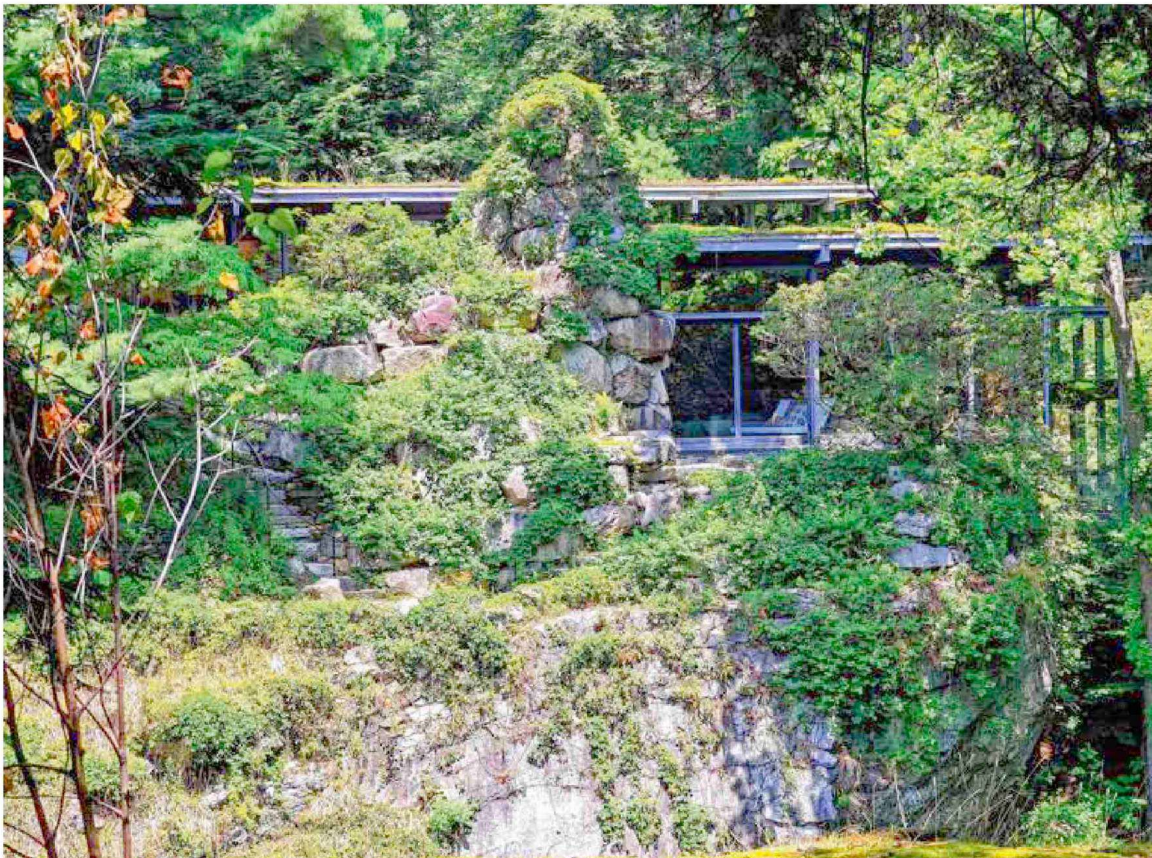


# SundayTravel

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

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PHOTOS BY DAVID LYON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Russel Wright called his Modernist house Dragon Rock. It seems to grow out of the rock wall of the abandoned granite quarry.

## At home with Russel Wright

The upstate New York estate captures designer's way of looking at the world

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GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

**P**ractically every home in mid-20th-century America had a piece of Russel Wright design — perhaps a graphic wall clock, a sleek pastel ash-tray, or a spun aluminum ice bucket. In the “Leave It to Beaver” era, many a suburban household dined off his colorful American Modern ceramic dinnerware.

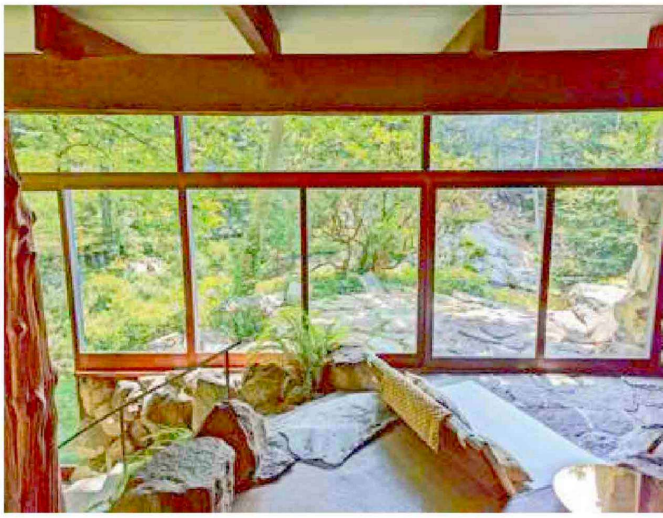
One of the premier product designers of the quarter century following World War II, Wright and his wife, Mary Einstein Wright, created a casual lifestyle as much as consumer products. He also exercised his talents by crafting an upstate New York estate on a 75-acre tract the couple bought in 1942. The Wrights called it Manitoga, a word meaning

“place of great spirit” in the language of the original inhabitants.

Now Russel Wright's own spirit also inhabits these Hudson Valley woods. The nonprofit Manitoga/The Russel Wright Design Center offers tours of the landscape, house, and studio through mid-November. The tour is an eye-opener for those of us who thought we knew Russel Wright by the brightly colored American Modern tableware that pops up at flea markets and antiques shops. It turns out he was equally adept at placing stones and trees and patches of moss as he was at making designs for molded ceramics.

The 90-minute property tour departs from the Visitor

MANITOGA, Page N14



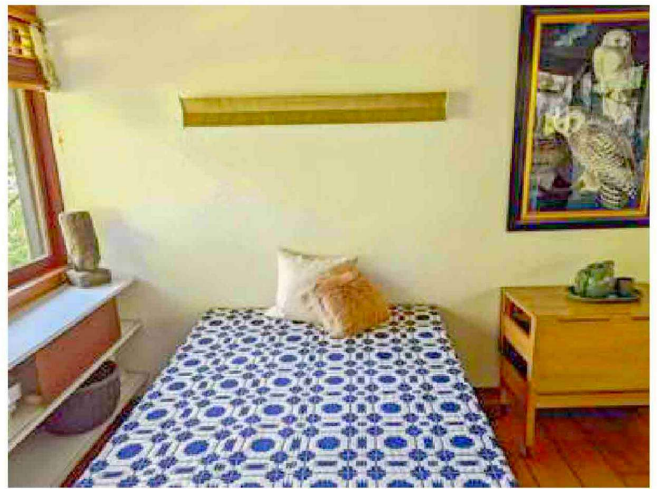
The living room of the Wright house at Manitoga has expansive views of the pond and the woods beyond.



A low rectangular structure next to the house, Russel Wright's studio featured a work desk clad in white Formica.



A view from the studio shows how the Wright house presides over the pond in the old quarry pit.



Wright often slept in the bedroom in his studio. Note the Russel Wright ceramics beside the bed.

# Natural extension of one designer's mind

► **MANITOGA**  
Continued from Page N11

Guide House, where books and a few reproductions of iconic Russel Wright designs are for sale. As our small group headed up a woody trail, guide Alan Most noted with a certain wry amusement that the Wrights had a wishlist of features when they began looking for a summer home that could be their escape from Manhattan. They wanted a view of the Hudson River, a meadow, and a swimming pond. The site they selected — a former granite quarry — didn't tick any of their boxes, but they bought it anyway. The logged-over tract was a scrubby barren surrounding an abandoned granite quarry.

"Russel Wright considered it a blank slate where he could create his world," Most explained.

Even a short walk on the extensive trail network shows how he reshaped the property. We paused halfway up the trail around the quarry and peered down to the pit. By damming it on one end and constructing a rocky channel on another slope — a waterfall during much of the year, though dry in the summer heat — Wright transformed the quarry into a summer swimming pond and winter skating rink. On one bank, a field of ferns undulates like waves when the wind blows.

"He did everything by gut instinct," Most explained. "He added native trees and vegetation despite no training in landscape design. 'He was always thinking, 'what's above me, below me, in the foreground, in the distance?'"

Wright embedded stone steps in the slopes around the pond. Rough-cut and irregular, they almost seem like natural features. He also scattered iron rings or other quarry remnants trailside to hint at the site's history.

Halfway around the pond, we stopped at one of Wright's "outdoor rooms," a patch of springy moss next to swaying birches and beneath a canopy of tall hemlocks. The moss practically begged for picnickers or nappers. (Manitoga has erected a small barrier, lest the moss be loved to death.) The

view over the pond alights on the house and studio that Wright eventually designed and built. They seem to have grown out of the rock.

We continued through a narrow "anteroom" of shrubbery that suddenly opened onto a wooden bridge over the waterfall's streambed. We had reached the house that Mary Wright, who died in 1952, never got to enjoy. The couple first lived in what Most termed a "shack" on the hillside above the pond.

Wright's home and studio, which he called Dragon Rock, was not completed until 1961. The eco-sensitive, Japanese-influenced design was executed in conjunction with architect David Leavitt. Wright lived there with the couple's daughter Ann. He continued to work on the property piecemeal until his death in 1976, constantly refining his ideas about the integration of nature and human design.

At the door to the house, Most reminded us that Wright began his career as a theatrical set designer. "When you enter," he suggested, "think of it like entering the theater."

Wooden walking sticks hang on a wall just inside the front door. Wright loaned them to visitors so they could explore the hiking trails he had cut. The uneven stones connecting the interior levels might have made them handy indoors too. In the living room, a massive vertical cedar log from the property stretches two stories to hold up the roof. (The stripped wood is reinforced with a hidden metal rod.) A dramatic rock fireplace seems cut out of the surrounding stone, but the true focal feature is the glass wall that appears to bring the entire landscape indoors.

"Russel Wright considered the interior of the house an extreme expression of his individuality," Most said. The "casual living credo meant no formal dining room. Walking down stone steps from the living room brought us to the dining area — identifiable by an Eero Saarinen pedestal table surrounded by Eames chairs — next to the kitchen full of Russel Wright cook- and tableware. It is a little tableau of Modern design mas-



DAVID LYON

Guide Alan Most (above) explained the impact of Russel Wright on mid-century American design. Some pieces of Wright's iconic American Modern tableware are displayed on the wall. Left: Wright employed stones, old metal castings, and other little treasures as doorknobs throughout his house and studio. No two are alike.



## If you go...

**Manitoga/The Russel Wright Design Center**  
584 NY-9D, Garrison, N.Y.  
845-424-3812, [visitmanitoga.org](http://visitmanitoga.org)  
Open Fri.-Mon. through Nov. 14. Reserve in advance for a timed 90-minute tour, \$30. Trails open year-round, \$5

terworks.

Wright spent much of his time in his adjacent studio building, where he also entertained guests and even slept. His utilitarian work area is like a corner desk on steroids, stretching more than

five feet in either direction. It's clad in white Formica to provide a neutral backdrop for his work with colors. Windows on three sides allowed him to stare out into the cool green woods.

The bedrooms where Annie and her

governess slept in the main house have been converted to a design gallery. It showcases about 200 pieces of surprisingly familiar Russel Wright consumer goods.

"Russel Wright became a household name for good mass-produced design that was just modern enough for the average American consumer," Most explained. "A teacher or a cab driver could afford it."

But even more than his consumer products, Wright considered Manitoga as his legacy. He might have designed for the masses, but his home and estate were ultimately one of a kind.

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