

strengthens the front elevation, partly by obscuring the roof profile. The new design also brings the circulation through the building to a satisfying conclusion. The roof is reached from the living room by an extension of the existing stair that winds around the fireplace. The path continues past the doors to the west terrace to a new stair, constructed in the space between the fireplace and the north wall; a dead end is replaced with opportunity for further exploration.

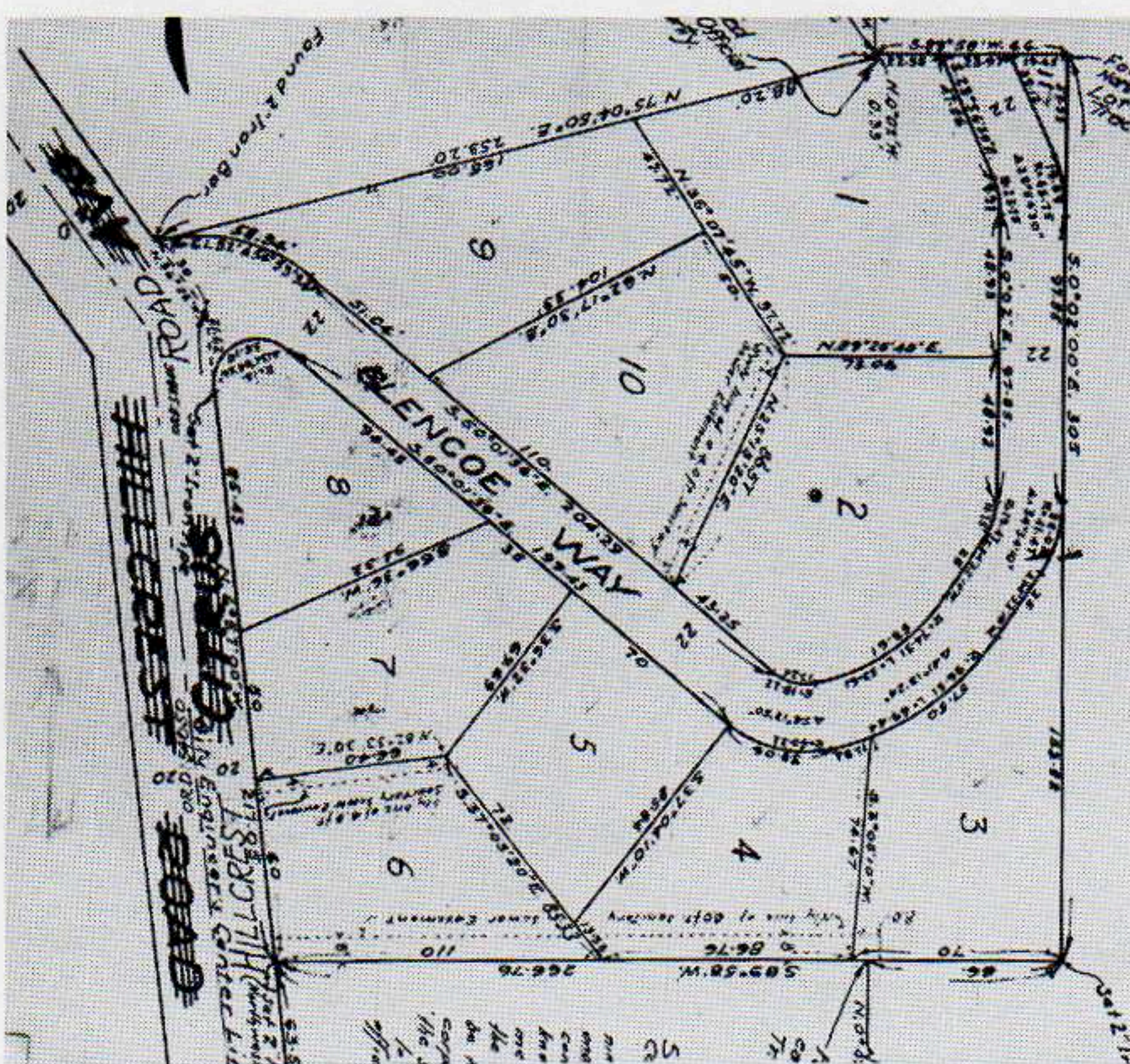
FREEMAN HOUSE, LOS ANGELES

Samuel (1889–1981) and Harriet (1890–1986) Freeman were the youngest and least affluent of Wright's southern California clients. He was a jewelry salesman; she was interested in modern dance and pursued progressive social causes. They may have learned of Wright and his work on Olive Hill through her sister, Leah Lovell; late in life, Harriet Freeman recalled that "after seeing Wright's buildings there, I couldn't imagine choosing another architect."³⁶ Though soon angry with Wright, the Freemans remained in their house until their deaths, some sixty years later.

Their building site was in the Hollywood hills, above the intersection of Highland and Franklin avenues. It was small and sloped steeply to the south; the boundaries were approximately seventy by seventy-five feet, but also included a narrow, wedge-shaped appendage (Fig. 72, Lot 3). Its selling point was the view: all of Hollywood lay below.

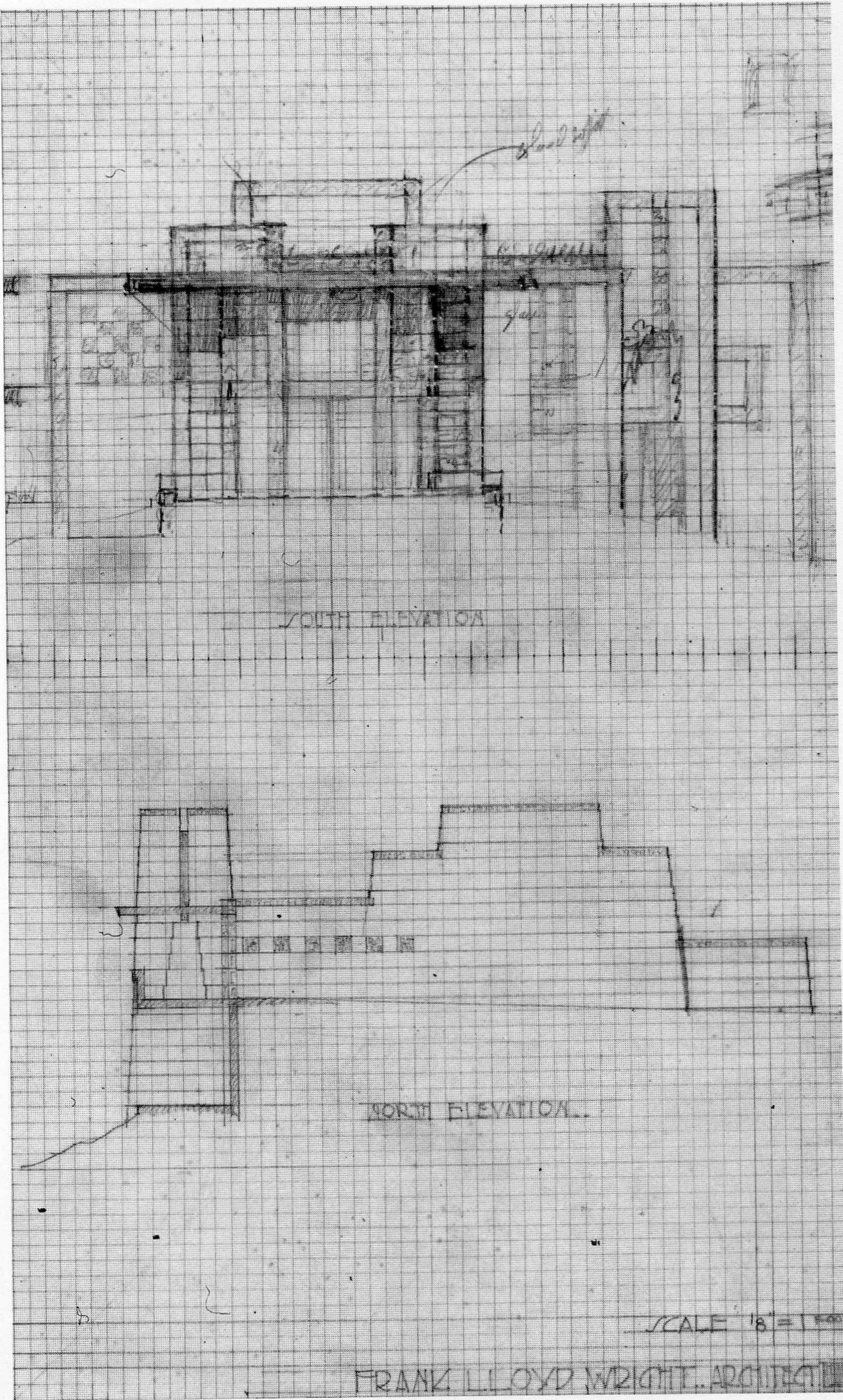
Wright responded by turning the house away from the street and opening it to the view: the front elevation is essentially a blank wall; the back is almost entirely glazed. As he had done before, Wright began with a composition of offset blocks which was later simplified (Fig. 73). The plan is on two levels, with the living room and kitchen above and two bedrooms and a bath below. Wright placed the house on the extreme northern boundary of the site, taking advantage of the extra wedge-shaped property for the garage.

No project was reworked as thoroughly during the design process as the tiny Freeman house. Two sets of working drawings were finished one month apart, in January and February 1924. Comparison of these drawings reveals that the changes were less formal than technical, suggesting that they resulted not from aesthetic indecision, but from structural necessity. Both schemes rely partially on the principle of the cantilever: wooden roof and floor structures are slipped like shelves into a perimeter



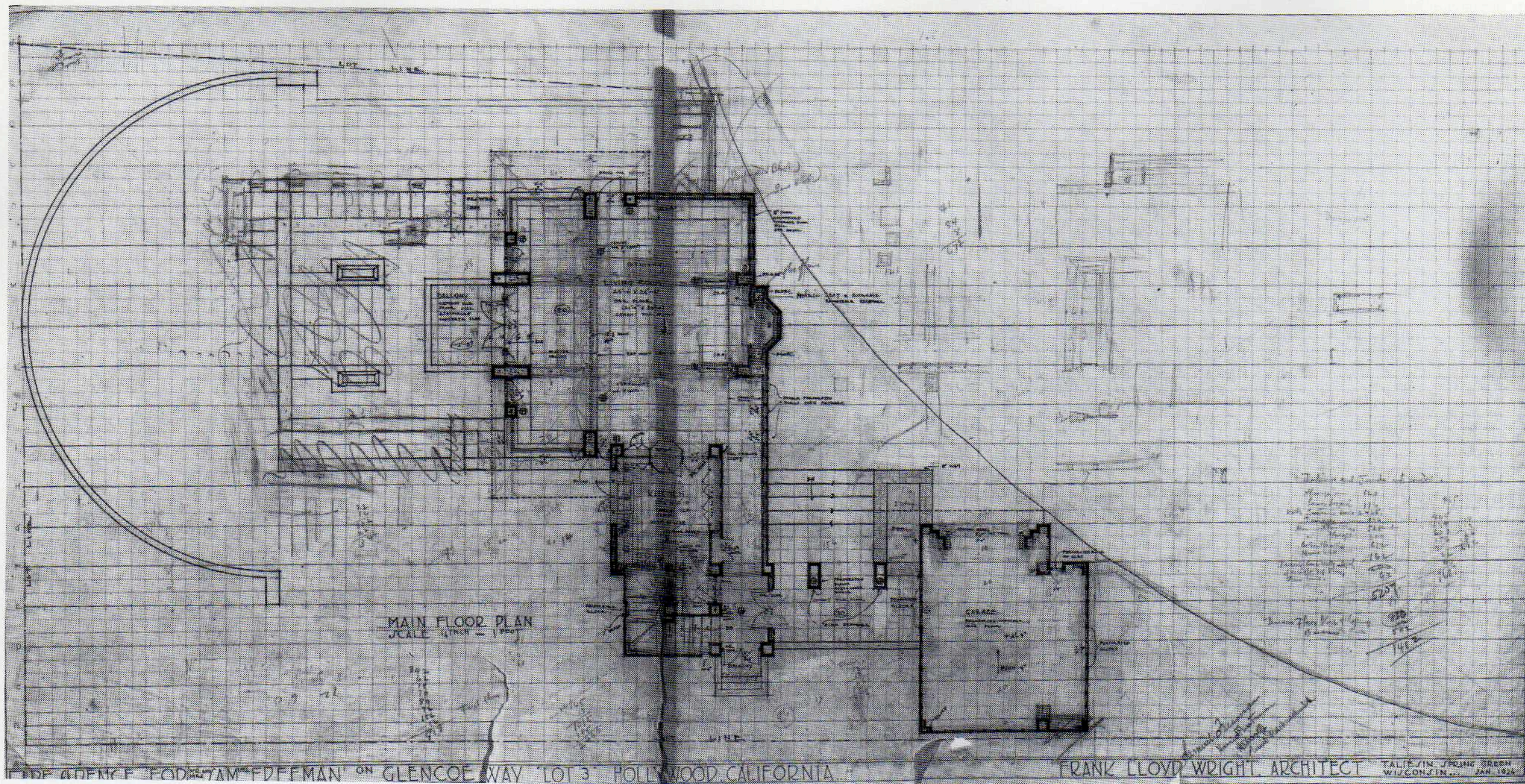
72. Samuel and Harriet Freeman house, Los Angeles, California, site plan, 1924. Los Angeles County Assessor, Book 221 (1920–27), p. 41

IMPROVEMENTS AND CHANGES
IN BLOCK TECHNIQUE

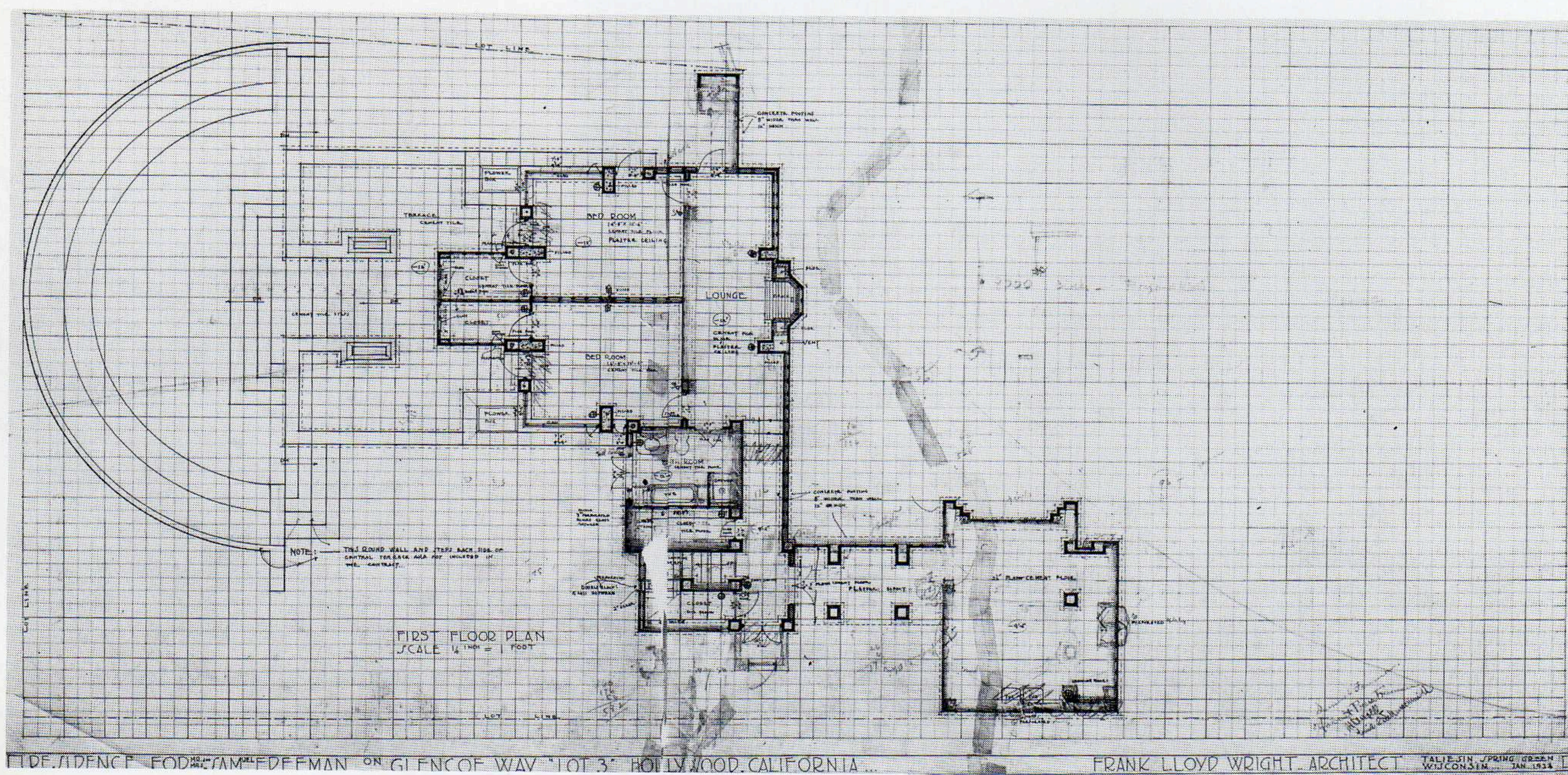


← WEDGE
OFFSET.

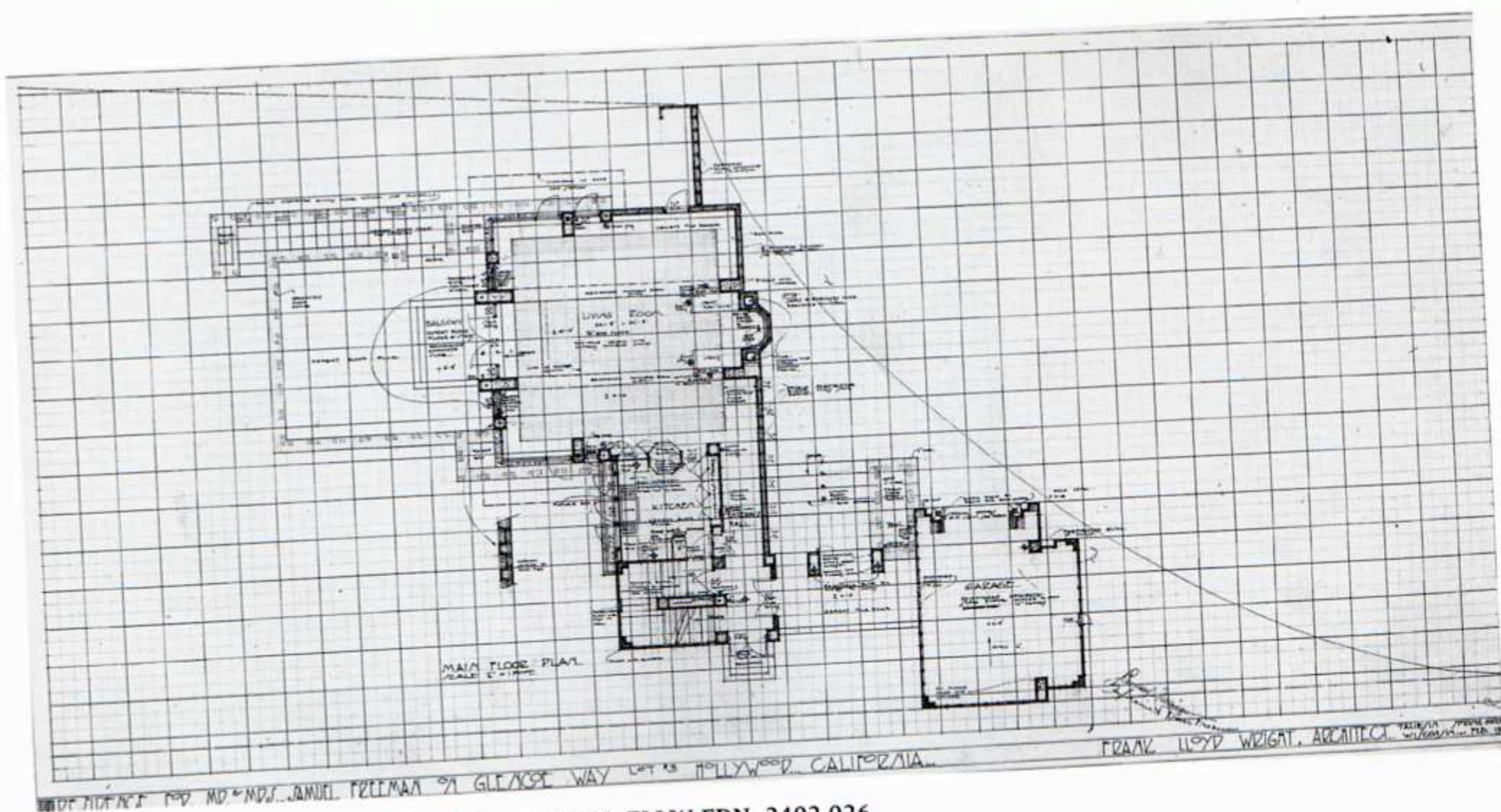
73. Freeman house, elevations. FLLW FDN,
2402.005



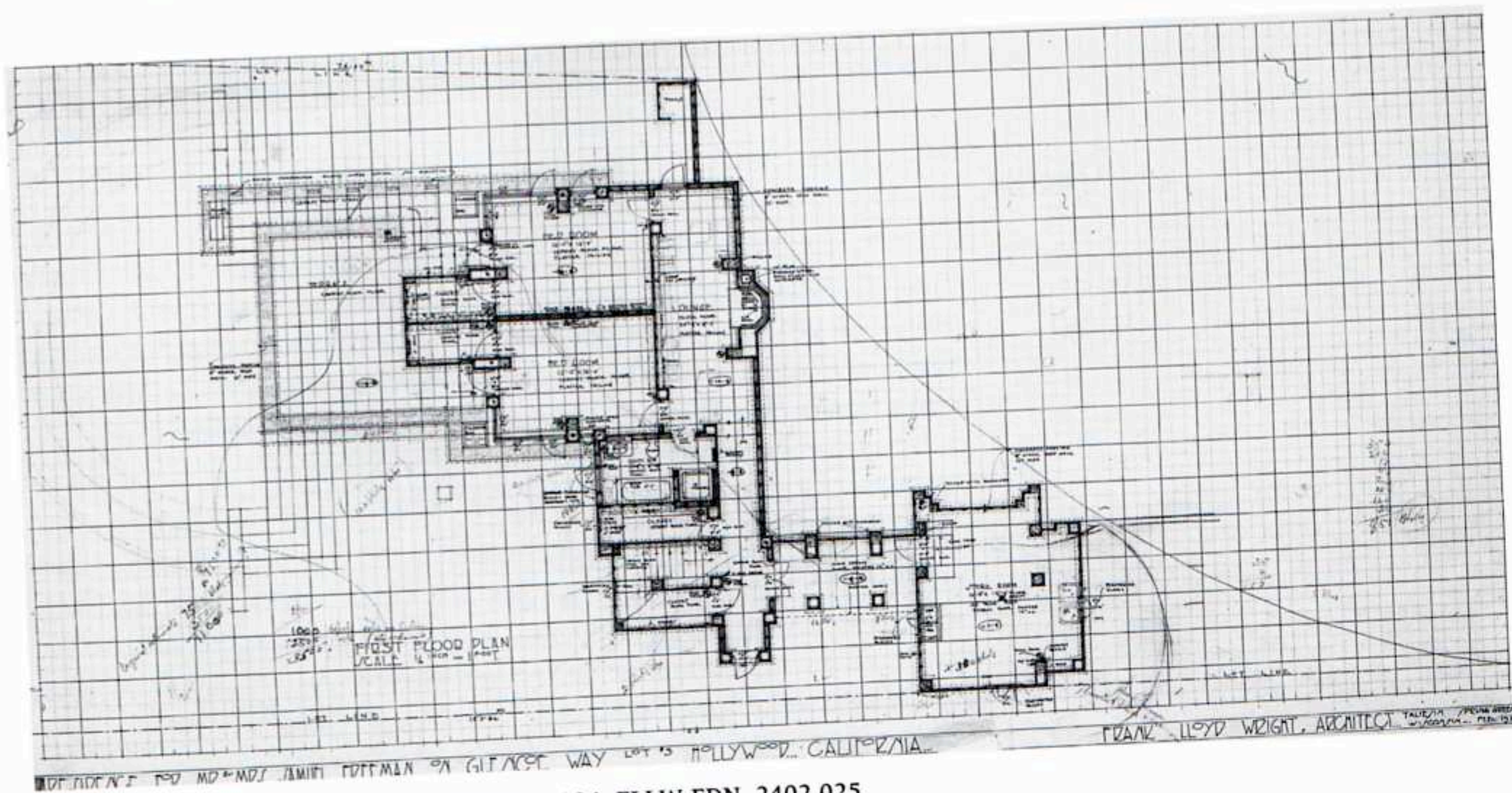
74. Freeman house, main-floor plan, January 1924. FLLW FDN, 2402.015



75. Freeman house, first-floor plan, January 1924. FLLW FDN, 2402.014



76. Freeman house, main-floor plan, February 1924. FLLW FDN, 2402.026



77. Freeman house, first-floor plan, February 1924. FLLW FDN, 2402.025

network of concrete-filled block piers. The effect is enhanced by a pair of two-story mitered corner windows that begin at the soffit and continue past the projecting edges of the upper floor, dematerializing traditional notions of support. Solid walls are formed with concrete block between the piers.

In the first scheme, the downward thrust resulting from building on so steep a site is acknowledged by a doubling up of the piers on the north-south axis. The east-west piers are linked by an I beam that serves to stabilize the building in a direction perpendicular to the natural forces (Figs. 74, 75). It is easy to speculate that this structure could not have withstood the lateral forces created by the steep hillside site, and that Wright quickly realized that additional north-south reinforcement was necessary.

With this in mind, the architect completed a second set of working drawings the following month, February 1924. The east-west I beam was replaced by a pair of reinforced-concrete beams spanning the living room north to south (Figs. 76, 77). These beams tie the seismically vulnerable south side of the building to the more substantial northern side. Apparently at this point an east-west concrete beam on the line of the original I beam was also introduced, although invisibly, and concrete reinforcement was added to the cantilevered corners of the living room, adjacent to the two-story windows.³⁷ The forms of the house were modified accordingly.

The house was built from this second set of plans. On January 26, Wright and Samuel Freeman signed a contract stipulating that the house would cost \$9,100.³⁸ Three days later, the Freemans signed another agreement with H. J. D. Wolff, a contractor who had worked on Olive Hill, that the house would be finished in six months, or on August 1, 1924.³⁹ Nothing more is known of Wolff except that he had no role in building the house; on February 26 the Freemans and Wright signed a third agreement, appointing Lloyd as contractor. The final agreement contains a clause reminiscent of Wright's contract with Alice Millard: if the cost of the Freeman house exceeded \$10,000, Wright agreed "to furnish whatever sum may be necessary to complete the work according to Plans and Specifications and to become a partner with MR. & MRS. SAMUEL FREEMAN to the extent of such payments as he — FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT — may be called upon to make and be reimbursed when . . . the property may be sold as an investment."⁴⁰

The building permit was issued on April 8, and construction photographs indicate that work began much as it had at the Storer house

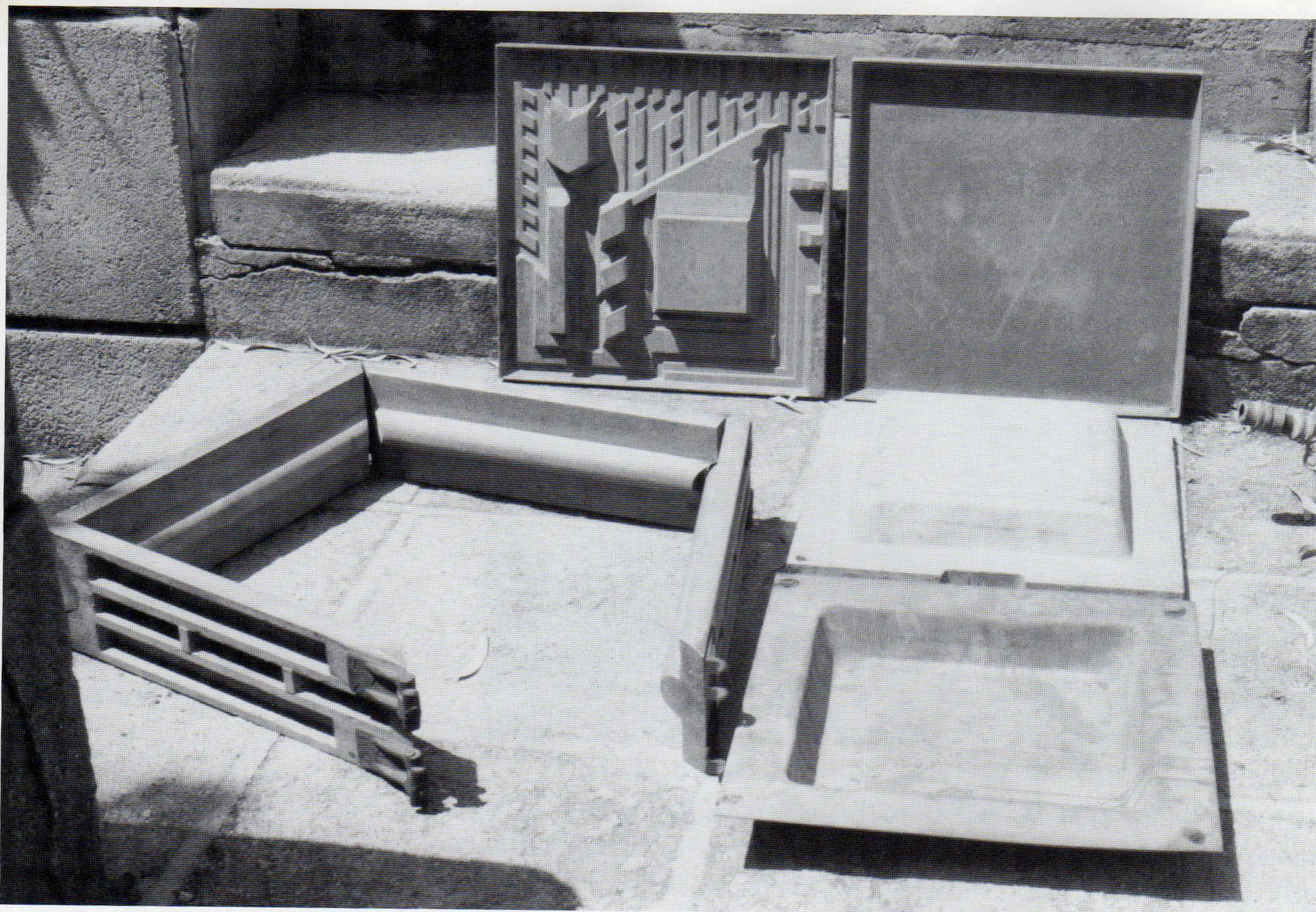


78. Freeman house. Courtesy of Eric Lloyd Wright

(Fig. 78).⁴¹ Storer had had a mechanical mixer at the site, but a more labor-intensive procedure was followed at the Freeman house. Byron Vandegrift, who made many of the blocks, recalled the process in 1983:

I was the only one making the block. I used to have to carry the cement and sand from where they'd dump it on the street [and] then mix it by hand. [Lloyd] had a big iron table out there. . . . We had an aluminum form . . . it was about this thick and sixteen inches square and you'd put the top right on it after you had leveled it off. . . . They had a small sledge hammer . . . and we put a two-by-four block on this sixteen-inch-square thing and pounded it down and it was enough to hold the block together and [then] you took the form out right away. I'd make over a hundred, some days. As soon as I pounded it in we'd lay them down . . . and water them. . . . He had me experiment and showed me how much stronger the blocks got if you watered them a couple of times a day for three weeks.⁴²

The molds that Vandegrift used were discovered in the garage of the Freeman house after Harriet Freeman's death. The basic mold is a four-sided, cast-aluminum flask, $17\frac{7}{8}$ by $17\frac{7}{8}$ by $4\frac{7}{8}$ inches, with machined faces. It has a tin liner plate for the bottom, and a cast-aluminum die, again



79. Freeman house, metal block mold.
Courtesy of the University of Southern
California

with a machined face, for the top (Fig. 79). The flask is hinged at three corners for disassembly and is secured by a latch at the fourth corner. A semicircular, convex rib creates the void or channel on the perimeter of the block. The liner plate is shaped to form the coffer on the back side of the block. The top die is plain or patterned as required.

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9/15 Construction continued for thirteen months. By September indications of trouble began to surface: on September 15, Wright discussed errors in the initial land survey in a letter to Lloyd. Then, on October 10, Wright instructed Lloyd to tell Freeman to draw on him "for enough to keep going." On November 19, Lloyd told his father that Freeman could not meet the payroll, that he was "held responsible to labor commission . . . car taken in." Similar problems continued into January, when

Lloyd reported "Work at a standstill . . . Freeman absolutely unable to meet any obligations."⁴³ The Freemans had in fact accumulated a backlog of unpaid invoices for materials and labor that resulted not only in the stoppage of work but also in a series of liens; between January 12 and April 14, 1925, sixteen liens, totaling \$3,388.56, were filed against the property.⁴⁴ Wright helped out somewhat; he telegraphed Lloyd on January 8 that he had "settled Freeman bills."⁴⁵ There is no documentation to reveal the extent of his total financial contribution to the project, or whether he or Freeman took care of the remaining debts. A notice of completion for the house was filed on March 23, 1925; the total cost was \$21,888.17, about two and one-half times the architect's estimate.⁴⁶ //

Like the Storer house, the Freeman house, as built, is a compromise; Wright's designs frequently did not improve when he reworked his initial concept. He first responded with a scheme that acknowledged and subtly reinforced the near axiality of the site with Highland Avenue. The main volume of the house was a square, bisected on the upper level by an implied line extending from the fireplace in the center of the north wall of the living room through the pair of glass doors at the opposite side of the room and on to the street below. On the lower level a wall separated the two bedrooms, the line of the wall continuing out through a perhaps overly grand stairway, leading to a semicircular garden below (see Figs. 74, 75).

The structural realities Wright seemingly faced, and his resolution of them, had the adverse effect of diminishing the subtlety of the original spatial concept, particularly in the living room. As the room was first designed, the southernmost third, beginning at the point of the I beam, was given definition by changes in ceiling height and floor material: the ceiling was dropped and the floor surface changed from wood to stone. The effect was to mitigate the regularity of the space by creating a cross axis with the dominant north-south axis, and forcefully to contrast the ephemeral, glazed portion of the room with the solid, womblike northern end. When the paired concrete beams were introduced, the room was again divided into thirds, but assertively on the main axis (see Fig. 76). While the first impression is that of a successful integration of the space with the vista below, the effect is in fact contrived. The beams are overbearing, their message too obvious. The southern third of the room is again defined by a lowered ceiling, but with distinctly diminished impact in contrast with the original concept.

The house offers several other intellectual dilemmas — minor by comparison, but worth noting. The entrance hall, reached through a small

loggia connecting the house and the garage, extends twenty feet toward the living room. Perforated blocks line the space: one expects them to contain lights, but they do not. At night the corridor is uncomfortably dark. The corresponding ground-floor corridor is similarly without light. Perhaps most difficult to understand is the "lounge," a long, narrow room at the end of the corridor onto which both bedrooms open. There is a second fireplace here, directly under the one in the living room, but it seems gratuitous. The space is dark and uninviting; the only natural light source is a glazed door at the far end.

While the Freeman house is not without problems, it also is enormously provocative. The Freemans were modern people, and among the early block buildings their house comes closest to embracing the tenets of modernism. The sense of the cantilever; the thin, projecting roof slab; and the two-story, mitered corner windows — for many the most memorable feature, indeed the real glory of the Freeman house — combine to produce an architecture that anticipates the future, rather than recalling the past (Figs. 80, 81; Plates 5, 6).

The Freeman house also has the most adventurous block pattern. The house was designed for construction with only a single patterned block, combined, as always, with plain blocks. In the first scheme, the pattern has a square motif reminiscent of one of the blocks for the Storer house. This was transformed in the February drawings into an asymmetrical pattern of disparate geometric shapes, dominated by a square and chevron. There are both left- and right-hand versions, and in application the blocks are occasionally turned upside down. At least one critic has seen this second pattern as an abstraction of the eucalyptus tree; if, however, there is an organic interpretation, Wright never said so.⁴⁷

There is less relationship between the combinations of plain and patterned block and structural function in the Freeman house than in the buildings that preceded it. On the exterior, patterned blocks are used in single courses as trim on all horizontal and most vertical edges. Piers are formed of alternating courses of patterned and plain blocks. Perforated patterned blocks are used to admit light in the entry and in the living room, where they appear in the clerestory and as screens in the south wall. Patterned blocks are used sparingly inside, perhaps with greatest effect around the fireplace.

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In no case did Wright attempt to fully furnish one of his California block houses. He did design bookcases for Millard's living room and similar,

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80. Freeman house. Courtesy of Kameki Tsuchiura



81. Freeman house, living room, looking southwest. FLLW FDN, 2402.011

82. Freeman house, living room, looking north. Courtesy of the University of Southern California



// though not identical, metal lighting fixtures for the Storer and Freeman houses. For the Freemans he also designed a pair of highly architectonic pewlike benches to flank the living-room fireplace (Fig. 82), a pair of bookcases backing the benches, and an octagonal dining-room table. The table was placed in an opening in the wall separating the living room and kitchen, to be accessible from either side. This wall itself, designed as an elaborate construction of cabinets and screens, was greatly simplified when the house was built.

Although it is generally beyond the scope of this book to comment on

later changes made to the buildings by other designers, it does seem important to mention R. M. Schindler's work at the Freeman house. The Freemans turned to Schindler for modifications early on. They found in him a kindred spirit who knew and admired Wright's work and had the ability and willingness to design on an extremely limited budget. Schindler began modestly, but as his friendship with the Freemans grew and their resources increased, he returned again and again, until his death thirty years later, leaving an indelible stamp on the building.

The most significant changes occurred in 1928 and 1932. In 1928 the wall between the west bedroom and the lounge was removed to create a larger space, and both bedrooms were furnished. Also, the benches flanking the living-room fireplace were discarded and replaced with a pull-out sofa bed and wall unit. Then, in 1932, the open loggia connecting the house with the storeroom under the garage was enclosed, and the storeroom itself converted into an apartment.⁴⁸

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bedroom was
removed.

Surprisingly, Schindler's modifications and additions display little of his well-known affinity for Wright's work. The remodeling projects produced much of the awkwardness of the plan as it is perceived today. And though much of the furniture is built in, it ignores the grid of the concrete blocks. Other pieces, fascinating geometric constructions in themselves, are too emphatic for the spaces they occupy. The effect is more of collision than resolution. It is difficult now, however, to imagine the house without Schindler's furniture and fruitless to speculate what Wright might have done, given the opportunity.

ENNIS HOUSE, LOS ANGELES

The final concrete-block house in southern California was built for Charles W. and Mabel Ennis. It was the largest and most elaborately conceived design Wright managed to carry out. For the first time he was able to build with the offset blocks he had proposed repeatedly; there is extensive, if nonstructural, use of blocks in overhead spans; and new compositional forms are introduced. Though badly flawed in execution, the house is the most complete summary of Wright's theories of concrete-block design and construction as they had developed by 1924. "You see," he wrote to the Ennises, "the final result is going to stand on that hill a hundred years or more. Long after we are all gone it will be pointed out as