

THE WRIGHT

Photographer Andrew Pielage captured this unique perspective of a commonly shot view of Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater while teaching a workshop at the property last year.

STUFF



Photographer Andrew Pielage is on a quest to document all of Frank Lloyd Wright's existing architecture.

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S famed Fallingwater is one of the most photographed houses in the United States. Camera-toting visitors travel from all corners of the world to Pennsylvania's Allegheny Mountains to capture the iconic view of the home's cantilevered balconies jutting over a waterfall on the Bear Run river.

"Everybody shoots from the same viewpoint," says Phoenix-based photographer Andrew Pielage, who spent 30 days last year as the site's artist-in-residence. "I wanted to get something unique, and the only thing that was going to make it different was Mother Nature."

One day, while teaching a workshop to beginning photographers, Pielage took his students to the overlook that offers the classic panorama. It was raining, and the skies were darkening, so the group soon decided to pack up and call it day. "Then this beam of light came down through the clouds, and it was like a spotlight from heaven. It was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen in my life," he says. "I quickly pulled out my camera, took a few shots, and then it was gone."

"It was amazing because there was nothing I could have done to make that happen. I could have sat at that viewpoint for the entire month and not gotten that light," he continues. "That's what made it different."

For the past eight years, Pielage has been on a mission to photograph all of Wright's work—documenting the buildings for historical purposes but also immortalizing their beauty in a way that honors their architect's innovative and distinctive vision.

It all started in 2011 when Pielage, a native Phoenician and graduate of Northern Arizona University, visited Wright's winter home, Taliesin West in Scottsdale. "I fell in love with the place," he recalls. "Frank Lloyd Wright's blending of nature and architecture was something I had never seen before." Photography wasn't allowed on the tour, but a friend was able to connect him with the folks at the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, which oversees the historic property. Pielage was given the chance to shoot a single image for the

Foundation. The result was a sunset photo taken from the southern edge of the triangular-shaped pool and overlooking the architectural studio and McDowell Mountains beyond. "The blue sky matched with the colors of the pool," he recalls.

The Foundation liked the image and offered the then-amateur shutterbug a spot as the organization's unofficial photographer. Soon Pielage was shooting more Wright sites, including local favorites such as the David and Gladys Wright House, Harold Price House, Grady Gammage Memorial Auditorium and First Christian Church, as well as Taliesin in Wisconsin and, of course, Fallingwater.

"Andrew is able to capture the spirit of a Wright building in a way that no other photographer can do," says Stuart Graff, president and CEO of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. "It starts with an understanding of Wright's ideas that are embodied in the architecture."

As word spread about Pielage's work, media attention followed. It was during a local radio interview that the photographer was asked how many Wright houses he wished to shoot. "At that moment, I said, 'All of them,'" he recalls. "That was the spark. I had never even comprehended or thought about trying to shoot the hundreds of sites that are still remaining. To this day, I'm continually thanking NPR for putting that thought into my head. It lit the fire, and now I'm on a quest to document them all."

So far, he's checked off about 60 of the more than 430 existing sites, from expansive public projects such as the S.C. Johnson Wax headquarters in Wisconsin

to renowned residences including the Mayan-influenced Ennis House in California and the



OPPOSITE "I do a lot of experimenting at Taliesin West, testing new concepts and new techniques with my tilt shift lens," says Pielage. Here, he explores Wright's bedroom, which includes a small office space. **LEFT** The centerpiece of Wright's Hollyhock House in Los Angeles, California, is a massive concrete fireplace with an abstract bas relief. It is designed to reflect the four elements: fire, earth (the hearth), air (the stained-glass skylight) and water (the home is surrounded by a moat).



CARL SCHUITZ

“Walking inside of a Frank Lloyd Wright building is an experience you never forget.”

—ANDREW PIELAGE, photographer



Prairie-style Thomas P. Hardy House in Wisconsin to intimate private homes rarely viewed by the public. This year, he'll be adding the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City, the Laurent House in Rockford, Illinois, and the architect's only synagogue, Beth Shalom, in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania.

For many fans of his images, the self-taught photographer brings new life and energy to his artform and to Wright's architecture. "I studied photography in school, and it was never the most interesting thing to me because it was like, here's an image of something that already exists," says gallery owner Nicole Royse. "But Andrew has made it really exciting."

"Obviously people have taken pictures of places such as Fallingwater and the David and Gladys Wright House thousands of times, but Andrew brings a unique perspective," she continues. "He's attempting to engage the environment as well as the architecture, and trying to capture the spirit of the artist."

Using a Canon 5D Mark III camera, Pielage shoots mainly in natural light. "That comes from Wright and his designs," he explains. "Wright was really good at shadow play and at positioning windows to collect light, bouncing it around and illuminating parts of the rooms."

As a photographer, I'm supposed to bring out the architecture and the architect. If I were to add artificial light or create shadows where Wright didn't want them, then that would take away from the fundamentals of his design.

"Along those same lines, I don't necessarily photograph architecture," he adds. "I see light before I see design, lines and color. My compositions are usually based around light and shadow."

His work is dynamic, often highlighting parts of the buildings not typically presented in the many books and collections about the architect, including private rooms, unseen corners and closeup details of angles and lines. "This isn't a drive-by, put-your-camera-on-top-of-the-fence-and-take-a-photo project," Pielage says. "The only way to really document these spaces is to do multiday shoots of the exteriors as well as the interiors. I want to represent Wright and his architecture the best I can."

Some of his favorite properties, besides Fallingwater and Taliesin West, include Unity Temple in Illinois—a space that "wraps you up and almost cradles and snuggles you a bit"—and the Unisonian Curtis Meyer House in Michigan. "It's really small, but I could have spent two weeks photographing it," he says. "I shot all day and all night, and



ABOVE The David and Gladys Wright House is one of Pielage's favorite local Wright-designed properties—it's also where he got married. **TOP RIGHT** Pielage's photograph of the living room and famed "March Balloons" rug in the David and Gladys Wright House perfectly captures the circular nature of the structure. **RIGHT** The artist relaxes on Wright-designed furniture in the living room, also known as the garden room, at Taliesin West. "The space is incredibly difficult to capture, says Stuart Graff, president and CEO of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. "The only way to really do so is to get down low and let it envelop you through the camera lens. Andrew does that really well."



CARL SCHUITZ



I still left compositions there. It's one of the homes that I really appreciate and fell in love with.”

Following in the footsteps of his well-known predecessors, including renowned midcentury photographers Ezra Stoller, Julius Shulman and Taliesin fellow Pedro E. Guerrero, who began working with the architect in 1939, Pielage hopes his images will awaken an appreciation of Wright's work in future generations.

With each passing year, the properties face added perils. Homes are remodeled and modernized; furnishings are lost or damaged;

some buildings are even torn down. The future of the David and Gladys Wright House—which holds a special place in Pielage's heart as it's where he got married—continues to be under threat of demolition.

“Those of us who have decided to work in this space are trying to wrap our minds and whatever talents we may have around the work of a genius. That in and of itself is a pretty awesome pursuit, but if we can lend that understanding to other people, we become stewards of that legacy,” says Graff.



LEFT “One of the unique things about Frank Lloyd Wright is that he created all these genres in the architectural world. He was doing square, circular, low flat roofs—his work was all over the place,” says Pielage. The architect’s textile block series of homes in southern California includes the Mayan temple-inspired Ennis House in Los Angeles. “It looks like a mausoleum, but it’s very comfortable inside.” **ABOVE** “I don’t necessarily fall in love with all of Wright’s projects,” says Pielage. One that did capture his heart was the Curtis Meyer House in Galesburg, Michigan. “It’s a beautiful little home, but I could have spent two weeks photographing it. There was just something about the design that I became enamored with.” **RIGHT** “Frank Lloyd Wright has wonderful line work in all of his designs, and Unity Temple [in Oak Park, Illinois] is that on a major scale,” says Pielage. “When you step into the space, the lines surround you. It’s overwhelming. Seeing it is one of the more wow experiences I’ve had.”



For Pielage, this project isn’t so much about completing the goal of photographing every remaining site, “it’s about the journey—it’s about meeting the people and learning about and understanding Frank Lloyd Wright,” he says. “I would love to finish, but I have to do it properly and thoroughly.

“When you step inside one of Wright’s properties, you don’t just see the architecture, you feel it,” says Pielage. “That kind of visceral experience is what keeps this project going.” □

For more information, see Sources on Page 118.