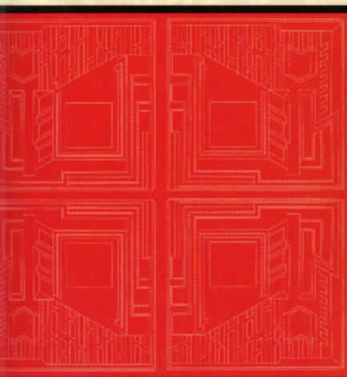
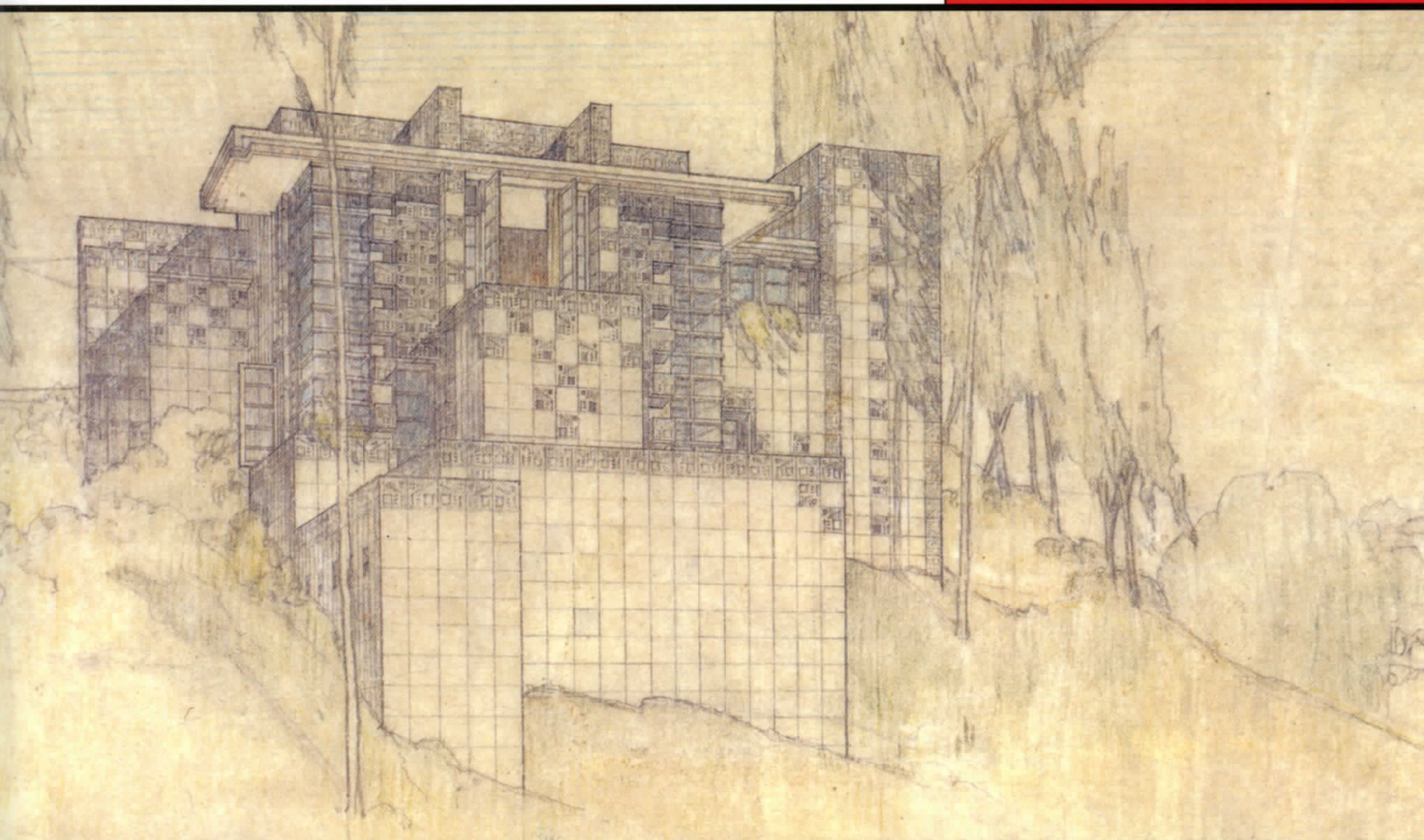


# SAVING WRIGHT

THE FREEMAN HOUSE  
AND THE  
PRESERVATION  
OF MEANING,  
MATERIALS, AND  
MODERNITY



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Wright's work has always deliberately exploited opposition, even to the point of a seeming willingness to elicit discomfort in the viewer (as in excessively low doorways or startlingly dark corridors). A long series of dualities makes his architecture continually challenging, dynamic, and assertive. (Similar qualities in the man produced a like result.) At least five of these can be found in the Freeman House: solidity versus transparency, light versus dark, compression versus expansion, inside versus outside, and the square versus the diagonal.

Wright's first sketches for the north and south façades of the house established a fundamental dichotomy between solidity and transparency, and between light and dark. The solidity of the concrete blocks makes the glazed openings welcome and dramatic, and the massiveness of the concrete around the hearth becomes a welcome, and literal, counterweight to the sense of floating generated by the cantilevered corners of the living room and roof terrace. In a building whose cubist concrete construction seems to represent the apotheosis of stasis, solidity, and stability, the choreography that Wright creates through his use of compression and expansion, light and dark, and opacity and transparency is all the more powerful. The visitor is drawn where Wright directs. At times, this movement seems to intensify the solidity of the concrete. In other instances, the concrete itself seems set loose.

Wright encourages movement by narrowing and darkening areas meant as passageways while brightening and expanding, both horizontally and vertically, the destinations. Like a branch floating in a stream, we are propelled faster through the narrow channels and then released to enjoy a pool of stillness. At the Freeman House, a sequence of these experiences begins at the street. When approaching the house, we move from the wide street onto the entry terrace, which is walled on one side, then down steps to another terrace, walled on two sides, walking first under a high roof, then under a lower one, and then through a still narrower doorway into the building. From the front door, we are squeezed down an almost windowless hallway toward the living room, the ceiling rising in steps as we go; then the walls open up, light floods in from three sides, and we can see through corner windows to the far horizon. Once in the living room, the highest volume is in the center, over the seating by the hearth, providing the spot of stillness. As we move toward the balcony, the ceiling lowers again, and the glass wall becomes two screens of perforated block on either side of the balcony door. But after we pass through the door and move outside, as the ceiling yields to sky and the walls to eucalyptus, the floor steps down to reinforce the expansion of space in every direction.

A similar experience occurs at the roof. The stairs leading to the public spaces on the roof are narrow and dark. Arriving at a small penthouse landing, we exit through a door that opens into a narrow, roofless passage framed by high parapet walls. Three more steps bring us to a 360-degree vista of the world.

In 1925, movement on the lower level proceeded in the same sequence as on the upper level. At the bottom of a dark, confining stair, one could turn right or left. To the right, a set of glass doors led to an exterior colonnade with a low ceiling (the loggia) from which the hillside dropped steeply and views extended eastward to the distant mountains and downtown Los Angeles. The colonnade ended in a short set of steps and a narrow door that opened to the high-ceilinged laundry/storeroom below the garage. If one turned to the left at the bottom of the main stairs, after several yards of dark, narrow passageway, the hallway floor stepped down while the wall to the left moved four feet further to the left and became

part block, part frosted glass. This vertical and horizontal expansion created the "lounge." Straight ahead was a large casement window through which one could walk directly outside.

In the Freeman House, as in most homes, the plan dimensions of the rooms and corridors vary according to their function and importance. But unlike most homes, at the Freeman House the proportion of width to height is also different in every room, except for the paired bedrooms. The ceilings and floor levels constantly shift; in some areas, several times. This modulation of the section enlivens the spaces as one moves through the house and shapes one's reading of space, purpose, and meaning.

That every axis in the Freeman House terminated outdoors related back to Wright's ideas about the California house and the human attraction to light. His manipulation of light reinforces the movement induced by the compression and expansion of walls, floors, and ceilings. Walking toward the house from the street, one is attracted to the shadowed terrace outside the front door not just by the water in the pool and the coolness described earlier but also by the glimpse of light and city views visible over the parapet wall next to the front door. Inside the house, french doors mark either terminus of the curving axis that is the route of circulation from the front door to the living room balcony or, in reverse, from the living room to a small balcony by the front door and main stairs. In fact, the latter balcony exists primarily to provide a visible exterior space at the east end of the upper hallway.

As already mentioned, taking the stairs from the front door down to the bedroom level, you arrive at a hallway with a large window and french doors at the east end and a large window, usable as a door, at the west end. Along the lower hall, both bedroom doors included small windows that enticed the visitor to follow the light through those rooms to the french doors leading to the slumber terrace, set beside more corner windows.

Another layer of excitement is added by opposing the square and the diagonal. The rooms at the Freeman House are organized orthogonally, but you often move through them at an angle, having entered at a corner. As you move farther into a room, more and more of the space is revealed, and the direction of your gaze continually shifts toward the largest openings. On almost every surface, including the floor, the omnipresent grid records a transgressive diagonal motion. In the living room, where you walk at an angle under the massive beams supporting the roof, the feeling is especially illicit and exhilarating.

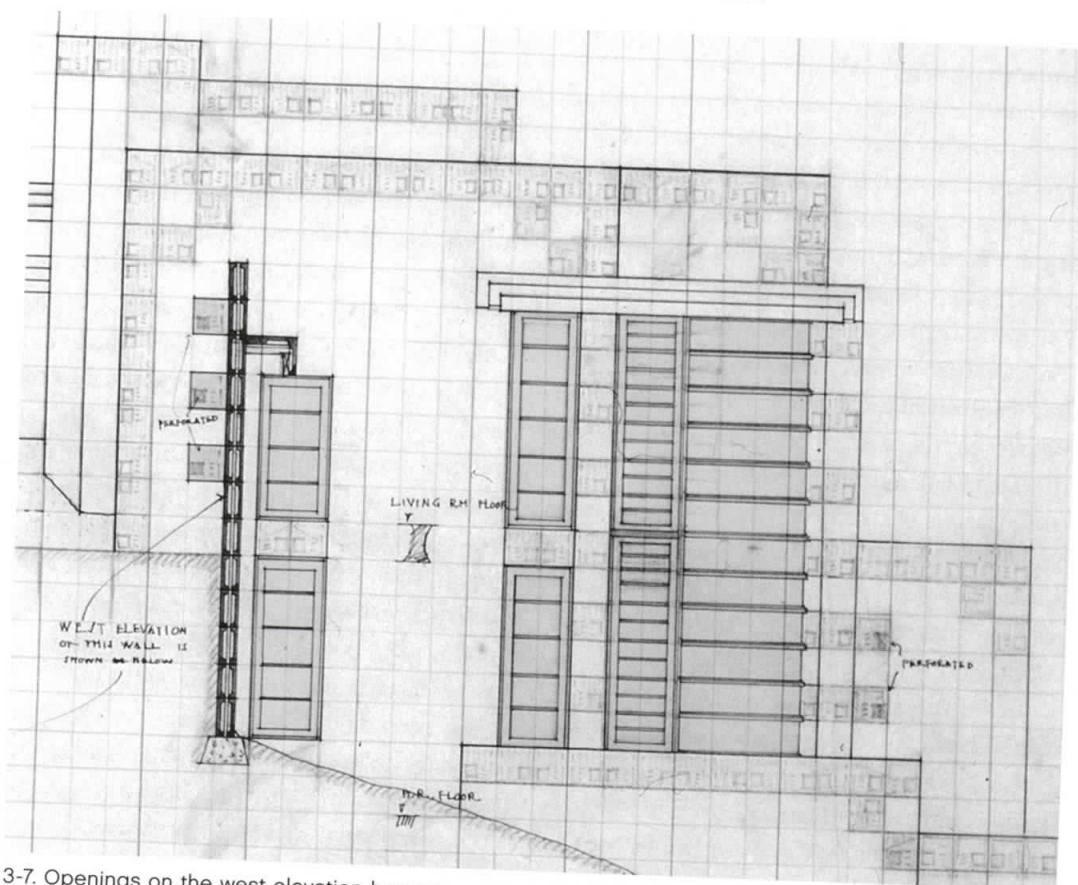
Diagonal movement was one of Wright's frequent strategies for freeing space from the confinement of traditional architecture, a concept he called "exploding the box." This effect could also be achieved by blurring distinctions between a room's planes or by the elimination of corners. Both of these strategies are employed at the Freeman House. The use of raw concrete block throughout the building blurs the distinctions between walls and floor, while the corners of the block cubes are themselves camouflaged or dissolved by becoming glass.

The drama of movement through the Freeman House is reinforced by additional elements in the architecture. The most powerful are the corner windows, joined by the broad cantilevers of the roof, the full-height french doors, and the horizontal mullions that mimic the horizon. All lead the eye from inside to out. In the living room, further impetus is given to this movement by the direction of the lines in the oak floor (ranged north to south), and by the same directionality of the roof beams and ceiling battens. Finally, depressing both the living room balcony and the slumber terrace down three steps so that their parapet walls are level with the interior floors prevents the walls from blocking the view.



One enters the house via a rocky defile and leaves it through a glass wall leading to a balcony high up in the trees; a progression from opaque to transparent. The architecture makes the transition as well. The only openings in the north wall at the street are the distinctively solid front doors and a row of seven perforated blocks with glass insets. Proceeding around the west façade of the house, however, the openings become steadily larger until they span two stories at the corners.

On the south façade, another kind of transition is observed, moving from the pair of massive vertical columns that appear to pin the structure to the hillside when seen from below to the floating bands of horizontal glass at the corners. The central opening between the columns on the upper level is a 6-block square. The transition proceeds from the columns themselves, which are encircled with alternating rows of plain and patterned block (in contrast to the columns on the north wall of the living room, which are patterned their entire height), outward to the two pierced screens of perforated block, each of which terminates in fingerlike extensions of block alternating with deep recesses. Thus, the tall, vertical shadow of a column is transformed into a vertical series of square shadows outboard of the screen. The final elements on the façade are the corner windows at each end. Even here, however, the part of the window next to the concrete screen is a 16" square of glass, recalling the concrete block but transparent. The entire transition terminates in the 32"-long bands of glass that reach to the corner.



3-7. Openings on the west elevation become progressively larger moving from north to south; beginning with single perforated blocks, and stepping up in size to the 12-block-tall and 3½-block-wide corner curtain wall. Detail from working drawing manipulated by the author.

The cantilevered roof prevents the various compositional games being played with openings and block patterns from making the façades of the house feel chaotic or choppy. This horizontal element, visible on three sides of the main cubic volume, is a single, dominating datum line that literally overshadows all of the other elements on the façades. As strong as it is, however, Wright establishes a relationship of tension between the roof and the concrete cube by piercing the roof plane with piers and parapets.

## METAPHOR

Many aspects of Wright's architecture comment on home, society, culture, place, even architecture itself. Most of the time, these added layers of meaning are clear, either visually or experientially—for example, the way the high backs of his Prairie-period dining chairs form a secure, inwardly focused enclosure around the assembled family. Sometimes, Wright added these layers of meaning after the fact, in writings or speeches, as guarantors bolstering a decision made primarily for other reasons, as when he proclaimed the sliding glass door “democratic.” while discussing the Usonian house. Examples of especially important metaphor or iconography in the Freeman House are the eucalyptus pattern on the blocks, the two large hearths, the Mayan architectural style, the references to the four sacred elements (earth, air, fire, and water), and the massive beams in the living room.

Many of Wright's designs feature an interpretation of a plant that had, or was given, particular meaning for the project, a practice common among Arts and Crafts designers. In picking the eucalyptus for the Freeman house, as consensus claims he did, Wright chose the most distinctive tree in the Los Angeles landscape, even though it was an import from Australia. Standing above the grasses and chaparral, or scrub, the silvery eucalyptus was a distinctive vertical element in an otherwise fairly homogeneous dark and low vegetative cover. Wright wrote: “Curious tan-gold foothills rise from tattooed sand-stretches to join slopes spotted as the leopard-skin with grease-bush. This foreground spreads to distances so vast—human scale is utterly lost as all features recede, turn blue, recede and become bluer still to merge their blue mountain shapes, snow-capped, with the azure of the skies. The one harmonious note man has introduced into these vast perspectives, aside from the long, low plastered wall, is the eucalyptus tree. Tall, tattered ladies, these trees stand with careless feminine grace in the charming abandon appropriate to perpetual sunshine, adding beauty to the olive-green and ivory-white of an exotic symphony in silvered gold and rose-purple.”<sup>14</sup> The presentation drawings of the proposed Freeman House prominently feature the eucalyptus. The “long, low plastered wall” was transformed by Wright into the long concrete-block wall along the street, and around the terraces. To this day, the Freeman House sits dappled beneath the clump of eucalyptus that preceded it on the site.

It is common in Wright's houses for the hearth, symbolizing shelter, to be set opposite a bank of windows or doors that open to the outside, setting up dialogues, or even another set of oppositions, between the home and the landscape, the family, and the community. At his Home and Studio, two seating areas bracket the living room. One is the inglenook by the fireplace; the other, a bay projecting toward the garden and the street. This duality serves several purposes. First, it provides a winter setting and a summer setting. Second, it allows



the inhabitant to indulge the needs or whims of the moment, for womblike security or for engagement in the world passing by outside. Third, it establishes a fundamental principle for the form of a house: anchored at its core by the fireplace, which is also the most solid element in the home and is enclosed by an active perimeter that moves in and out to interact with or wall off the outside world.

The hearth contains fire, which not only provides heat but is the symbol of the life of the family. It is sacred, and its location in the home is sacred as well. Some writers have claimed that the concept of shelter originated along with fire as a means of protecting it. However one views this archetypal concept, it is clear that in Wright's architecture the hearth takes the form of a cave, the most primitive, secure, and grounded of shelters.

In his book *The Living City*, Wright himself sets up the dichotomy of the Cave Dweller and the nomad.<sup>15</sup> From the beginning of his career, the inglenook formed the cave within his domestic architecture. It only required the concept of "exploding the box" to complete the duality. With that in place, the exterior, itself often free to extend throughout the site, allowed the home's residents to wander visually through clerestories, laylights, skylights, and windows that ranged from opaque to transparent, and physically through porches, terraces, garden walls, and loggias stretching to the outside. Even ornament and decoration can be subordinated to the dual natures of these spaces. Patterns are usually more profuse and elaborate on the exterior walls, to encourage the mind to wander and to enhance visual delight, while the area containing the hearth is more severe, more regular, more substantial—relying on the flickering flames for animation.

In the Freeman House Wright intensified this duality. The hearth almost literally burrows into the hillside, while the walls of glass opposite it reveal not just a garden or street, but the world stretching to a distant horizon. (The hillside setting provides the opportunity to incorporate another iconic type of shelter, the tree house, which sets its inhabitants above it all, allowing them to see without being seen and to see farther and more than anyone else). Wright contrasts the two prototypes by setting the hearth and the opposing window wall in two different structural systems. The north wall of the living room is massive, unbroken by windows: a bearing wall in which pilasters frame the fire and patterned block forms a tapestry on the wall above it. The south wall is a post-and-beam construction of glass and cantilevered planes. Two large and two small columns support the floating roof, but they are set on either side of the balcony door, away from the corners. There is no vertical element, not even a mullion, within four feet of the corners, which seem to have been just taken away. The few blocks that remain at the south wall form elaborate perforated-block screens, obviating any similarity they might have to the opaque block at the hearth. These screens also provide a level of ornamentation similar to that formerly furnished by the art-glass windows of Arts and Crafts designers.

Central to Wright's physical and architectural wanderings between 1910 and 1924 was a search for an essential core to architecture. For him, and many others, that essence was found in the "primitive." It was thought of as both an ethnographic and a formal concept. It prompted a study of the works of simpler or older cultures to find a shared architectural grammar of ornament and form that was more meaningful, more "true," by virtue of being more universal. It encouraged a return to an architecture of platonic forms and solids: simple geometries that gave both order and a cosmological validation to the architecture. Theo-

retical underpinnings for this search came from the nineteenth-century German writer Gottfried Semper and his four components of the "primitive hut," the prototypical dwelling of the human race: the earthen mound, hearth, framework/roof, and lightweight enclosure.<sup>16</sup>

The search for architecture's universal, essential core on the one hand and for a national or regional design character on the other are contradictory impulses that underlie much of modern architecture, as well as other forms of modernist expression, including dance, music, and the fine arts. At the same time as Europeans were stripping history away from their architecture, the early California moderns—Gill, Schindler, and the two Wrights—were looking to historical precedents to give a sense of rootedness and place to their otherwise often radical works, and perhaps to please an American taste that had become enamored of exotic styles. One might argue that the Freeman House's evolution from the Mayan-influenced Romanza style of the early sketches to a less picturesque, more modern house as built, indicates the end of this experiment for Wright, and the integration of the important elements of his admittedly romantic experiments into more enduring polemical and architectonic concerns.

One last elemental gesture that survived at the Freeman House was the small pool by the entry, which offered an oasis from heat and sun. Situated partially under the entry canopy, the pool also reflected sunlight and ripples onto the soffit above it. Besides the obvious sense of refreshment, water had symbolic import. The Hollyhock, Millard, Storer, and Freeman houses all contained the four sacred elements: fire (the hearth), water (the pool or stream), earth (the site, and its extension, the concrete block), and air (the sky and views). At the entry to the Freeman House these four elements were represented by the courtyard: bounded to the northeast by the pool and to the southwest by the projecting tower of the hearth and chimney, framed in block that was made, at least in part, from the earth on which the house sat, the space was open to breezes that wafted through the open porch and views across the city and Hollywood Hills.

Even if the primitive style of the Maya had disappeared from the final design of the Freeman House, Gottfried Semper's four components were still very much in evidence. The earthen mound is expressed in the way the house is both cut into the hillside and (putatively), using the granite from the site, itself forms a new hilltop. Two hearths, one on each floor, dominate their associated interior space and are set into a distinctive tower that is the singular strong feature in the street façade. The main house's pair of massive concrete beams and column assemblies start in the earth and rise two stories to penetrate the plane of the roof. They are the framework, at least metaphorically, on which the rest of the building hangs. The



3-8. Harriet in the east window seat of the living room, ca. 1925, in front of a screen formed from a panel of perforated blocks.



lightweight enclosure is formed by the other great innovation of the house: the two-story glass curtain walls.

Frank Lloyd Wright first came to prominence as an architect of the Arts and Crafts movement, a period when, among other ideas, he investigated the expression of a building's structure through its ornament. In the octagonal drafting room of his Home and Studio, for example, massive chains of black iron connect a balcony to the beams of the roof above. While visually and aesthetically compelling, the chains perform no real structural function. They are ornament used in a structurally "logical" way. Wright represented the concept or idea of structure, as opposed to simply revealing the structure itself, as would architects of the Modern movement.

In the Freeman House, the massive concrete beams that span the living room from north to south appear to be part of a pair of great arches that support the entire house. In fact, the beams are massive in part because of the physical requirements of forming a beam out of both block and reinforced concrete, but mainly because each beam supports its own considerable weight as well as a row of perforated blocks that form the clerestory above. Because no continuous steel reinforcing runs from the beams into the pilasters at their north end or into the columns to the south, the beams actually do not establish a structural frame. The building's structure requires four additional concrete beams that span from east to west in the living room ceiling, and three more in the floor; but they are hidden from view because they would visually confuse our "understanding" of how the room is constructed, and because they would interfere with the more important aesthetic ideas of the north-south axuality of the room and the sense of lift and space created by the raising of the central section of the roof.

For all the inconsistency of the gesture, however, the house still represents a move toward a modernist revelation of structure, while the dominance of the structure visually connecting north and south, solid and transparent, dark and light, cave and tree house, inside and out, reinforces the dualities so central to Wright's vision.

Wright, writing two years after the Freeman House was completed, described the way the concrete blocks were standardized "unit-mass" elements woven together like an oriental carpet. He was conflating the idea of weaving and masonry, and connecting Semper's origin myth for architecture to modernist aspirations for the affordable house. But realizing Wright's rich vision for the Freeman House required that the building actually be built, which turned out to be not an easy thing.