The Key to the Front Door

by Gordon Tully

Most house entries are placed prominently at the front, scaled up in size and embellished with arches, fancy trim, transoms, or sidelights. There is nothing wrong with such a traditional entry if it fits in with the many complex requirements for a modern home. Too often, however, the main entry is a pretentious, inappropriate, and dysfunctional leftover from another era.

The Experience of Entering

Entering and leaving a building is a complex and important experience, so it is not surprising that we celebrate it by showing off a fancy doorway. Yet a prominent door is only one of many different entry options. To understand how other solutions might work, we need to first examine what happens when the occupant or guest approaches and enters a building.

When approaching a building, we first identify it, park our vehicle, and get out. Next, we locate the entry and move toward the building. At the entry we might leave mail, notes, or packages, or more likely, we request admission after being identified. If we are known, we receive a greeting, go through a security or climate barrier, and finally deposit outdoor gear.

As we move under cover there is an accompanying change in environment and often a change in floor level. In addition, we'll notice that the lighting as well as the acoustics are altered as the space around us changes. In a traditional entry, all these events and environmental changes happen in one place, at the door. No wonder it is so richly embellished!

Stretching Out the Entry

By spreading out the entry experience, we can make it more complex and interesting, and in the process make the entry door much more serviceable for modern living.

The most common way to draw out the entry experience is to add an open covered porch, a transition space which is neither fully outdoors nor fully indoors. In this approach to the house we are given a bigger target: First, we aim for the porch, and only later do we need to identify the door.

The porch needs to be deep enough to count as a space. A small porch, or the absurd two-story colonnades glued onto so many facades, are really only embellishments of a traditional door. A big, deep porch becomes a new kind of space, mysterious and inviting, which can also be used for outdoor living. In addition, a generous porch can be very helpful in planning because it can lead visitors to a hidden side entry.

Unfortunately, glazing the porch takes you back one step, moving the same old entry door outward by one room. A screened porch can go either way, depending on how it is lit and detailed; and it has an entry door of its own, however modest.

Moving the Front Door

Another option is to set up a gateway or portico away from the actual front door. Architect Philip Johnson built himself a unique house with just such a solution. Set at the back of a small urban lot, it looks out onto a garden through a wall of glass. To create privacy from the street, Johnson surrounded the house and garden with a high wooden fence, in which he placed a tall front door. This door is the security entrance to the house and the place where the environment changes dramatically, yet one is still outdoors after entering.

Many houses in Charleston, S.C., use another variation on this theme to stretch out the entry experience. These houses are set endwise to the street, with the main rooms overlooking a side garden. On the street front, these houses have monumental gated entrances, the real front door of the house (see Figure 1).

Sidle On In

Porches and garden gates are simple and widely used substitutes for the typical monumental front entry. Architect Frank Lloyd Wright developed a whole vocabulary of subtle and complex entry sequences — entrances fascinated him.

One of his most useful ideas is to slip crabwise into a house, instead of approaching and entering on an axis. A good example is his first Herbert Jacobs house. The deeply recessed entry door is hidden in a corner between two walls, under the cantilevered roof of the carport. Entering, you squeeze past the central chimney next to the long side of the living room. Wright sidles you in (Figure 2).

Wright never stopped inventing ingenious entrances. In the David Wright house, you approach up a long spiral ramp to the second floor, and in his second Jacobs house, in

Houses in Charleston, South Carolina

Figure 1. *These houses are one room deep, set endwise to the street, with a deep porch on the side facing the private garden. Through a gate on the street one enters onto the lower level porch, off which is the house's front door.*

Madison, Wis., you penetrate an earth berm through a tunnel, ending up in the secluded backyard.

Convincing the Client

All these wonderful options to the monumental front door are of little use until their practical advantages are clear to our customers, wedded as they are to the traditional entry. Here are some considerations I use to stimulate a client's thoughts about alternatives.

The front door should be the functional entrance, convenient to the garage, kitchen, and mudroom (Figure 3, previous page). Also, houses often work better if you enter them from the side. Many of the schemes outlined above provide a good way to announce "entry" to the public at the front when the actual entry is at the side. Most traditional entryways ignore the vehicular bull in our china shop, the automobile. Tacking a double garage onto the end of or, worse, underneath a traditional house doesn't work for me. I try to keep the car at a distance (an excellent but unpopular idea) or change the design of the entrance to accommodate the beasts.

If possible, put a generous canopy at the entry to protect newspapers, mail, and packages, and to keep the rain off anyone standing at the door. A door tucked into a corner is an excellent idea, but never put it directly under a roof valley, unless you create a fool-proof diverter for rain and snow, or provide sufficient cover.

In cold climates, entrances facing the prevailing snowy winds should be protected from ice and drifting snow. A deeply recessed entry, which routinely is buried in snow, is a big nuisance and could be a real hazard in case of fire.

A hidden and mysterious entry can be wonderful, but it should not be uncomfortably ambiguous. Visitors should not feel as if they are making an error, perhaps going to the wrong door or venturing into private territory. In some areas, security is an issue, and a deeply hidden entry might be a hazard. ■

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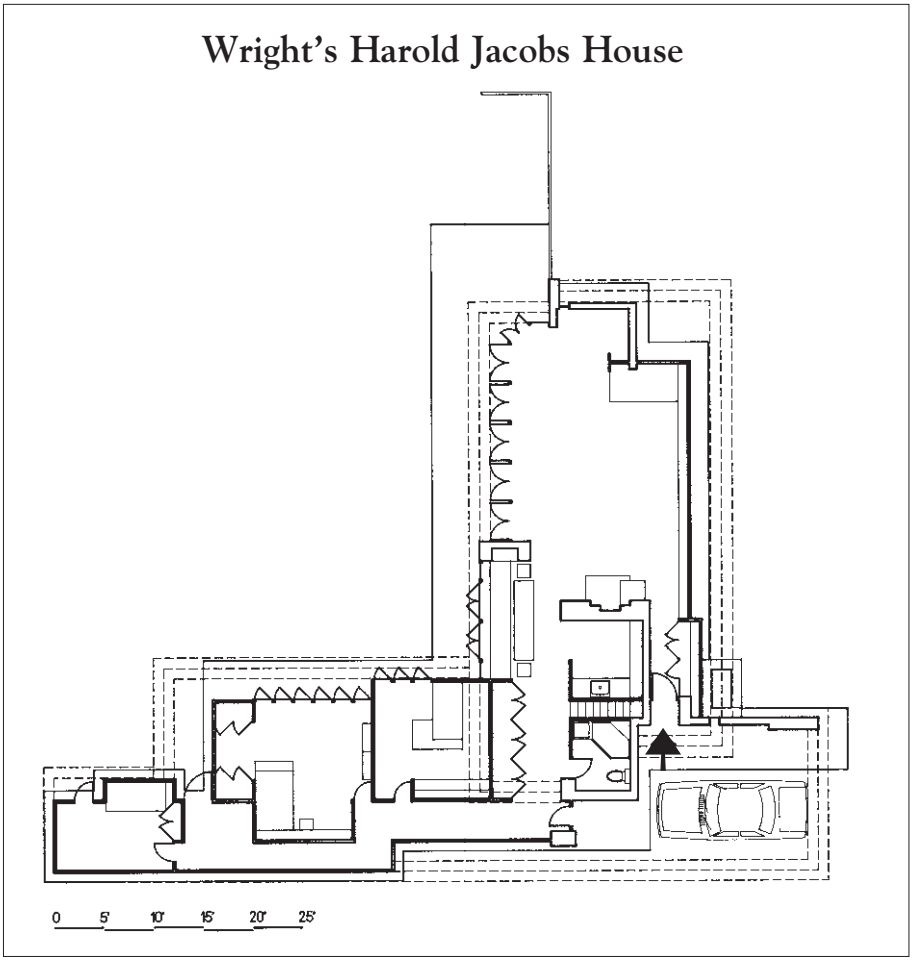

Figure 2. *Frank Lloyd Wright created one of his typically dramatic entry sequences in this Usonian house. Starting under the low carport roof, you are funneled into a cave-like entry, sent through a constricted corridor, then released into the big living room with its broad view of the backyard garden.*

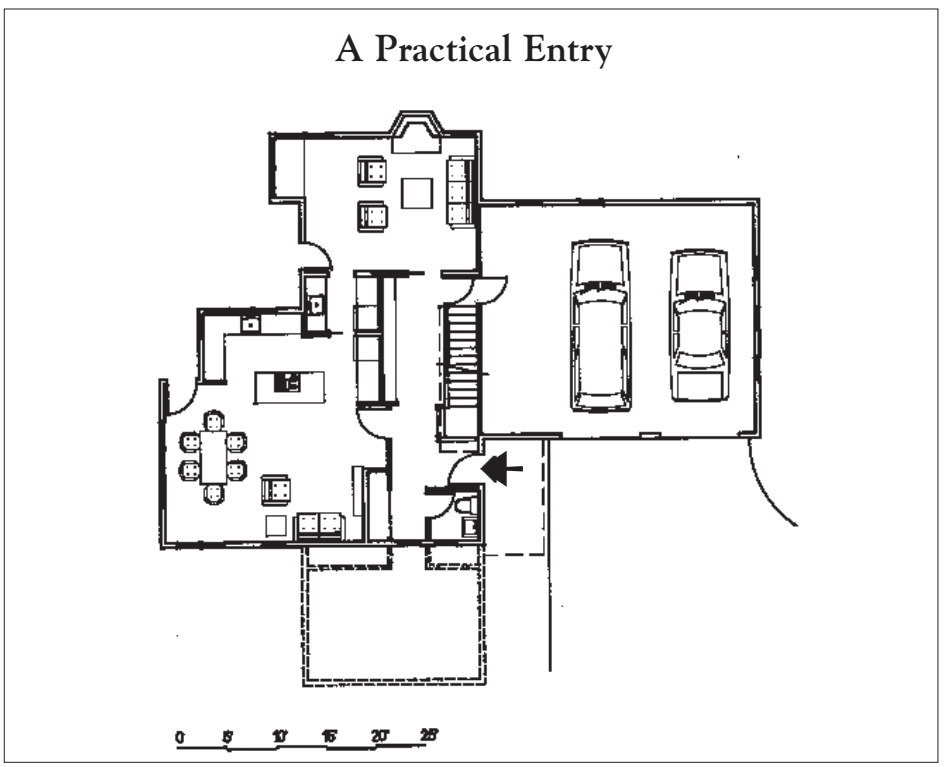

Figure 3. *A small roofed porch protects the entry door into this house designed by the author. The door opens into an entry hall that connects every part of the house.*