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Photography by Wayne Sorce

Dream Builder

When an architect designs a dream house, the dream is usually that of his clients. Rarely is the dream his own. However, in the case of the 1997 *LIFE* magazine Dream House, John Rattenbury of Taliesin Architects designed a house that is actually his dream.

"When *LIFE* magazine approached me about designing this year's Dream House, I didn't just sit down and design from scratch," says Rattenbury, a protege of the late Frank

Rattenbury insisted on a large hearth for the *LIFE* Dream House in order to encourage family talks. The clerestory windows bring in natural light, an important ingredient of every Taliesin design.



Lloyd Wright, who co-founded Taliesin Architects near Spring Green, WI, and later a second office at Taliesin West outside Phoenix, AZ. "I had been thinking about this house, and working on this house, and even dreaming about this house all my life."

The house was built this past winter in northern California, about an hour's drive north of Lake Tahoe. There are some 2,100 square feet of livable space, and true to Taliesin tradition, the whole of the house is designed to access the outdoors and vice-versa, bring nature inside.

Three principles guided Rattenbury as he created the Dream House:

- Humanize the house.
- Nurture the family.
- Give the house a spiritual quality.

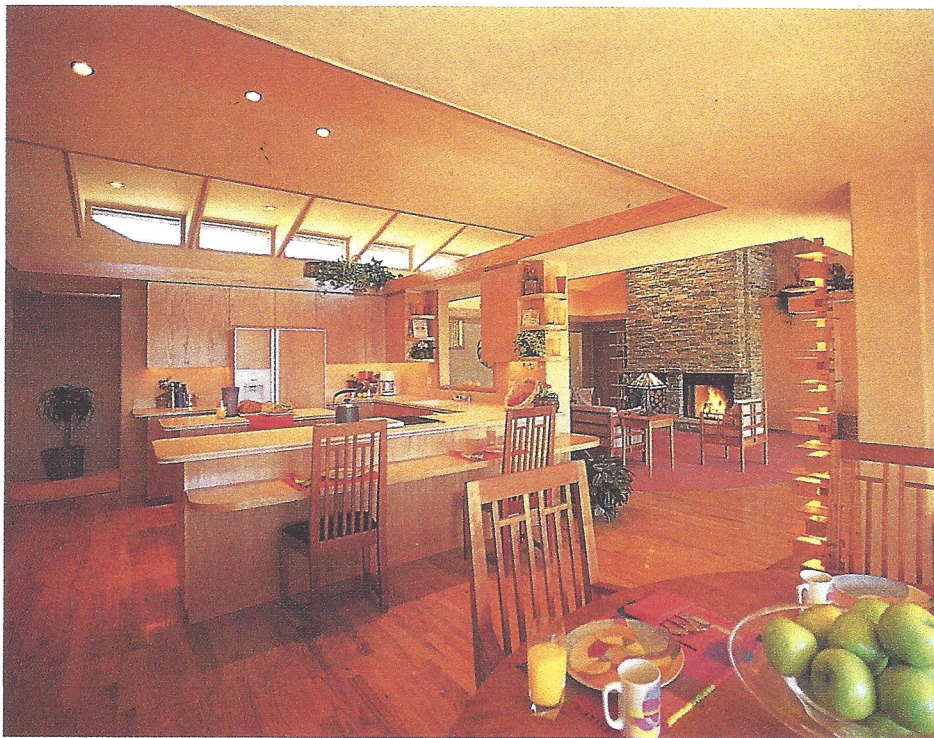
To humanize the house, Rattenbury carefully considered scale, something that many houses today are entirely bereft of both inside and outside, says the architect.

"A popular amenity around Phoenix now is the porte-cochere," he explains. "But some of them are certainly large enough for a tractor trailer to drive through. That's not to any-

body's scale. Can you imagine how imposing that looks to a three- or four-year-old child? And inside the house, the ceilings just soar out of sight. A house is meant to honor the family within—not to impress the neighbors.”

Therefore, the dream house exterior is reposeful, with an emphasis on horizontal construction rather than vertical, in order to draw the eye outward, not upward. (Even when the lot size requires altering the plans for a two-story version of the house, the lines of the architecture are still predominantly horizontal.) Inside the house, the varied ceiling heights add visual interest. The kitchen and living room ceilings reach nearly 12 feet at their highest points, but an overhead ledge that rings the space prevents the ceiling from becoming too high for human scale.

In contrast, the ceiling above the dining room and foyer are a couple of inches below



With an easy connection among the living spaces, the house is ideal for intimate gatherings or large parties, like the one Taliesin hosted for the people who worked on the house when the project was completed. “There were 70 people in the house and I don’t think anyone felt like they were in a 2,100-square-foot house,” says Rattenbury.

today’s standard eight-foot ceiling, a height that Rattenbury believes is most comfortable. After all, scale doesn’t only apply when people are standing, but when they are sitting and lying down, as well.

To nurture the family, the house has spaces in which the family can do things together. Rattenbury believes families are spending less and less time together what with work, school, sports and other activities that take them away from home. Therefore, the duty of a house is not only to shelter, but to unite and nurture the family that lives inside.

In the Dream House, families can practice what Rattenbury calls the “art of conversation” in front of the generous fireplace that anchors the home. “Even without a fire, the hearth is a symbol of warmth and gathering,” he says.

Mealtime presents a variety of ways for the family to be together. Rattenbury intentionally made the dining room that is adjacent to the kitchen less formal than a traditional dining room in order to encourage its use even when guests aren’t expected. A casual breakfast bar looks into the kitchen, and weather permitting or not, there is the covered porch area out

back. And to keep the cook involved in the rest of the family's doings, the partial wall between the kitchen and the living room has an opening that can be shuttered for when the clean-up can wait.

Finally, Rattenbury believes the spiritual quality of a house, or any example of good architecture, should nurture the spirit of man. In the case of the *LIFE* Dream House, that nurturing comes from what the house is not as much as from what the house is.

"There is nothing forced or phony about the house," says Rattenbury. "I'm sorry to say that most houses today are built by real estate salespeople telling designers what the fads are. Then you end up with a house that has a little bit of everything added to it just to impress the neighbors. I think a house should be a work of art and as such should be natural."

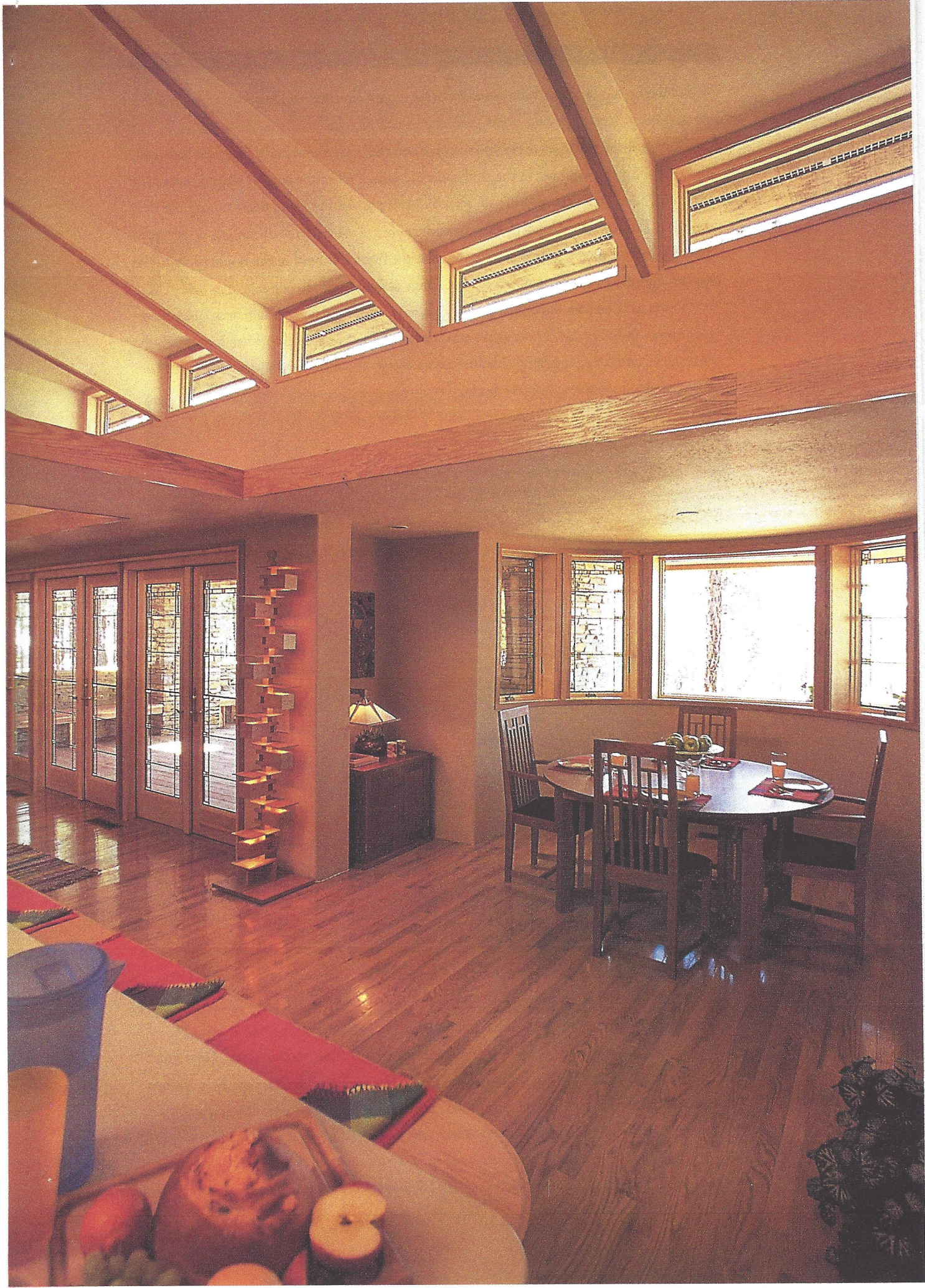
The master bedroom features a comfortable window seat for cozy reading day or night and French doors that provide natural light, cool breezes and easy access to a private covered porch.



Right: The dining room, conveniently located across from the kitchen, is small enough for family dining, or with a large table extended into the living room, can accommodate a large group.

From end to end, the Dream House is designed with convenience and sensible living in mind. Within the 2,100-square-foot home (the average size of a house built in America today), there is a living room, kitchen, dining area, master bedroom, study and two children's rooms. This floor plan, however, can be easily modified or expanded to accommodate different stages of life. For example, the study, which is next to the master bedroom, can be used as a nursery when children are young. The other bedrooms are separated from the master, an important psychological division between parents and children: one gets privacy, the other gets independence. And here too, the layout can be altered to add another bedroom, build a mother-in-law's suite or create a home office with a separate entrance through the adjoining garage wall.

The exterior of the house can easily change, too, without altering the plan. In addition to Rattenbury's primary design, called the Linden, there is the Sycamore, the Willow, the Hawthorne and the Paloverde. The most noticeable difference among these other designs is the roof, which, for example, is barrel-vaulted on the Willow and flat on the Paloverde. The



five different choices are meant to satisfy climate requirements, regional styles and personal preferences.

Outside, the house has covered porches beyond the living room and the master bedroom, and except for the windows in the study and the garage, all of the windows face the back or side yards for a welcome measure of quiet and privacy. And at some point during the day, each of the windows is shaded by the extended roof.

In contrast, the clerestory windows that line the front and back of the house bring in the natural light that is an integral part of all Taliesin design work.

"Daylight is such an important part of our lives," says Rattenbury, "and it can add excitement to an ordinary day. Here, as the sun moves across the sky, light comes in through the clerestories and casts wonderful shadows across the walls and floors. So, although the house is designed to be relaxing, it is not boring."

Conveniences in the house are abundant. The doorway from the garage into the house is near the kitchen, so heavy groceries don't have to be carried too far. In the children's rooms, a daybed is tucked into a window alcove, so friends can sleep over. The alcove also has storage below and a drop leaf that can be lowered to provide more desktop work space. The children's bathroom at the end of the hall can have an outside entrance, making it perfect for letting in muddy-pawed friends from the backyard. And because the house is all on one level without many hallways and unnecessary doorways (which also makes the house seem more spacious than its actual 2,100 square feet), it is ideal for the elderly and people in wheelchairs. Moreover, bedrooms, bathrooms and the kitchen can easily be modified to accommodate special needs.

"I wanted this house to work at all stages of life," Rattenbury says. "Most young couples today initially move into a small home. Then they move into a larger home when the kids arrive, and then they move back to a smaller home when the kids leave the nest. Here, you can take the same house, make changes or upgrades over the years, but always have the same high quality house as a foundation."

Rattenbury describes his approach to house design as proceeding from the inside out. As such, he always presents his design work with details of the interior—right down to the last end table—in place.

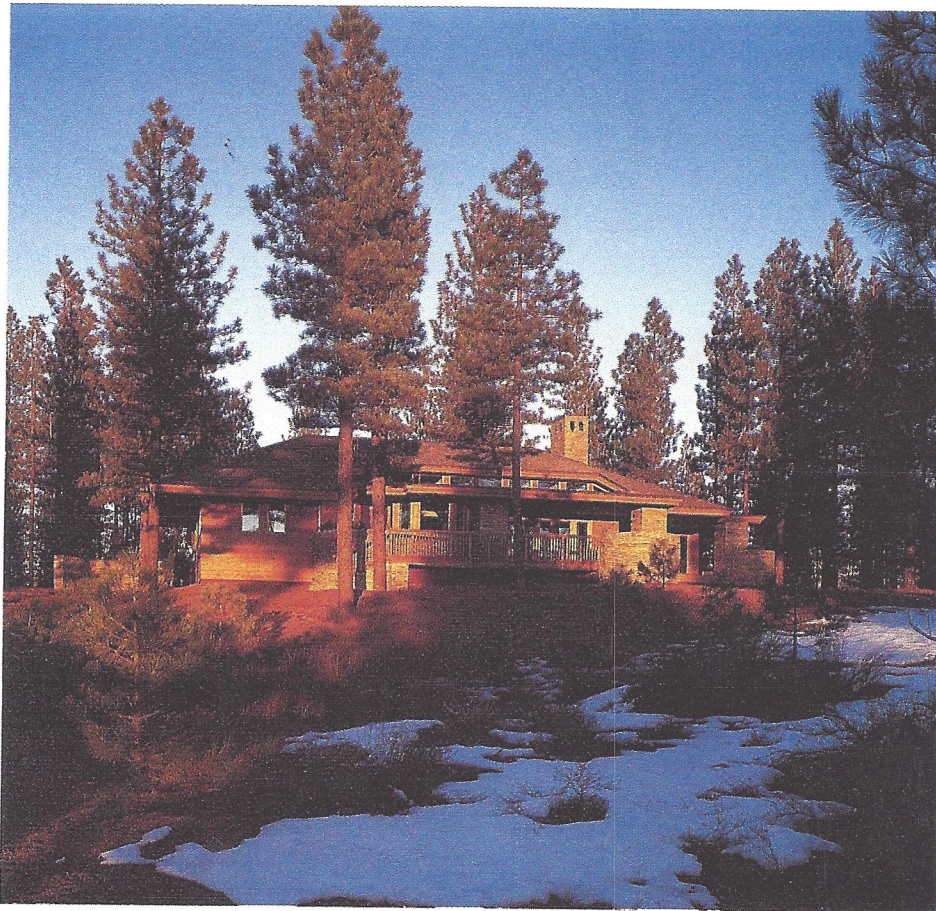
"As I design, I think of people in motion," he explains. "A house itself may be static, but its use is dynamic. Therefore, in my mind, I go through all the activities that take place in a home and then I am able to arrive at the best form. I believe the form of a house grows naturally from function, or as Wright said, 'Form and function are one.' So I really can't imagine simply turning over plans to someone else to figure out how to use the space."

For the Dream House, Rattenbury made simple choices, but nothing stark. The furnishings are not unlike what Wright himself designed—simple and full of geometric references. The walls are mocha, a neutral shade that blends well with the wood flooring and stone work. The textured ceiling is painted with a matte finish of Alpine white that helps to reflect daylight down. These finishes are the same from room to room, because Rattenbury finds that when rooms of a house are decorated differently, the house loses integrity and cost increases unnecessarily.

“When a family builds a house, they are making a big investment,” he says. “Therefore, an architect needs to make sure the investment is a sound one. We need to protect that investment by not designing according to a particular fad or style, but according to what is timeless design.”

Recently, Rattenbury took his daughter and his grandson and a friend to spend a long weekend in the house. It was the first time Rattenbury had the opportunity to live in one of the homes he designed, other than his own. Because the house is still being shown as a model within the neighborhood, the guests had to keep things neat and tidy, but other than that, the place was all theirs.

The weekend was quiet—lots of relaxing, talking and enjoying the outdoors. Rattenbury



The back of the house has a porch that is mostly covered by the extended roof, thereby making cookouts possible in wind, rain or shine.

found that the house worked just the way he planned and except for one missing light switch, he was satisfied.

“I was up at 2 a.m. one night, so I decided to get a glass of milk from the kitchen,” he says. “I discovered that I had forgotten to place a light switch outside the master bedroom that would create a path of light. But if that’s the only thing I forgot, I think I did okay.”

Judging from the brisk sale of the plans—more than 100 copies in the first two weeks that the May 1997 issue of *LIFE* was on the stands—Rattenbury did more than okay. ¶

LIFE Dream House plans are available by calling (800) 950-7210.