Blending and Contrasting the Artificial and the Natural: Russel Wright’s Manitoga

By D. J. Huppatz

The table is set for a meal (figure 1). The round form of the plates, saucers, and cups repeats that of the table, though their intense colors – Seafoam and Chartreuse – stand out on its white surface. The table and its plastic chairs seem an odd, almost alien presence on the rough flagstone floor that seamlessly extends the room onto an outdoor terrace. The rectangular panes of glass framed in timber echo the kitchen bar’s white Formica panels, yet both contrast with the large cedar log, smoothed to highlight its irregular knots and grain, that supports a ceiling beam above.

This integration of a 1950s domestic dining room with a natural environment, and the juxtaposition of artificial and natural materials, textures, and colors, were central design strategies in Russel Wright’s experimental “dream house,” Dragon Rock. For Wright, Dragon Rock was “a designer’s experiment, not only in designing a house, but in designing a home and the way to live in it”.1 Wright’s experiment went beyond the house to encompass the surrounding environment, shaped by him into a woodland garden. He called the property Manitoga, derived from an Algonquin word meaning “Place of Great Spirit”.2

A well-known industrial designer, Wright purchased the 75 acre property in the Hudson River Valley near Garrison, roughly 50 miles from New York City, in 1942. Initially trained as a sculptor, Wright worked in Broadway set design before he began a career as an industrial designer in the 1930s. He specialized in furniture and household items including a popular dinnerware, American Modern (pictured on the table in figure 1). In 1950, capitalizing on his reputation as a designer of domestic products, Russel and his wife Mary collaborated on Guide to Easier Living, a book that promoted “a new way of living, informal, relaxed”, and free from Victorian rules and pretence.3 This mid-century lifestyle manual included advice on changing spatial configurations within the home, new furniture and materials, as well as etiquette, hospitality, and household management ideas. At Manitoga, Wright expanded upon these lifestyle ideas in an idiosyncratic but holistic creation that
combined architecture, interior design, and landscape design in an attempted dialogue between human habitation and the natural environment.4

From the dining room, it is a short ascent up rough stone stairs to Dragon Rock’s living room (figure 2). Nestled into the side of an abandoned granite quarry, the living room seems to emerge organically from its environment, with large stones comprising the hearth, flagstone floors, and a base for a built-in seat. Wright painted the back wall, which features protruding stones, with green plaster mixed with hemlock needles collected from the site. Such conscious incorporation of organic materials, textures, forms, and colors into the interior highlights Wright’s ideal of living in an intimate relationship with the local environment. However, the synthetic flooring sculpted around the informal arrangement of stones creates a contrasting smooth surface for more conventional modern furnishings such as Wright’s Easier Living chairs and a long, rectangular cabinet with bright red Formica doors. By juxtaposing modern, high-tech materials and rectilinear forms with natural materials and organic forms, Wright aimed to stimulate sensual engagement for Dragon Rock’s inhabitants and visitors. His core design principles, blending and contrasting, aimed to dramatize the ongoing dialogue between the artificial and the natural.5

Dragon Rock comprises a house and separate studio/bedroom, designed and built by Wright in collaboration with architect David L. Leavitt. The multi-levelled dwelling’s complex arrangement follows the site’s irregular topography (figure 3). The house and studio’s low, horizontal profile appears to emerge from the quarry, and large expanses of glass on the south elevations serve to integrate habitation with the environment outside (figure 4). Constructed of local oak in a Japanese-style post-and-lintel system, the house’s timber frame and overhanging eaves are painted deep gray to blend into their surroundings, while the flat roofs, covered with gravel and planted with sedum, further highlight this effect. While the colors and timber of the house blend with the environment, the sharp rectangular forms and geometric pattern of window frames clinging to the quarry’s edge contrast with the organic forms of adjacent trees and granite stones (figure 5).

Extending from the house, Wright designed a series of paths through the property along which he consciously shaped the formerly denigrated landscape into a woodland garden.
Constructed of irregular granite stones from the quarry, the steps of the Quarry Path appear almost natural as they follow the quarry wall’s contours (figure 6). By planting ferns and encouraging moss growth, Wright further blended the fabricated path into the environment. However, by the side of the path, Wright also left subtle signs that acknowledged prior human intervention. By visibly exposing blasting marks and iron cable hooks (figure 7), Wright’s design reminds visitors of the site’s former status as an industrial quarry. Through such unusual juxtapositions, the carefully contrived paths through the surrounding landscape dramatized the relationship between the artificial and the natural. Thus, Manitoga’s woodland garden was not simply an environmental regeneration and stewardship project, but an extension of Wright’s design principles of blending and contrasting. Wright’s design philosophy was far from a naive environmentalist position of leaving nature undisturbed in the hope that it might return to a primeval wilderness. Instead, Manitoga’s carefully managed landscape acknowledges both prior and current human intervention into the environment as both inevitable and necessary.

Visible and audible from Dragon Rock’s dining room, the waterfall into the quarry pond is one of Wright’s most subtle interventions (figure 8). Created by diverting a stream at the top of the property, the waterfall was carefully composed by positioning stones to create particular visual and aural qualities. The abandoned industrial quarry served as a readymade feature that Wright blended into a waterfall and pond. Of this apparently natural but consciously designed landscape, he wrote, “Friends and neighbors consider it a fascinating and unusual piece of land, and I am amused and pleased to often be asked, ‘How did you ever find such an unusually beautiful site?’ – pleased because these friends think that I found it this way, and therefore I know that it looks natural.”6 His regeneration of the landscape into a woodland garden included clearing underbrush, retaining and highlighting remnants of native hemlock forest, and cultivating tableaux composed of indigenous ferns and wildflowers. In this process, Wright paid careful attention to texture, color, light and the sensual qualities of the existing site, consciously shaping the landscape, rocks, and vegetation for particular scenic effects such as the waterfall.

Stretching almost to the end of the property, the Lost Pond Path was the longest and most varied trail designed by Wright. The hardness of granite steps around the Quarry Path contrasts with the Lost Pond Path’s varied textures underfoot such as gravel and thin tree
branches that spread like fingers across one section path. A carpet of spongy moss snaking through the hemlocks defines the trail half way to the Lost Pond (figure 9). By consciously cultivating the moss as an unusual underfoot surface and slowly winding the path through the hemlock forest, Wright draws a walker’s attention to the experience of moving through the forest. The walker becomes attuned to birds flitting, squirrels scampering, and even the occasional deer disappearing into the distance. Just before reaching the Lost Pond far from the house, the path becomes consciously more rugged, narrow, and difficult to identify, heightening the walker’s anticipation of finding a secret, remote place. While walking the Lost Pond path is like a wilderness trek in miniature, it differs from hiking the Appalachian Trail (which runs not far from Manitoga) due to Wright’s carefully contrived artifice, differing surfaces underfoot, surprise vistas, and concentrated plantings in choreographed sequences.7

Integrating human habitation with the environment in a holistic way, Manitoga was described by landscape designer and theorist Ian McHarg as a “Temple to Ecological Design.”8 Although the house and property were designed before the term “ecological” became widespread in design circles, both Manitoga and Wright himself had various connections with the emerging environmental consciousness of the 1960s. Wright hosted talks and picnics at Manitoga whose guests included environmental activists and luminaries such as scientist and author Réné Dubos, Secretary of the Interior, Stuart Udall, and singer and activist, Pete Seeger. Furthermore, Wright was an early advocate for environmental education with his public programs at Manitoga that evolved into today’s annual Summer Nature and Design youth camp. Such initiatives ensured that Wright’s ongoing dialogue between the artificial and the natural continued after his death in 1976. Through absorption into Manitoga’s designed environment, visitors today can still experience the immediacy and intensity of Wright’s vision, the realization of an all-encompassing design project intimately attuned to the local topography, history, and natural environment.

Finally, Manitoga remains a curious case for environmental history. Wright’s implicit foundation for intervention was that a designer cannot return a plot of land to a primeval state and hope to live “naturally” – that there is no longer any original, pristine nature. More recently, William Cronon encapsulated this sentiment with the idea that nature “is a profoundly human construction”9 and that our common understanding of wilderness
“represents a flight from history.” Wright’s subtle blending of house, lifestyle and landscape would represent just such a flight if it were not for his use of contrast as a key design principle. Instead, Wright’s Manitoga asserts the impossibility of escaping history and cultural construction, and remains today a dramatic stage upon which to reflect upon the fundamentally artificial dimension of design as a human activity.

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Figure 1: Dragon Rock, dining room

Photo by Masca, courtesy Manitoga, Inc./Russel Wright Design Center.
Figure 2: Dragon Rock, living room

Photo courtesy Manitoga, Inc./Russel Wright Design Center.

Figure 3: Dragon Rock, floor plan, sketch by David L. Leavitt.

Courtesy Manitoga, Inc./Russel Wright Design Center
Figure 4: Dragon Rock, living spaces to the left, Wright’s studio at right.
Photo: D.J. Huppatz

Figure 5: The dining room perched over the quarry pond.
Photo courtesy Jim Robertson / www.pbase.com/jimroh.
Figure 6: Stone steps and visible blast marks along the Quarry Pond path.

Photo: D.J. Huppatz
Figure 7: A path ascending the quarry wall

Photo: D.J. Huppatz
Figure 8: The waterfall into the quarry pond.

Photo courtesy Manitoga, Inc./Russel Wright Design Center.
Figure 9: Carefully cultivated moss forms a trail through the hemlock forest

Photo: D.J. Huppatz

2 The original Algonquian word, mani to or manitou, has various meanings including ‘spirit’, ‘guardian spirit’, and ‘genius loci’, so Wright’s version, Manitoga, should be seen as a poetic rather than a literal translation. See A. F. Chamberlain, ‘Algonkian Words in American English: A Study in the Contrast of the White Man and the Indian’, The Journal of American Folklore, vol. 15, no. 59, 1902.

3 Mary and Russel Wright, Guide to Easier Living (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith): 2003, 5. This is a reprint of the 1950 original.


7 For more detail on Manitoga from a landscape design perspective, see D.J. Huppatz, ‘Revisiting Russel Wright’s Manitoga’, Landscape Journal, forthcoming 2013.

