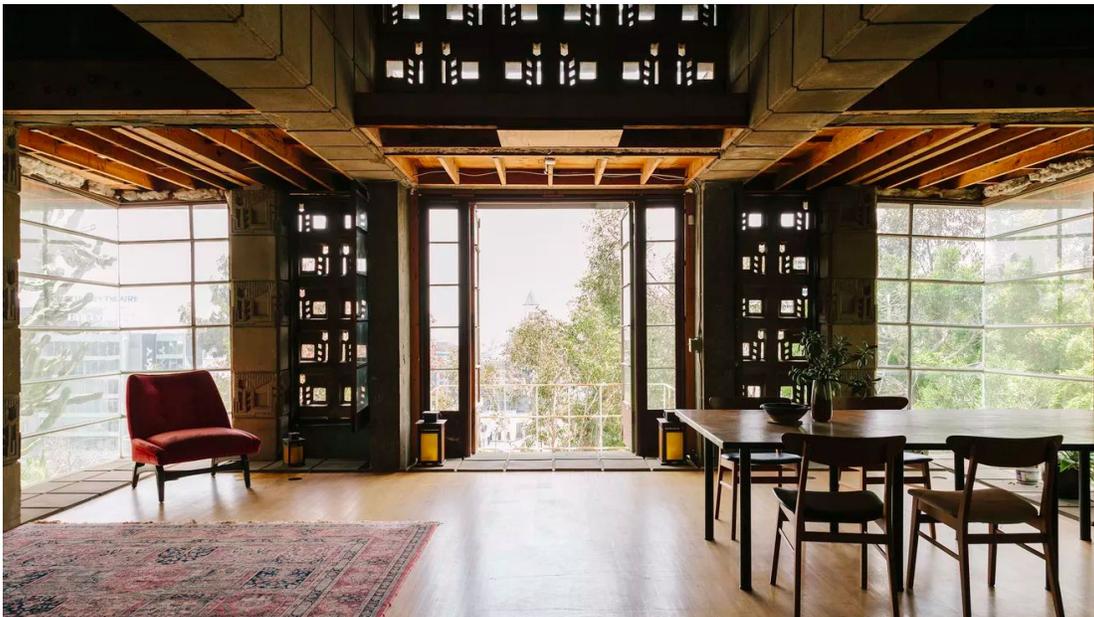




FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S FORGOTTEN HOLLYWOOD SANDCASTLE BY ALISSA WALKER

<https://www.curbed.com/2017/6/8/15742110/samuel-freeman-house-frank-lloyd-wright-los-angeles>



I lived next door to Wright's least-famous textile-block house—and it shaped my career

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In true Hollywood fashion, I didn't even notice my famous neighbor until after I moved in. My uphill neighbor was the Freeman House, Frank Lloyd Wright's least famous textile-block home. I was well acquainted with its celebrity sibling, the Ennis House, which occupies a hillside a few canyons over, from its cameo in the 1982 Ridley Scott film. And I knew of the Storer House, also in Hollywood, two miles west, and the Millard House, known as La Miniatura, in Pasadena, due to recent high-profile sales of the properties. All four textile-block houses were completed around 1924, but the Freeman House was smaller than the others, harder to find, not open to the public, and largely absent from contemporary pop culture. In many ways, it had been forgotten, even though it's easily the most visible—it's right there in historic images of Old Hollywood, in the opening segment of the Oscars, in many tourists' photos of one of the most famous places on Earth.



“It was the cheapest (and ugliest) thing in the building world,” Frank Lloyd Wright once said about why he chose to work with concrete blocks. “Why not see what could be done with that gutter rat?”

Each textile-block home is stamped with its own distinctive pattern, like a family crest, and the monumentality of the Mayan-inspired blocks evokes the opulence of an exotic temple. But Wright designed the homes with a utopian vision that homeowners could build these houses themselves, using affordable materials and a site-specific plan. However, as I could clearly see from my backyard, Wright’s vision did not intersect with LA’s geological realities.

There’s a 1953 photo by the architectural photographer Julius Shulman of the living room where the salons were held. A still-young Hollywood can be seen through the windows; one can almost hear jazz wafting out of the clubs on the boulevard and see klieg lights swooping through the sky. At the southern corners of the room, two planes of glass intersect. These two-story, freestanding miter-cut windows were said to be the first of their kind—a claim that is pretty much impossible to substantiate, although it’s very likely that this was one of the earliest experimental versions, at least in the United States. This home, like its owners, was pioneering a new way of living.



The Freeman House in 1953. The three prominent buildings seen from the center window are all still standing, and the view remains relatively similar today.

The story of those history-making windows, like everything else in the house, is more about the process than the final product. After Wright designed the home, he left it to his son, Lloyd Wright, to build it, as he’d moved on to other projects. Renovations to the house completed over the next few decades were executed by Rudolph Schindler, who worked alongside Wright on the Hollyhock House (where the Freemans met Wright when they were staying with arts patron Aline Barnsdall). These included carving the house into three separate living spaces after the Freemans’ marriage dissolved and the two began living essentially as

roommates. Even the legendary windows are not original, but actually a re-creation by Wright's protege, John Lautner, who added an aluminum support structure to replace the decaying wood. So reverting the house back to its original state would actually mean erasing some rather notable alterations, argues Peyton Hall, managing principal of Historic Resources Group, which has served as the historic preservation consultant for the Freeman House and many other LA landmarks. "People ask, why don't we make it 'Wright'?" he says. "But the house has been subjected to important changes over time which are not to be taken for granted."

When I finally got to go inside the Freeman House, 12 years after I'd moved away, I immediately looked out the windows to locate my old apartment. I saw the glorious vista familiar to me from the Shulman photo. But the view from my apartment had been better, I decided, because in addition to the exact same perspective of Hollywood, I had the Freeman House perfectly framed in my uphill window.

Unlike the flower-inspired motifs of the Hollyhock House, the significance of the Freeman House's textile-block pattern isn't known. Some scholars believe it looks like a tulip.

I didn't recognize it at the time, but the Freeman House shaped an essential part of what I became during those years I lived in Hollywood—among other things, a person fiercely passionate about the preservation of buildings. I remember the way the windows would ignite with golden light at the magic hour, visible from dozens of blocks away as I walked home, a beacon that showed I was on the right path. Soon, I was making actual money writing about architecture, organizing salon-type events for the interesting designers I met, and working hard to make the city below me a better place.

All the while the house was watching over me, nudging me down toward the action, but reminding me to pause and take it all in, because only one of us would get to stay on this hill forever.