminum and custom-designed. In many areas of the house the windows and doors are trapezoidal in shape and angled at the top because they terminate along the slope of the gable roof. Windows vary in type and include fixed, awning and casement. On the interior, non-bearing walls are made of shellacked and waxed clear Western larch horizontal tongue and groove. The floor is concrete slab on grade with inlaid gravity heating. Asbestos floor tiles cover the original scored, glaze-finished reddish-tinted concrete floors. Wright designed the built in furniture, which includes banquettes, desks, tables and beds.

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Continuation Sheet**

Neils, Frieda and Henry J., House

Name of property

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Section 7 Page 2

The entry, which is hidden from view from the street, is accessed through the carport. The glass and aluminum door, which is angled on the top edge to conform with the angle of the roof gable, opens onto a long gallery (running north/south) flanked on the west by five small rectangular awning windows, and on the east by a bookcase that runs the full length of the gallery thereby creating a parallel secondary hallway that provides access to the bed and bath rooms.

At the end of the gallery, three steps descend to the open plan dining room and living room. At the same time the space ascends vertically to the apex of the 17-foot high vaulted ceiling, and extends visually to the outside through the continuous band of large pane aluminum windows and doors that run from floor to ceiling on the north and from wing wall to ceiling on the east. A massive, open-hearth fireplace, also constructed of cull marble, dominates the space. The cantilevered fireplace hood begins four feet above the floor and dramatically rises thirteen feet to the apex of the vaulted ceiling. A triangular terrace, defined by low wall extensions of two of the house's exterior walls, extends beyond the living room toward the lake to the north. Maid's quarters, a second entrance and the workspace are in the northwest end of the wing.

With the exception of a small marble and stone outdoor planter that was added along the west side of the driveway in the 1980s, and two window mullions that replaced leaded joints in two mitered windows, the property has had no significant alterations. The property is in excellent condition and retains its architectural integrity.

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Continuation Sheet**

Neils, Frieda and Henry J., House

Name of property

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Section 8 Page 1

Statement of Significance

The Frieda and Henry J. Neils House is eligible for the National Register under Criterion C as a property that embodies distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction. It is of statewide significance in the area of architecture. The house is a good example of Frank Lloyd Wright's post World War II Usonian houses. It is also a singular example because of its unique building materials – cull marble, clear Western larch and aluminum. It is the only house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright constructed of marble.¹ Henry J. Neils, a prominent and well-connected Minneapolis businessman, not only suggested the unique building materials, but also was able to secure all of them through companies with which he was personally or professionally associated. The Frieda and Henry J. Neils House falls within the statewide historic context "Urban Centers, 1870-1940," and within the local contexts "Minneapolis Architecture: Post War Minneapolis, 1945-1991."

The singularity of the house is a manifestation of the well-documented process of give and take between Henry J. Neils and Frank Lloyd Wright that characterized the design and construction phases. The process of designing and constructing the Neils house, and discussions about building material selection, are meticulously documented in extensive correspondence between Neils and Wright. Such correspondence proved necessary because Wright did not visit the Neils house site until after the house was built, and Neils's visits to Taliesin were infrequent.² Neils also kept careful records of contracts and expenditures.

In 1949 Henry J. Neils, retired president of Flour City Ornamental Iron Company in Minneapolis, and his wife, Frieda Tetzlaff Neils, asked Frank Lloyd Wright to build a "one story modern functional house," for them and their daughter Patricia, the youngest of their three children.³ They chose three lakeside lots that adjoined their 1923 thirteen-room family home at 2815 Burnham Boulevard in Minneapolis, as their building site.

The Neilses decision to approach Wright was an informed one. Collectively, Frieda and Henry were extremely knowledgeable about the arts, design, architecture, the building trade, and construction. Frieda Tetzlaff Neils was the daughter of Eugene Tetzlaff who founded Flour City Ornamental Iron Company in Minneapolis in 1893. She frequently made extended visits to Europe with her parents where she became very interested in modern decorative arts and architecture. She was an avid collector of

¹ According to Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, Director of the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives. Wright intended to use marble floors and countertops in the Valley National or "Daylight Bank" in 1947, and considered surfacing the exterior of the Guggenheim Museum with marble, but neither was realized. Email correspondence from Pfeiffer to Jane King Hession, July 18, 2003.

² Some original correspondence remains in the possession of Mary McGee. The majority of original correspondence, however, is held at the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives, at Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Arizona, with copies at the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and Humanities, in Los Angeles, California.

³ Henry J. Neils letter to Frank Lloyd Wright, September 30, 1948. The Neilses also had a son, Henry E., and an elder daughter, Mary.

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Neils, Frieda and Henry J., House

Name of property

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Section 8 Page 2

decorative arts, notably Meissen, Dresden, Venetian glass, and later Japanese and American ceramics. She was also a great admirer of the architecture and philosophies of Frank Lloyd Wright, and read widely on the subject. She suggested to her husband that Wright design their new home.⁴ Henry J. Neils was familiar with the building trade and accustomed to working with architects, contractors and craftsmen in his capacity as president of Flour City Ornamental Iron Company, a company that specialized in architectural metalwork and curtain wall windows, and which was also known for its artistry. Additionally, he was a scion of the J. Neils Lumber Company, founded by his father Julius, in Cass Lake, Minnesota, and a trustee of Northwestern Marble and Tile Corporation, Minneapolis.⁵ Although he once wrote to Wright saying, "Mrs. Neils and I are rank amateurs at this kind of work," the correspondence suggests this was not the case.⁶

In an effort to connect with Wright, the Neilses sought the counsel of Dean and Mrs. Malcolm Willey, for whom Wright designed a house in 1934 in the Prospect Park neighborhood of Minneapolis.⁷ The Willey House was an important commission for Wright for several reasons. It was his first commission after years without work during the late 20s and early 30s, and ushered in a period of tremendous achievement and productivity for Wright: his very next commission was Fallingwater. But most significantly, the Willey House "represents the major bridge between the Prairie style and the soon-to-appear standard L-plan Usonian house."⁸ Mrs. (Nancy) Willey suggested they contact Eugene Masselink, Wright's secretary, for an appointment with the architect. Prior to the arranged meeting, Neils sent Wright a letter in which he stated, "Mrs. Neils and I feel that only you could design a house that would take the best advantage of the beautiful view over Cedar Lake,"⁹ On October 16, 1949, the Neilses and their elder daughter, Mary McGee, traveled to Taliesin in Spring Green, Wisconsin to meet with Wright. Upon showing Wright a photograph of their 1923 Mediterranean-style home, the architect immediately agreed that a new house was in order commenting, "You sure do need a new one; why

⁴ According to Mary (Neils) McGee, her mother was "pushing" for Wright. Her father was "probably very skeptical about getting involved with Frank Lloyd Wright because of his character and immorality, and because he had heard of his reputation for vast overruns of design and difficulties in building. But as soon as he met Wright he knew he was in the presence of a genius." Mary McGee interview with Jane King Hession, May 21, 2002.

⁵ Neils was associated with Flour City Ornamental Iron Company from 1917-1964. His professional associations also include Aluma Craft Boats, General Bronze Company and Champion Motors.

⁶ Henry J. Neils, letter to Frank Lloyd Wright, October 21, 1948.

⁷ Malcolm Willey was a professor of sociology and Vice-President of the University of Minnesota. Although thirteen Wright designs were eventually built in Minnesota, by 1949 only the Willey House and the Francis W. Little House (1912) in Deephaven had been built.

⁸ William Allin Storrer, *The Frank Lloyd Wright Companion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 236. Storrer contends "all of the features of a Usonian in-line plan are here, but not in the usual order." These features include a workspace/utility core linked to the dining room and living room, and zoned quiet and active spaces. Wright scholar Neil Levine identifies the Willey House as "the predecessor of the Usonian House, and the prototype for many of its characteristic features." He further states: "In the design of the Willey House, Wright responded keenly and accurately not only to the site but also to the new economic and social realities of the 1930s...The Usonian House that evolved out of the Willey House was 'streamlined' in plan to accommodate new patterns of family life and entertainment." Neil Levine, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996) 222-23.

⁹ Henry J. Neils letter to Frank Lloyd Wright, September 30, 1948.

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Neils, Frieda and Henry J., House

Name of property

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don't you burn the old one down?"¹⁰ When asked by Wright what their requirements were for their new home, the Neilses listed, "one level... a large living room, three small bedrooms each with a private bath, a kitchen and a carport."¹¹ They also specified a \$25,000.00 maximum budget. On November 6, Wright sent a letter agreeing to take on the project.

In a lengthy November 10th letter to Wright, Neils once again reiterated the family's spatial requirements, and also described certain intangible qualities he sought in the design explaining, "As you know I am a lover of nature and enjoy the trees, water and beautiful sunsets over the lake. If the beautiful outdoors can be brought inside, this effect will give me a great deal of satisfaction." He also added, "If you should decide on the use of aluminum, bronze, stainless steel, or just plain iron, our company is in a position to furnish such items. I am thinking particularly of window frames and mullions should the use of metal fit into your scheme of construction."¹²

The Neilses were pleased with the plans they received from Wright in March of 1949. "You have interpreted our requirements perfectly," Neils wrote.¹³ In the same letter Neils offered to "secure the necessary lumber from my brothers who operate a lumber mill at Libby, Montana and Klickitat, Washington," listing Ponderosa pine, fir, larch, tamarack, some cedar and white pine as possible choices. He also reiterated his offer to fabricate aluminum windows and glazed doors at Flour City Ornamental Iron. "[Flour City owns] the dies for aluminum extrusions that will accommodate double strength, plate or thermopane glazing."¹⁴

Wright's design for the Neils house is rooted in his principles for "Usonia," a democratic societal ideal for which the architect designed Usonian, or "affordable, beautiful housing for a democratic America," specifically the American middle class.¹⁵ In his 1943 autobiography, Wright stated that his Usonian houses were intended to, "liberate the people living in the house." In order to do so he challenged his clients to "see life in somewhat simplified terms," and believed it was "necessary to get rid of all unnecessary complications in construction." The Usonian house was modularly planned on one level, and organized spatially into active and quiet areas, which Wright segregated using various, angled geometric floor plan configurations. Usonian houses featured dominant living rooms often with a

¹⁰ Ibid. Neils reminded Wright that he "needed to sell the old house in order to have money to build a new one."

¹¹ Henry J. Neils, "Mr. & Mrs. Henry J. Neils Residence, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1950," *Northwest Architect*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 5 (July-August 1969): 67.

¹² In the same letter, Neils also added the additional spatial requirements of "a small servants' quarters," for a couple they planned to bring over from Germany, and a storage room near the carport as a "requirement for my hunting and fishing equipment."

¹³ Henry J. Neils letter to Frank Lloyd Wright, March 18, 1949.

¹⁴ Neils wrote to Wright scores of times discussing in detail the design and fabrication of the aluminum windows and doors. Neils similarly corresponded about most aspects of the house including the site topography, existing tree cover, carport dimensions and orientation, location of kitchen appliances and telephones, and masonry expansion joints details, among many other topics.

¹⁵ Storrer, *The Frank Lloyd Wright Companion*, 241. According to Storrer, "Usonia" is a term originally attributed to author Samuel Butler. It stands for, "United States of North America, with an 'i' inserted to make the word euphonious."

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Neils, Frieda and Henry J., House

Name of property

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window wall on one side, and a masonry “workspace,” or kitchen, and utility core. Wright eliminated basements as well as garages, which he replaced with more economical carports. Structurally, the Usonian house stood on a concrete slab within which gravity heating was integrated. Wright felt it was ideal to “complete the building in one operation as it goes along...the house is finished on the inside as it is completed outside.”¹⁶ To this end he employed sandwich wall construction, and favored five construction materials: wood, brick, cement, paper and glass.

The Herbert and Katherine Jacobs Residence (Jacobs I) built in 1936 in Madison, Wisconsin, was the first of Wright’s built houses that he described as “Usonian”.¹⁷ The L-shaped plan of the house accommodates quiet areas in one wing and active in the other, and includes a large dominant living room, and masonry workplace core at the intersection of the two wings. The house, which cost \$5,500. to build, was constructed of relatively inexpensive materials including brick, redwood and pine boards, and employed several efficient, low-cost building techniques, such as sandwich wall construction, and simplified, efficient design elements, such as gravity heating and a flat roof. In that regard it is typical of the simply planned, inexpensively constructed Depression-era Usonians. Over time, however, Wright designed scores of Usonian houses that varied in composition and complexity with regard to geometry, size, materials, and structural elements. Wright also experimented with numerous roof configurations and cantilevers. While Depression-era Usonian houses featured inexpensive materials reflective of lean economic times, “masonry construction became the standard after WWII.”¹⁸

In plan, the Neils House bears many of the hallmarks of Wright’s Usonian houses and in this regard is closely related to Wright’s first Usonian, the Jacobs I House. These hallmarks include modular planning, one-level construction, social and spatial organization of the house into active and quiet areas, dominant size and placement of the living room, a masonry workspace core, and concrete slab floor with integrated gravity heating. The plan was originally generated on a 4’0” modular grid but was later reduced to a 3’6” grid to reduce costs. The impact of the module reduction is evident in narrow “gallery,” or hallway passage and several compact rooms. The layout of the house is one of many variations of the in-line plan Wright used for his Usonian houses.¹⁹ Other characteristic features include integrated lighting and furniture, and a non-load bearing window wall.

Generally speaking, the more expensive building materials and masonry construction of the Neils house are typical of Wright’s post-World War II Usonians, which reflect postwar economic recovery, more generous home-owner budgets, and the commercial availability of an increasingly wide range of building materials. However, the Neils house is completely unique among Wright’s houses in the specific building materials used. The house is constructed of cull or scrap marble, clear Western larch

¹⁶ Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pierce, 1943), 490.

¹⁷ In 1953, Wright clouded the issue by naming the Mrs. Alice Millard Residence (“La Minatura,”) built thirty years earlier in 1923 in Pasadena, California as his first Usonian house. Storrer, *The Frank Lloyd Wright Companion*, 242, 217.

¹⁸ Storrer, *The Frank Lloyd Wright Companion*, 241.

¹⁹ Storrer categorizes the Neils house plan as a 240-degree reversed in-line plan. *Ibid.*, 327.

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Neils, Frieda and Henry J., House

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interior tongue and groove walls, and custom-made aluminum windows and doors -- materials Wright never specified for his Usonian homes. All the materials were expensive on the retail market, and were either: unusual or not readily available (cull marble); not generally used for the purpose employed in the Neils house (clear Western larch for interior walls); or were used in commercial, not residential, construction (die-extruded aluminum windows and doors.) Uniquely, all three of these unusual and expensive materials were readily – and affordably - available to Henry Neils through three companies with which he was personally or professionally associated. They are respectively: Northwestern Marble and Tile Corporation, of which Neils was a trustee; the J. Neils Lumber Company, founded by Neils's father Julius, and operated by two of his brothers, and; Flour City Ornamental Iron Company, founded by his father-in-law, Eugene Tetzlaff, and of which Neils was president. Through this fortunate set of circumstances, these more expensive and unusual construction materials proved to be the most economical and accessible choices for the house.²⁰ Although it cannot be discerned precisely from the correspondence which materials Wright originally specified for the house, Mary McGee recalls fieldstone, brick, concrete block, and Tidewater cypress being mentioned in conversations.²¹ However, it can be discerned that Henry Neils repeatedly suggested materials and products, and forwarded pertinent product literature and material samples to Wright on a regular basis. Wright and Neils's choice of materials, and the availability of these materials for residential construction, link the Neils house to post World War II economic prosperity, and identify it as a postwar Usonian.

The most distinctive features of the house are the cull marble bearing walls and the process through which they were realized. Wright was receptive, but needed to be convinced, that cull marble could and should be used for the double or sandwich wall construction of the house. Frieda and Henry Neils set out to convince him. They went to Northwestern Marble and Tile Corporation and examined "piles of marble culls," left over from myriad major construction projects, such as federal buildings (including the Minneapolis Post Office), courthouses, banks (including the Northwestern Bank building in Minneapolis) and hotels, undertaken by the firm. They selected nine samples of marble to send to Wright for consideration. The samples included Roman Travertine, Gray Tennessee, Montana Travertine, Colorado Travertine, Rose Bonnard, Botticino, Radio Black, Carthage and Verde Antique in pieces measuring from 2" – 12" wide and from 6" to 30" long.²² In a succinct note Wright responded: "Regarding the marble. Take over all larger chunks and larger pieces (see drawing forwarded) and mix. Make a model wall and send photographs."²³ Wright approved the sample wall shortly thereafter.

²⁰ However, it is important to note that although Neils repeatedly stressed the cost of the house should not exceed \$25,000., and often asked Wright, "How can such a beautiful house be constructed for \$25,000.?" the actual cost was closer to \$100,000.

²¹ Mary McGee interview with Jane King Hession, May 21, 2002.

²² Henry J. Neils letter to Frank Lloyd Wright, March 27, 1950. In all of his correspondence and later discussions of the house, Neils describes the walls as being constructed of "marble culls," yet Mary McGee claims they were constructed of marble and stone culls, possibly classifying travertine as stone rather than marble. However, according to various encyclopedic references, "marble" is a term used commercially to include rocks composed of calcium carbonate, like travertine, which take a polish.

²³ Frank Lloyd Wright letter to Henry J. Neils, April 18, 1950.

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Neils, Frieda and Henry J., House

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Wright eventually designed a double wall system lined with 2-inch rigid cork insulation. As constructed, the walls cant, or taper from the ground up being approximately 30 inches thick at the bottom of the wall and 7 inches at the top. Wright also directed the stonemasons to roughly chip away the polished edges of the cull marble pieces to minimize the smooth and shiny appearance of polished block surfaces and edges. Stonemasons accomplished this labor-intensive step on site, one block at a time, by hand.²⁴ Furthermore, Wright required the mortar be raked horizontally only to minimize any verticals. Although the walls were built to Wright's specification, when the house was finished both architect and client expressed displeasure at the light color and visual dominance of some of the marble blocks. On Wright's instruction, Taliesin apprentice John DeKoven Hill was dispatched supervise the hand staining of selected offending blocks.²⁵ Although the applied coloration has faded on the exterior blocks, traces remain on some interior blocks.

The clear Western larch was another unusual choice of wood for the house. Larch, a pinewood, was not commonly used for interior residential paneling. Rather it was more often used commercially, or for flooring and decking because of its durability. Additionally, the larch chosen was relatively rare being clear, or free of knotholes. This made the choice both particularly distinctive and potentially more expensive -- were it not for Neils's family lumber business connections. Although Neils initially priced out Tidewater red cypress, a wood Wright favored and suggested for the paneling, on more than one occasion he told Wright he could secure larch at less than half the cost of cypress through his brothers at J. Neils Lumber Company. Neils respectfully wrote Wright: "the choice of wood Mrs. Neils and I will leave entirely to you. We know you are interested in getting a certain result and if the larch will not produce it, of course, we will not use it."²⁶ But diplomatically continued, "If, however, larch is satisfactory we can make quite a substantial saving in the cost of the house." A week later Wright approved the use of larch.²⁷

Neils was also responsible for the choice of aluminum for the windows and doors, prevailing over Wright's preference for redwood. Once again, Neils was able to suggest a superior and affordable product that he, as president Flour City Ornamental Iron Company, could deliver. As early as March 1949, Neils made the connection between the number of windows and doors and their variety of shapes and sizes, and the wisdom of designing and fabricating them in aluminum. Although Flour City was producing window walls for large commercial projects across the nation, they were not in the residential window business. However, Neils told Wright that Flour City had "the necessary dies for aluminum extrusions that will accommodate double strength, plate of thermopane glazing."²⁸ He further stated that the installation of aluminum doors and windows in the Neils house would "undoubtedly be a tribute to

²⁴ Although it cannot be precisely determined, several of those involved with the project estimate that approximately thirty different varieties of marble culls were used to construct the walls.

²⁵ The process had to be repeated in the spring of 1952 because the initial stain application did not take.

²⁶ Henry J. Neils letter to Frank Lloyd Wright, April 11, 1950.

²⁷ J. Neils Lumber Company also provided the lumber for the roof.

²⁸ Henry J. Neils letter to Frank Lloyd Wright, March 18, 1949.

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our company.” Flour City also provided stainless steel counter tops in the kitchen (at Mrs. Neils’s request) replacing the linoleum countertops specified by Wright.

Much of the spatial dynamism of Wright’s design for the Neils house is derived from visual illogic of the load of the roof being supported by an unbroken expanse of light aluminum windows that rise to meet the roof and wrap the north and east living room walls. The design presented technical challenges that were further complicated when Wright revised his original plans by removing a marble structural pier from the northeast corner of the living room. Wright pushed the structural drama to its limit when he specified that the mullions must “present thin edges to view and be as light in appearance as possible.”²⁹ It fell to Flour City window designer George B. Melcher and general contractor Lyle Halverson, vice-president and general manager of Madsen Construction Company, to find an acceptable solution.³⁰ In the end, “stainless steel bars of sufficient size and strength,” used as mullions for the windows provided adequate structural support while maintaining a light appearance.³¹

Originally, Wright designed a hipped roof for the Neils house, but later changed it to a gable roof with asymmetrical planes. It is likely that Wright’s disdain of the house next door (the Neilses’s 1923 house) drove the redesign of the roof, as well as the orientation of the house on its site. Wright effectively blocked any view of the offending house by extending a section of the west plane of the gable roof to within inches of the ground.³² In a dramatic counterpoint, on the east side of the living room, the gable peaks seventeen feet above the ground and projects several feet beyond the window wall. The unequally sloped roof set up several unique conditions in the Neils house including the elimination of door-height soffits. According to Curtis Besinger, the Taliesin apprentice who prepared the working drawings for the Neils House, Wright often employed door-height soffits in his designs to establish “the intimate scale, horizontal layering of the space, its spatial contrasts, and the spatial continuity between the exterior and interior.”³³ In the absence of this ordering principle, the interior spaces have “increased plasticity,” and “a new sense of openness and freedom.” The absence of soffits also eliminated any space between them and the roof joists within which structural members could be concealed. As such, “any structural reinforcement of the roof – with steel beams or channels – now had to be handled within the roof thickness,” which is the case in the Neils house.³⁴

²⁹ William Wesley Peters letter to Henry J. Neils, June 27, 1950.

³⁰ Halverson trained as an architect at the University of Minnesota. Halverson and Madsen Construction Company had previously associated with Neils and Flour City Ornamental Iron Company on the construction of the Champion Motors plant in 1946. Neils claimed that Halverson and Madsen Construction were the only contractors who did not “throw up their hands,” when the saw Wright’s set of plans for the house. Henry J. Neils interview with Gordon Olschlager, November 6, 1982.

³¹ Henry J. Neils letter to William Wesley Peters, June 30, 1950.

³² Wright called the 1923 house, “a constipated box.” He later designed a fence to completely block the view. Mary McGee interview with Jane King Hession, May 21, 2002.

³³ Curtis Besinger, *Working with Mr. Wright: What It Was Like* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 206.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

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Although Neils told Wright in December of 1949 that he and Mrs. Neils “would like to avail ourselves of Section 3 of our contract with you under which you will send an apprentice to select the proper contractor and supervise the work until the structure is satisfactorily completed,” this did not happen.³⁵ Eugene Masselink explained to Neils: “Mr. Wright does not know what advantage an apprentice would be to you at this time.” Instead, Neils interviewed contractors and hired Lyle Halverson and Madsen Construction Company as general contractors. Neils and Halverson supervised and troubleshot the construction of the house while constantly communicating with Wright by mail. The relationship between Taliesin, and Neils and the construction team in Minneapolis was close and productive. According to Mary McGee, “their ability to communicate was a major factor in the successful building operation.”³⁶ At Taliesin, chief draftsman John Howe instructed apprentice John Geiger to undertake the Neils house working drawings, which Steve Oyakawa later completed. After Wright made revisions, apprentice Curtis Besinger redrew the working drawings.

Apprentice John DeKoven Hill worked most closely with the Neilses and was the only apprentice to visit the house while under construction. At Wright’s request, he supervised the staining of the marble blocks. But he also worked closely with the Neilses in his capacity as editorial director for *House Beautiful* magazine assisting with furniture and fabric selection. Hill was no doubt responsible for publishing photographs of the house in *House Beautiful* in November of 1955. The house was also photographed by several noted architectural photographers including Ezra Stoller, for *Architectural Forum*, and Pedro Guerrero, whose photographs appeared in *House + Home*.

Wright visited the house on three occasions. The first time was three and a half years after completion of the house, in October 1954, when he came to lecture at the University of Minnesota and was a houseguest of the Neilses.

The Neils house has had only two sets of owners -- all members of the Neils family. Frieda Neils lived in the house until her death in 1975. Henry stayed on until 1977 when he remarried. In 1977 Mary McGee, elder daughter of Frieda and Henry Neils, and her husband J. Paul McGee purchased the house. Mary McGee currently resides in the Neils house.³⁷

The Neils house generated a second commission for Wright from the Neils family. In 1954, Wright designed a house for Patricia Neils Boulter and her husband Cedric Boulter in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The Neils house represents an excellent example of Frank Lloyd Wright’s postwar Usonian designs that evolved from his first Usonian, the Jacobs I house built in 1936, to the mature versions of the 1950s. Initially, straightforward plans and inexpensive materials characterized Usonian houses. After the Great Depression and the end of World War II, the designs increased in complexity and more expensive

³⁵ Henry J. Neils letter to Frank Lloyd Wright, December 12, 1949.

³⁶ Mary McGee, “Attachment to Homeowner Questionnaire,” Undated.

³⁷ J. Paul McGee died in 1980. Today the house is owned by the Mary L. McGee Trust.

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materials were often employed. The Neils house, through its complex massing, dramatic cantilevers, and the unique use of marble masonry, Western larch and aluminum doors and windows, represents a well-developed, important, and unique Usonian design by Frank Lloyd Wright from the postwar period.

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Verbal Boundary Description:

Lots 4 and 5 and all that part of lots 6 and 7 lying northeasterly of a straight line drawn northwesterly from the southeast corner of said lot 6 to a point on the northerly line of said lot 7, distant 20 feet southwesterly measured along said northerly line of lot 7, from the northeasterly of most northerly corner of said lot 7, in Cedar Lake View, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary includes the land and building historically associated with the property.

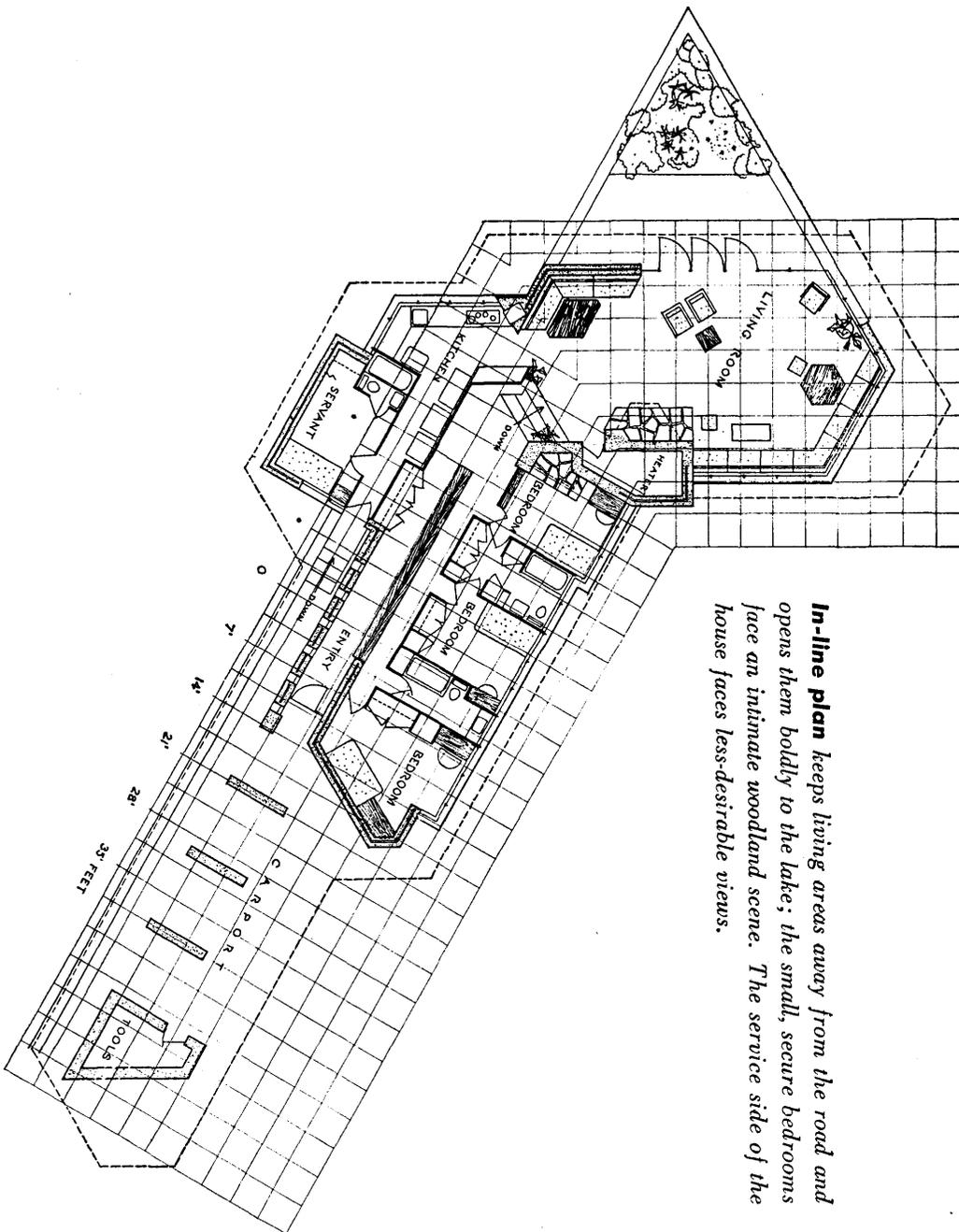
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Looking Northwest

In-line plan keeps living areas away from the road and opens them boldly to the lake; the small, secure bedrooms face an intimate woodland scene. The service side of the house faces less-desirable views.