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Above: a simple pergola planted with the native Dutchman's pipe vine connects the studio to the main house. A reflective panel inside the studio's entrance mirrors the leafy view outside the door. Opposite: an Asian conical hat hangs on the far wall of the narrow hallway, which leads to the open main space



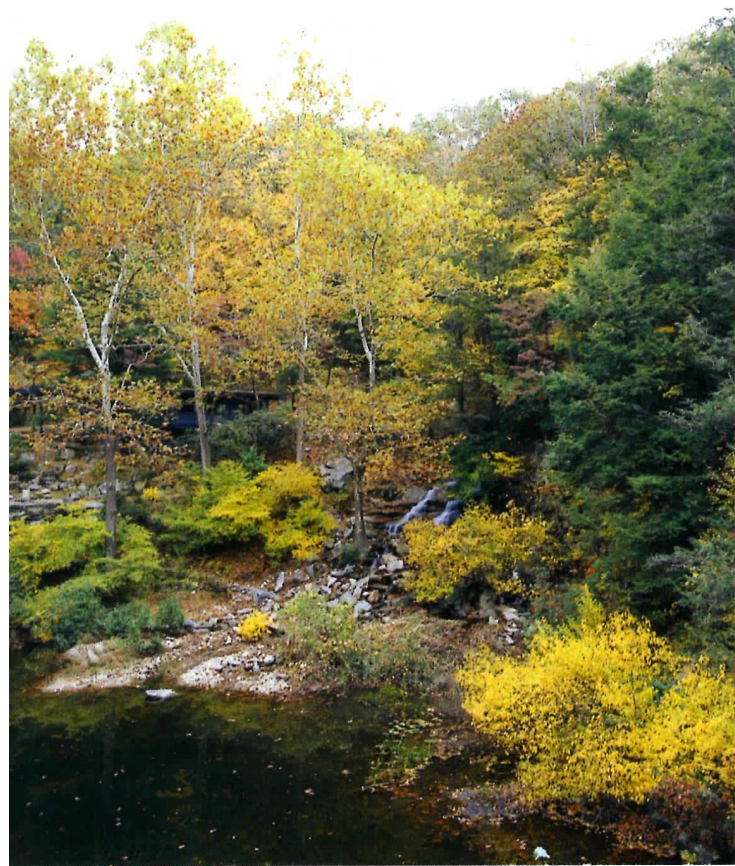
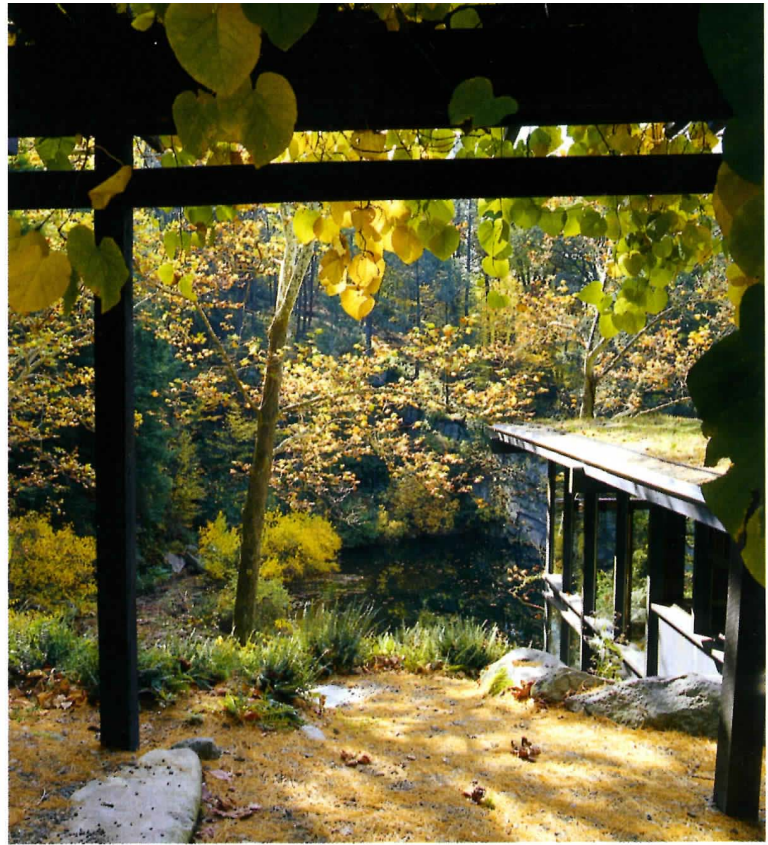
EAST IN THE VALLEY

Eighty kilometres up the Hudson river from Manhattan, designer 'for the masses' Russel Wright built himself a Modernist retreat with the help of an architect who had worked with Frank Lloyd Wright in Japan. With his studio there reflecting time spent touring Southeast Asia in the 1950s, Carol Newman gets a taste for the Orient expressed... in New York State. Photography: Simon Upton

A Hans Wegner 'Valet' chair sits in front of oak shelving that separates the master bedroom from the living/work space. A white cotton curtain on a track can be drawn around the bedroom area for more privacy







This page, clockwise from top left: the 1958 chair is by George Nelson for Herman Miller; looking from the studio's terrace towards the main house, which with its seeded green roof melts into the landscape; between the master bedroom and work space, a door leads on to the terrace; the quarry pond



Above: a circular coffee table by Wright sits on Eastern-style mats underneath a ceiling of, on one side, dark-green epoxy marked with the impressions of pine needles and other forest materials, and on the lighter side, of burlap. The ferns decorating the window blinds were painted by Wright



NEWLY RESTORED with a sensitivity and meticulous eye for detail Russel Wright would have adored, his studio now sits as a little jewel of vintage Modernism deep in the rocks and forest of New York's Hudson River valley. This live-in workplace, with its simplicity, wealth of natural materials and stunning views of the landscape beyond, is simply sublime.

Wright was a passionate advocate of 'good design for the masses', and at the height of his fame, from the 1920s to the 1950s, he was the most celebrated design guru in America. By the time his country house in Garrison was completed in 1961, his fame had waned somewhat. His own interests had moved on too, towards ecology and nature, so that his house was not the conventional Modernist machine-for-living but rather a work of art, an example to emulate, and a weekend retreat for a man and his young daughter who loved nature.

Wright and his wife and business partner Mary Small Einstein had bought the land in 1942, a ravaged quarry far from the alluring landscape it is today. From their town house in Manhattan, Wright and Mary ran an ever-expanding business based on his industrial designs for tableware and furniture. In 1950 they wrote their *Guide to Easier Living*, explaining how to organise the domestic environment more simply and efficiently for the modern age. His award-winning products were everywhere, all signed with his trademark signature. Tragically, Mary died of breast cancer in 1952, just after adopting their baby daughter, Annie. Wright's life changed accordingly.

For years, at weekends, father and daughter explored the land in Garrison, an hour north of the city. From a cottage on the site they climbed the rock-strewn mountain, blazing trails, noting the light and the native vegetation, finding the best views of the Hudson below. In 1955 the state department asked Wright to tour Southeast Asia to help US exports – and of course he fell in love with classical Japanese design. With firm ideas of his own, he found an architect, David L. Leavitt, who had actually worked with Frank Lloyd Wright in Japan. It was a good partnership, and in 1957 work on the house started.

The house sits in the rock cliff on the north side of the quarry pond Wright had created by diverting a mountain stream – *in* the stone, rather than on it. Glass walls face south towards the pool and forest beyond. The small compact rooms are on 11 different levels, connected by stone stairs and beams of native cedar. The entry hall, 'den', living room and dining room sit juxtaposed on top of each other, with the utilitarian kitchen tucked under in the main core. 'The Harem' – Annie and her English nanny – had bedrooms on the west side. A separate building to the east, connected by a pergola, housed Wright's studio, bedroom and guest-room, all on one level.

Dragon Rock, as the house was called by young Annie Wright, has been much written about, including a piece in this magazine (*Wol* Dec 1999) when Annie was still in



Top: above a table designed by Wright, a print of Jean-Jacques Audubon's owls keeps vigil over the bed, with its hand-loomed American cover. Above: the guest bedroom has a door lined with birch bark, while Asian reed matting – one of many Eastern influences here – covers the walls



Above: among books on the oak shelves, which are simply slotted together, sits a Japanese root basket. Wright helped the American state department promote Asian imports and collected many himself. Towards the open entrance door on the right lie the bathroom and guest-room



Top: a Korean silk ancestor portrait hangs on a door in the hallway that opens into the bathroom. Above: the studio sits comfortably in its rocky surroundings, at a higher level than the main house, which is visible to the left

residence and the studio was used as the business's office space. Now much has changed for the better. The Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum did a Russel Wright exhibition in November 2001 to much acclaim, and Annie now has another home of her own, so it has been possible to restore the studio to its original state of 1962. The restoration of the house remains to be done.

The studio was the first of the dwellings to be built, and represents the culmination of Wright's design principles. It is higher than the house but sits low in the landscape, barely visible under its beautifully restored green roof. The linking pergola is planted with the large-leaved Dutchman's pipe vine, which hides the quarry pond when approached from the parking area. To the left, the unobtrusive doorway opens into a narrow hallway, which in turn opens on to the bright, open living room, windowed on three sides to the dramatic landscape. Above the white built-in seating on the right, the windows are almost level with the ground outside, with ferns, moss and rocks at eye level. Opposite, above the white Formica desk, wrap-around windows overlook the waterfall. A free-standing dark-oak bookshelf screens the bed on the right. The ceilings are low. Above the desk, sheets of burlap shield the fluorescent tubes, while the other ceiling panels are covered in dark-green paint textured with the impression of pine needles, further segmenting the large open room. The restorers have placed Wright's pack of Salem cigarettes in the ashtray, with correspondence on his letterhead lying on the desk. The bed has a handwoven American coverlet; Audubon's owls are on the wall. Hans Wegner's 'Valet' chair gives a note of elegance.

Back towards the entry in the hall, a panel covered with a Korean silk ancestor painting swivels to reveal a breathtaking bathroom. A window above the bath affords a stunning view of the pond and the hemlocks, perfectly mirrored above the washbasin. The loo sits to the side of the swivelling door, ensuring perfect privacy. Immediately to the right of the entry is the twin-bed guestroom, behind the novel birch-bark door. The hall is lined with built-in cabinets, sliding doors fitted with Wright's found hardware or rock knobs, another signature touch. Light, dark, expansive, intimate, with a wide variety of textures juxtaposed.

Russel Wright was a man of passionate enthusiasms, always looking forward to the next project. 'He had a knack for enlisting people, making you think taking out the garbage was an honour,' Annie says. In 1975, with the US environmental organisation Nature Conservancy, Wright opened trails through the woods, and started the programmes that have grown since his death in 1976, still educating an appreciative public ■

The Russel Wright Design Center, 584 Route 9D, Garrison, NY 10524, USA, runs tours of the house, studio and landscape, May-Oct. For times and more information, ring 001 845 424 3812, or visit russelwrightcenter.org



Above: the red cedar of the bathroom lends it great warmth, while a wall of mirror increases the sense of space and extends the view. The window above the deep tub overlooks the quarry pond, waterfalls and woodland