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EMILY LARSON

THE STATE FAIR  
AT TWILIGHT

## Getting It Wright

A Frank Lloyd Wright-designed studio, renewed



Right: Don and Virginia Lovness in the living room with the dining set and coffee table he built. Don was a 3M engineer, and in 1958 the 3M house newsletter did a full-page article on the young couple and their home.



# GETTING IT WRIGHT

The second owners of a midcentury Frank Lloyd Wright-designed property near Stillwater, Minnesota, painstakingly bring a Usonian-style studio into the 21st century

BY LINDA MACK



“

The main room is one of the great residential spaces I've experienced. It's on par with the living room at Taliesin.

”

#### LOVNESS STUDIO RENOVATION

**Architects:** Kelly R. Davis and Tim Old, AIA, of SALA Architects  
[salaarc.com](http://salaarc.com)

**Interiors:** Talla Skogmo Interior Design

**Structural engineer:**  
Meyer Borgman Johnson

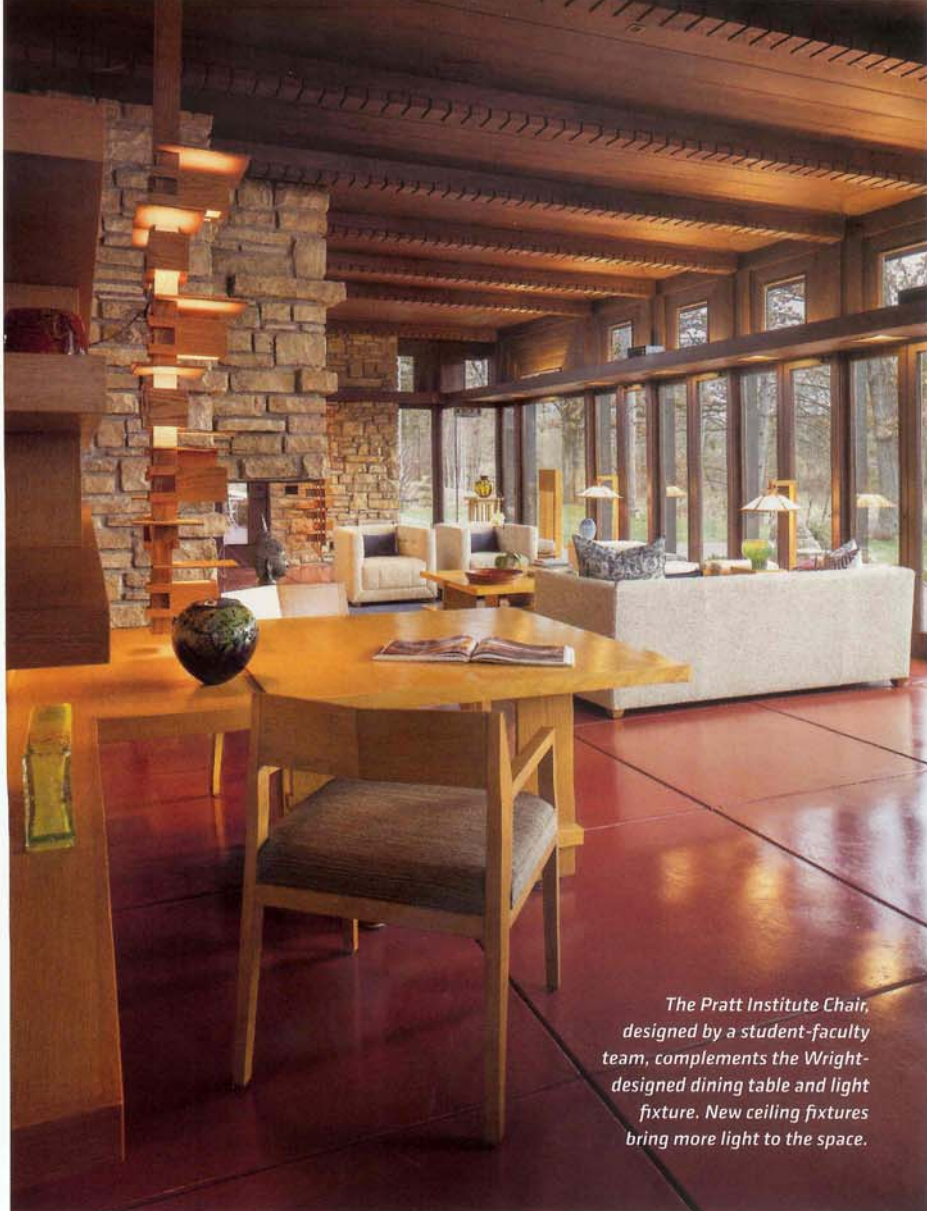
**Landscape architect:**  
Aune Fernandez Landscape Architects

**Contractor:**  
Braden Construction

**Photographer:**  
Troy Thies Photography



*The living space now features comfortable seating and a gas fireplace along with original Wright-designed plant stands, lamps, and tables.*



*The Pratt Institute Chair, designed by a student-faculty team, complements the Wright-designed dining table and light fixture. New ceiling fixtures bring more light to the space.*

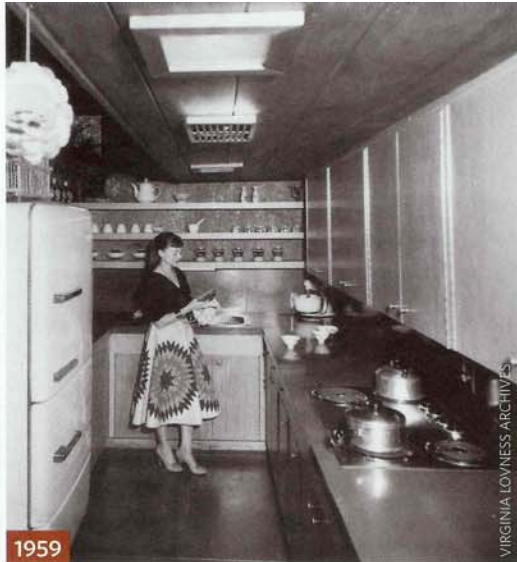
**IN JUNE 1955**, Virginia Lovness charmed Frank Lloyd Wright into agreeing to design a house for her and her husband, Don. In fact, he later gifted designs for four additional “cottages” for the 20 acres the Lovnesses bought on Woodpile Lake in Grant Township, west of Stillwater.

Over the next two years Virginia, a painter, and Don, a 3M engineer, hand-built one of the designs, a 1,600-square-foot, flat-roofed Usonian studio with a great room, two small bedrooms, a galley kitchen, and a gigantic stone fireplace, for which the petite Virginia laid the stone. Over the course of the project, the couple became part of Wright’s inner circle, staying in the still so-named Lovness Suite when they attended the gatherings at Taliesin in Spring Green, Wisconsin.

“The main room is one of the great residential spaces I’ve experienced,” says SALA Architects’ Tim Old, AIA, who partnered with colleague Kelly Davis on the studio’s recent renovation. “It’s on par with the living room at Taliesin.”

Twenty years later, the Lovnesses built another of the designs—a 900-square-foot cottage with a soaring glass wall under a shed roof—and lived there as well, adorning it with their Asian antiques, plants, and whatever exotic pets animal-lover Virginia kept at the time.

But, as with many Wright houses, the transition to a second owner was rocky. Don died in 2001, and Virginia put the property on the market in 2007, but no sale ensued.



Virginia Lovness in the original kitchen—a typical Wright “galley.” The couple’s daughter, Lonnie, is writing a memoir, *Growing Up Wright*, slated for publication in 2019.



“

This is the promise we made to Virginia Lovness—that we would bring the house into the 21st century.

”

It was unclear if anyone wanted to live in two small Frank Lloyd Wright–designed houses in the countryside.

Enter Ted and Debi Muntz, who lived in St. Michael, Minnesota. They weren’t Frank Lloyd Wright aficionados, but when Ted saw a photo of the Lovness Studio in a book Debi gave him, he determined to buy it. He wrote to Virginia and began what Kelly Davis called “a two-year courtship.” In 2013, Ted sold his company and he and Debi bought the Lovness property on the same day.

“The Muntzes made it very clear that they were interested in Wright, but in a different way,” says Davis, a Wrightian architect and a principal emeritus at SALA. “This was to be their home—and every piece of furniture was to be comfortable.”

They moved into the studio, to live there and figure out what needed to be done, while Virginia and her companion lived in the cottage for an additional year. And they hired Davis and Old to design a third building—a cedar-and-stone garage with an office for Ted. Davis based the plans—a simple flat-roofed structure with a mitered

corner of glass—on two of Wright’s unbuilt designs for the property, cottages A and B.

“Introducing a new building was intimidating—and also enticing,” says Davis, who first saw the Lovness property as a teenager in the 1960s, when he drove in unannounced (see sidebar on page 37).

In 2015, the Muntzes moved into the cottage and started an almost two-year reconstruction of the studio with the help of Braden Construction. “The floor came out, the roof came off, the chimney came down, the cabinetry and windows came out,” says Davis. “The only thing that remained was the stone work and the Douglas fir walls and ceilings. It was like a stone ruin.”

The construction issues were many, from sagging cantilevered roofs to the chimney built with rubble without concrete-block backup. But the Muntzes never blanched. And they kept Virginia engaged along the way, including inviting her to the photo shoot last November. She died in February.

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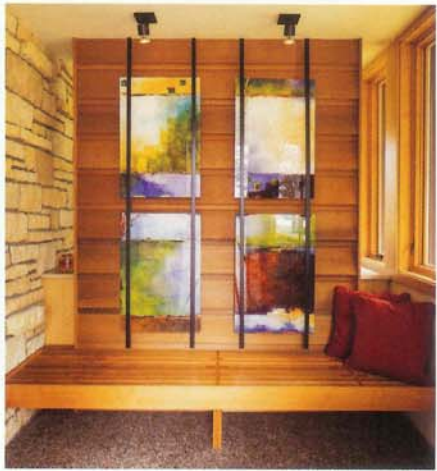
A flat roof, mitered corners, and cedar and limestone walls blend the new garage and office structure with the studio.

# SMALL WORLD

Architects Kelly Davis and Tim Old both intersected with the Lovness Estate in their youth. "As a high school student interested in Wright, I drove uninvited up the driveway, through the gate and into the forecourt outside the house, only to find a frothing-at-the-mouth Doberman pinscher named Lucifer halfway in the car with me," says Davis. "Virginia let me suffer for what seemed like an eternity before she came out to see what exactly was happening to this embarrassed intruder. In her inimitable and gracious way, she assessed the situation, decided I wasn't a burglar, and spent the next hour or so touring me through the property. An unforgettable memory, even all these years later."

Old got to experience the studio in a more traditional way. "I met Don and Virginia's daughter Lonnie in junior high, and we became great friends. There were a bunch of us that hung out together. I have great memories of those early days, sitting on the living room floor as Don Lovness sat in his chair and lectured us about architecture. There'd be a big, roaring fire in the fireplace, and he'd grab a book of drawings and start talking about other houses by Mr. Wright."

—Christopher Hudson



A wood bench and acrylic abstracts by Arizona artist Cheryl Martin welcome visitors to the new office space.