

Inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright

The Authorship and Attribution of the Massaro House at Petra Island

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The Authorship and Attribution of the Massaro House at Petra Island

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Between 1949 and 1951, Frank Lloyd Wright designed two houses for Petra Island: an idyllic, heart-shaped private isle in Lake Mahopac, 47 miles north of New York City. Both houses were built according to Wright's plans and can be visited between June and October as part of small guided tours. But whether there is one or two Frank Lloyd Wright houses to see on the island is a matter of significant architectural and legal debate concerning their attribution. While the smaller cottage was completed in 1953 and is attributed without dispute to Frank Lloyd Wright, efforts to build the larger house on the western shore of the island did not begin until 2000, more than forty years after Wright died. Completed in 2008, this posthumous structure raises complex questions about the authenticity of its architecture, particularly in relation to the authorship of the project and those with the authority to attribute it.

The history of Wright's work on Petra Island began with a commission from engineer Ahmed Chahroudi in 1949 for a family home. Wright's initial design, known as the Chahroudi House, sprawled across 5,000 square feet, including a terrace daringly cantilevered 25 feet over

the lake. According to the client, Wright believed the design would surpass that of Fallingwater, famed for its cantilevers over the waters of Bear Run.¹ Chahroudi, however, could not afford what Wright envisioned. Instead, he built a second design from Wright for a more modest, three-bedroom home (the Chahroudi Cottage) tucked away from the lake's edge amongst the beech trees. In 1996, Joseph and Barbara Massaro bought the island with the intention of renovating the existing cottage. By 2000, however, the Massaros shifted their attention to constructing the larger house based on Wright's five remaining drawings: a plan, a perspective, and three building elevations. With such incomplete documentation, the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation was approached for assistance. The Massaros, however, rejected the Foundation's fees – reportedly \$450,000 for design and supervision services – turning instead to architect and Wright historian, Thomas A. Heinz to help complete the necessary construction drawings and to bring the design up to current building standards. The Foundation sued and, in a settlement, the two parties agreed that the house would be described as “inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright” but not attributed to him.

1.

Steve Rose, “This is His Finest Work,” *The Guardian*, August 29, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2006/aug/28/architecture.usa>.

This unauthorised construction, now generally referred to as the Massaro House, is one of a dozen Wright works built from the archives since his death. Many of these were sanctioned by the Foundation and executed with the help of Taliesin Associated Architects (TAA), Wright's now defunct successor firm. But whereas the Massaro house – save a few contested details² – was built on its intended site and ostensibly as Wright designed it, many of the other posthumously constructed projects have undergone significant changes in scale and program, often for sites quite unlike those imagined by Wright.³ Nevertheless, when realised under the auspices of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, they are generally recognised as original Wright works whereas the Massaro house is not. This paper explores the questions raised by such posthumous Wright constructions through disciplinary and legal frameworks, and considers their status, value, and reception in relation to Wright's broader architectural legacy.

2.

A small number of particular changes are frequently cited by critics of the project. For example, the Massaros installed domed skylights rather than the flat ones Wright preferred, while constructional demands required the stones of the so-called "desert masonry" walls to protrude from the concrete surface much more than seen on the earlier cottage. A stair from the cantilevered deck to the lake was also omitted. Less often discussed is the grey paint finish to the concrete of these walls, whereas the original cottage's concrete remains raw.

3.

In fact, Massaro boasts that the house is exactly where Wright wanted it, set out on a regular triangular grid from a cleft in the natural rock that is visible in the original drawings.