

The height of audacity



The American architect Frank Lloyd Wright had a fondness for low ceilings, so when it came to placing a grand piano in one of his designs, something had to give. **Lowell Cross**, Professor Emeritus of the School of Music at The University of Iowa, tells the story of Wright's attempts to alter the dimensions of a Steinway...

In 1945, Lowell and Agnes Walter of Des Moines, Iowa, commissioned the celebrated architect Frank Lloyd Wright to design their country home. The site they chose was on a limestone rock bluff overlooking a curve in the Wapsipinicon River near the town of Quasqueton in Buchanan County, Iowa.

Above: Frank Lloyd Wright
Below: western exposure of Cedar Rock, a prime example of Wright's Usonian houses. The Model B can be seen in the room just to the right of centre



Lowell E Walter was a wealthy businessman, who had sold his very successful Iowa Road Building Company in 1943, thereby allowing him to continue his ongoing activity of purchasing a large amount of Iowa farmland. Among his many properties was the 11 acre plot near Quasqueton, where the The Walter House (known today as Cedar Rock) would be built.

Construction of the Walters' residence, as well as a boathouse on the river (Wright called it the River Pavilion) and work on the grounds began in 1948, with completion in 1950. Nearly all the features of the home, boathouse and grounds were, and remain, Wright designs. The Walter House, built from concrete, brick and glass, with interior features made of walnut, contains items designed or chosen by Wright, including the furniture, carpets and draperies. Even the apartment for guests in the boathouse and the 'fire circle' on the grounds are Wright's designs. In the opinion of this observer, the results are spectacular, fascinating, but in certain instances problematical – the leaky flat roof, the uncomfortable bathroom with Pullman car fixtures and the vast expanses of glass not double-glazed for the Iowa winter.

One interior feature that Wright certainly did not design or install was the Walters' Steinway piano; but he did wish to exercise an important

amount of control over it, following an inquiry from Lowell Walter himself. On 28th April 1951, Walter wrote to Wright:

*Dear Mr Wright,
... You or John [Hill] once said we should have a 7 foot Steinway Grand Piano. As I studied voice at one time, we thought we would appreciate owning one, so ordered it in February from Stoner Piano Company of Des Moines, delivery to be made within a few months.*

I am now wondering if the walnut piano, which I understand is 38 inches high, will look too tall in comparison with furniture and ceiling in [the] Garden Room. Will you kindly inform me in regard to same, and in case it should be a little lower, how would you suggest going about to have it so. The shaped piano and pedal legs, and bench, would have to be made shorter at [the] factory, and I presume the Steinway factory would be hard to convince.

If you think it would look better, I thought you might have made previous requests for same, and we could get you or Eugene [Masselink] to write a letter to be more effective...

*Sincerely yours,
Lowell E Walter*

Wright answered almost immediately:

*Dear Lowell,
How would you know that piano would look too high in your house? – You are one of the smartest men I ever knew.*

We are writing to the manufacturer and asking them to take two inches off the legs.

Will be home soon and will attend to your house-moving operation.

*Faithfully,
Frank Lloyd Wright*

The pertinent part of Wright's letter to Steinway & Sons, sent on 2nd May, reads:

... The standard piano height – 38 inches – will be too high for his house and we wish to have you shorten the piano and pedal legs two inches – the bench as well.



Above: the Steinway Model B Grand piano that Wright and Walter felt would be out of proportion with the room

Wright had his reasons for low ceilings and furniture in his houses. In the first version of his autobiography he states, "Taking a human being for my 'scale', I brought the whole house down in height to fit a normal one – ergo, 5ft 8in tall, say. Believing in no other scale than the human being, I broadened the mass out all I possibly could, brought it down into spaciousness. It has been said that were I three inches taller (I am 5ft 8½in tall) all my houses would have been quite different in proportion. Perhaps."

On 14th February 1951, at the Stoner Piano Company in Des Moines, Walter signed an order for a walnut Steinway Model B Music Room Grand piano and bench for \$3,750, with delivery to Quasqueton, Iowa, in about six to eight months. Steinway & Sons has a one-line sentence on file for Model B serial number 334920: "Walnut, sold to Stoner Piano, date of completion of manufacture, 10th May 1951." There is no mention of shortening the piano.

The plans of Wright and Walter to lower the piano were never completely, or properly, realised. Today the instrument reposes in the Cedar Rock Garden Room without casters, which contribute two inches to the height of a Steinway grand piano. However, the base of the pedal lyre of an unmodified Steinway is only one inch above the floor, thus preventing the lowering of the piano two inches by the simple expedient of removing the casters. The legs are now supported by small wooden blocks approximately seven-eighths of an inch thick. The piano has been lowered, but not by two inches, only about one. To accomplish the lowering, the pedal lyre and its braces have been shortened, but not the pedal rods. This has caused the pedals to be at a 20° angle to the floor, instead of parallel to the floor.

During a trip to Cedar Rock in 2010, I discovered the pedals are noisy and do not operate properly; the una corda (soft pedal) does not work at all.

Below: a piano leg minus caster and the adjusted pedal lyre





Above: entrance to Cedar Rock, showing the angular lines of Wright's innovative design

The correspondence from Wright to Steinway & Sons about the Walters' walnut Model B is not the first or the last time Steinway personnel encountered requests from the architect. On 30th December 1933, Hermann Irion of Steinway wrote to Mrs Ida Gaertner in New York, who had written to Steinway on Wright's behalf:

*My dear Mrs Gaertner,
It was very nice of you to write me concerning Mr F Lloyd Wright and his desire to buy a number of pianos for the F Lloyd Wright School for Allied Arts at Spring Green, Wis. Our records show that Mr Wright was at our warerooms and was shown a rebuilt small concert grand, a style which we discontinued a number of years ago. We quoted Mr Wright a very special price, of \$850, on this instrument, and he said that he would let us hear from him about it. Since then Mr Wright has been to our dealers in Madison, Wis., the Ward-Brodt Music Co, and wanted to negotiate through them for that very same piano which he saw here. As we had quoted him such a low price we were compelled to tell our dealers that we could not sell them the piano for less money than we had quoted it to Mr Wright, which bears out conclusively that Mr Wright did receive the bottom price on the instrument.*

I shall instruct our Sales Department to again write to Mr Wright and to offer him our professional discount on any new pianos he may wish to purchase, either directly from us or through our dealers in Madison, and I hope we can effect the sale.

*Sincerely yours,
Hermann Irion*

Below: Wright's signature red tile, which he affixed to an outside wall of Cedar Rock, a mark of his pride in the project



One can assume that Irion passed Mrs Gaertner's letter on Wright's behalf to another Steinway & Sons employee, who then wrote to Wright on 2nd February 1934:

*My dear Mr Wright,
Mr Irion has handed me your recent letter.
We have at the present time a Concert grand piano about eight years old, unrebuilt, but in splendid condition, which we would be willing to let you have at a special price of \$1,000. We have also another style "C" grand seven feet five inches long in ebonized case, thoroughly rebuilt, that we can let you have for \$950. The number of the style "C" is #107,237. It is a much more recent piano than the one you were considering, hence the difference in price.
If you can get some responsible individual here in New York to purchase either of these instruments I would be glad to have him call and discuss terms. It does not seem feasible to try to contract with several different people.*

*Very truly yours,
Otto Goehl*

There are two other items of Wright/Steinway correspondence in the Getty Research Institute collection, written after the completion of Cedar Rock and the installation of the Walters' piano. Both letters demonstrate Wright's continuing attempts to strike a deal with Steinway, even to the extent of obtaining the gift of a concert grand piano, and the frustration of John H Steinway in finally deciding to remove a Model A Parlor Grand piano, 6ft 2in, from the apartment used by the Wright Foundation in the Plaza Hotel.

On 1st November 1954, Wright wrote the following to John H:

*Dear John,
Has your noble house of "Steinway" given a thought to the concert grand piano for the apartment we (the Foundation) are doing over at the Plaza? We need a used instrument of good quality and we can refinish it ourselves if only it has a good Steinway quality under the player's hand.
A galaxy of famous people will play on it and you will like to see it where it will be.
Enclosed you will find a copy of our government charter making us eligible for the*



gift – exempt from your taxation.

Yes, John. I know how many appeals you have for “largesse”. But (of course) not just like this one? Perhaps you will soften your father’s good heart to this respectful petition from one who intends to do more and more for MUSIC. We will be useful to your cause I am sure.

Truly yours,
Frank Lloyd Wright

Apparently “The Noble House of Steinway” put a piano at Wright’s disposal in the Plaza Hotel apartment for several months. On 15th July, 1955, John H Steinway wrote to Wright:

Dear Mr Wright,

In answer to your note, I am sorry that you feel there was a misunderstanding between us about your piano Model A number 253,886. I thought I had made it quite clear to you as to the price of this piano. Of course, the added service charge is our standard charge, which we must make for all cases of long-time-payment contracts. The easy way to avoid these service charges is to pay cash for the piano.

I have issued instructions to our Moving Department to pick up the piano from your apartment on Friday, 22nd July. I trust this will be all right for you.

I will be out of the city all of next week attending a convention in Chicago. If by any chance this arrangement is not satisfactory to you, or you wish to reconsider the possibility of owning this piano, please be good enough to let Mr RW Freimuth know. He will be here at Steinway Hall all week.

With best regards to you and your family,
I remain

Sincerely yours,
STEINWAY & SONS
John H Steinway
Advertising Manager

Wright’s flamboyant life ended four years later, leaving a legacy of remarkable buildings, most notably the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and an influence on the principles of architecture that is still felt today. Cedar Rock – The Walter House – is one of Wright’s Usonian houses, a term derived from ‘Usonia’, an abbreviation of



Above: the boathouse or “River Pavilion”, as Wright called it, on the Wapsipinicon River

United States of North America, first attributed to the American author James Duff Law. Wright wanted to establish a democratic architecture that expressed the American values of simplicity and economy “for the common people”.

There are numerous Usonian houses by Wright in the US. They evolved from his earlier Prairie style, and the Usonian houses in turn influenced the later designs of ‘ranch houses’ by many different architects. Of his nine residential designs in Iowa, Cedar Rock is the only one that Wright chose to honour with his red signature tile, affixed to an exterior wall, bearing the inscription ‘FLLW’ in the architect’s handwriting.

Lowell Walter died in August 1981 and soon thereafter his wife Agnes donated Cedar Rock and a trust fund for its perpetual maintenance to the State of Iowa. Now a state park, it is managed by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources and is open to the public from 1st May to 31st October. Agnes Walter died in 1986 and was buried with her husband in the Quasqueton Cemetery, only a short distance from the remarkable home they built at Cedar Rock.

The ‘shortened’ Steinway Model D is still on display in the Garden Room. It measures 37in from floor to rim, only one inch lower than the height when it left the Steinway factory unmodified. The walnut bench is 17¾in high, about 1¼in lower than a standard aftermarket piano bench.

It seems obvious that these modifications to the piano and the bench took place after they left the factory. One wonders if Mr or Mrs Walter ever played it with the lid fully raised, alone or for an audience. One also wonders if Frank Lloyd Wright was ever a member of an audience at Cedar Rock for a piano recital.

Below: the Garden Room, where the ‘shortened’ Steinway Model D can still be seen today

