

"THE CRIMSON BEECH" (CASS HOUSE), 48 Manor Court, Richmondtown, Staten Island. "Prefab No. 1" design (1956) by Frank Lloyd Wright for Marshall Erdman & Associates, Madison, Wisconsin; Built 1958-59. Morton H. Delson, supervising architect.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 2286, Lot 18.

On December 12, 1989, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of "The Crimson Beech" (Cass House) and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 37). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Four witnesses spoke in favor of designation. The owner had previously communicated with the Commission indicating strong support for the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

"The Crimson Beech" (Cass House) on Staten Island is the only residence, and one of only two complete buildings, in New York City designed by American master architect Frank Lloyd Wright. An example of the "Prefab No. 1" prefabricated house designed by Wright in 1956 for builder Marshall Erdman & Associates of Madison, Wisconsin, "The Crimson Beech" was built in 1958-59 under the supervision of Wright's associate Morton H. Delson. The Erdman prefabs were Wright's last major attempt in his long career to address the problem of well-designed moderate-cost houses, and despite the lesser cost he achieved a design quality consistent with his previous residential work. The components of the house were shipped by truck from Madison and assembled on a steep site on Lighthouse Hill overlooking Richmondtown. A low, L-shaped, horizontally-articulated residence employing an architectural vocabulary characteristic of Wright's Usonian houses, it is faced in cream-colored painted Masonite with redwood battens and smooth-faced red brick, and has a carport, a reddish-paintedterne metal gabled roof, and clerestory windows on the front and large expanses of glass on the rear. The residence was commissioned by William and Catherine Cass after seeing Wright in a television interview, and the house has been very well maintained by the original client. "The Crimson Beech" took its name from a large several-hundred-year-old copper beech tree formerly growing in the front yard.

Frank Lloyd Wright and Moderate-cost Houses¹

Although American master architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) is perhaps best known for his residential commissions for the well-to-do and for his wide range of monumental designs, he also had an interest throughout his extraordinarily long career in the problem of producing well-designed moderate-cost housing. As stated by Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, director of the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives, Wright

strongly believed that the average American was entitled to a home that could also be a work of art... He knew that if the maxim was to apply to the lower-income home, it would require either prefabrication or a systems-built method of construction. It meant, he explained, that the home would have to go to the factory, rather than skilled labor coming onto the building site.²

As early as 1901, Wright produced a series of designs for moderate-cost model suburban houses for the Ladies Home Journal, which included "A Small House with 'Lots of Room in It'" and "A Fireproof House of \$5000." In the 1910s he developed an innovative semi-prefabrication scheme called the "American Ready-Cut System," in which lumber pre-cut in the factory could be assembled at the site in a variety of designs. In 1916 a number of wood and plaster houses and duplex apartments were built in Milwaukee by Arthur L. Richards employing this system. Wright's intention was "an organization systematized in such a way that the result is guaranteed," cutting out "the tremendous waste that has in the past made house building on a beautiful scale possible only to the very rich."³ His textile block houses in California of the 1920s, a project for sheet metal houses in California (1937), and his revival of the use of textile blocks in 1951 also demonstrate his involvement in different construction systems and affirm his interest in prefabrication.

In 1932 Wright spoke before the National Association of Real Estate Boards, discussing the concept of "the assembled house," and remarked that "there is no reason why the assembled house, fabricated in the factory, should not be made as beautiful and as efficient as the modern automobile."⁴ In 1936-37 many of Wright's ideas about moderate-cost housing came to fruition with his first completed "Usonian"⁵ house, for Herbert Jacobs in Madison, Wisconsin. In the Usonian house, Wright's "dwelling place that has no feeling at all for the 'grand' except as the house extends itself in the flat parallel to the ground,"⁶ Wright re-worked many architectural themes he had previously employed some thirty years before in his Prairie houses. Usonian houses typically exhibited a number of planning and construction characteristics. Instead of decoration Wright relied on the beauty of natural materials. Many of the components of traditional building were eliminated, and standard materials and details were adapted to a geometric module. "Sandwich walls," consisting of a plywood center lined with building paper and faced with interior and exterior siding, held together with screws, and a simple slab roof carried on laminated 2 x 4 supports provided most of the basic enclosure of the Usonian house. It had a functional spatial flow arranged around a masonry "core" with the kitchen, bathroom, and heater, and had a carport as well. Clerestory windows provided privacy on the street facade while French doors and a larger expanse of windows on the rear opened the house to the

outside. "Gravity heating" consisted of a concrete floor laid over heating coils. Wright-designed Usonian houses were built all across the United States throughout the rest of his career, in the numerous variations that he explored. Although originally intended to be of moderate cost, in practice they generally tended to be no cheaper than conventional construction, though clients directly involved in the building process could save costs. Apprentices of Wright often supervised the construction of Usonian houses and hired the subcontractors. Considered by many observers more attractive and functional than their other suburban counterparts, they were also desirable to the clients, of course, because they were designed by one of the world's foremost architects.

In his book The Natural House (1954) Wright again reiterated that "the house of moderate cost is not only America's major architectural problem but the problem most difficult for her major architects."⁷ His last notable effort to address this issue was his prefabricated house designs for Marshall Erdman & Associates of Madison, Wisconsin, in 1956-57.

Marshall Erdman & Associates Prefabs⁸

Marshall Erdman, a Lithuanian immigrant who came to the United States in about 1938, studied architecture at the University of Illinois and started a small building concern in Madison. Through the recommendation of a friend of the head of the building committee, Erdman was asked by Frank Lloyd Wright to construct the Unitarian Meetinghouse (1947-51) Wright had designed. Though Erdman suffered a financial loss in executing the commission, he became a friend of Wright's. Erdman turned to building prefabricated houses and in 1951 joined with Henry Peiss, a Madison woodworker, to produce a "build-it-yourself house" kit, which was featured in Life in 1953:

Of all the experts who have tackled the big idea that Americans can build their own homes, the most promising is... Marshall Erdman.⁹

Wright visited Erdman's model house, of which he was critical, and was in turn challenged by Erdman to design such a house. In 1956-57 Wright developed several designs for prefabricated houses for Marshall Erdman & Associates, only two of which were actually produced and built. The first "Prefab No. 1" model house (later called the Van Tamen House) was finished in 1956, and the first "Prefab No. 2" built was the Rudin House (1958-59); both are located in Madison. At a talk in Chicago in 1958 where he displayed one of the models, Wright advised the use of prefabrication because "today labor is about one-half the cost of the building."¹⁰

The Prefab No. 1 design employed Wright's characteristic Usonian vocabulary with its low, horizontal emphasis, although elements of its construction differed from the Usonians (neither sandwich walls nor gravity heating were used) and it featured a gabled roof. Erdman produced all of the components for the houses except for the masonry, foundation, and heating and plumbing systems. At least nine houses of this design are known to have been built,¹¹ including "The Crimson Beech" (Cass House) on Staten Island. Not identical, each of these houses was provided with some degree of variation in detail and plan, such as the type of masonry used,

the number of bedrooms, and the option of a basement. Of the Prefab No. 1, Erdman declared "I'm satisfied with it because it dignifies prefabricated designs."¹² The first "Prefab No. 1" was acclaimed in House & Home in 1956:

It is big news because it gives prefabrication -- once the stepchild of home building -- the prestige associated with the greatest name in contemporary architecture. It is amazing news, because the principal advocate of standardization and modular planning had to wait 60 years before he got his chance to put his original theories into practice.¹³

Though the Wright-Erdman partnership ultimately failed in its goal of providing truly moderate-cost housing that could be applied on a wide scale, owners of these prefabricated houses were still able to afford a Frank Lloyd Wright design that they otherwise could not. The design they received, despite its lesser cost, was of a quality consistent with Wright's previous residential work.

"The Crimson Beech" (Cass House)¹⁴

In 1957 William and Catherine Cass, then living in Corona, Queens, wrote to Frank Lloyd Wright about the possibility of his designing a home for them. Mr. Cass, who worked for an employment agency, had been a fan of Wright's work, and the Casses had visited a number of Wright's buildings during their travels. They had also seen his first building in New York City, the Usonian house that was part of the "60 Years of Living Architecture" exhibition celebrating Wright, located in 1953-54 on the site of the future Guggenheim Museum. According to Mr. Cass,

It all started when I saw Mr. Wright on Mike Wallace's TV interview [September 1957]. I had this property in Staten Island and I wrote asking if he could give me a house for around \$35,000. Mr. Wright referred me to Marshall Erdman.... We met and Mr. Erdman pointed out that, with a prefab, I could save from 30% to 40%. I decided that was for me.¹⁵

Though Erdman was initially reluctant to enter into a contract for a house on the East Coast, Mr. Cass was persistent in his desire for one of the "Prefab No. 1" houses. The lot that the Casses purchased was atop Lighthouse Hill in the center of Staten Island, formerly part of the Platt estate; they especially liked the site for its views overlooking historic Richmondtown and the presence of a huge several-hundred-year-old copper beech tree. Construction began in 1958; the components of the house were brought by truck from Madison to the site and the shell of the house took only four or five days to erect, although completion was four months later. The Casses had anticipated a total budget of around \$35,000, and the cost of the house and its shipping were only \$20,000; local contractors,¹⁶ however, added another \$35,000 to the total. Publicity concerning the house generated the donation of the materials for the special "terne" metal roof by the Follansbee Steel Corporation of Follansbee, West Virginia. Terne roofs, made of a lead-tin alloy set on a steel sheet base, were of high quality and were employed by Wright on several of his buildings of the 1950s,¹⁷ although they could be prohibitively expensive for residential

purposes.

Marshall Erdman and Gaylord Nelson, Governor of Wisconsin, attended the opening ceremony of the house; the Casses invited the public to view it in an "open house" during the month of July, 1959, prior to their moving in. They named the house "The Crimson Beech" after the old copper beech tree then located in the front yard. Though Erdman at the time believed that "there is a terrific potential market for it on the east coast,"¹⁸ the Cass House was the first of only two Marshall Erdman prefabs built on the East Coast (the others all being located in the Midwest). It is also the only residence, and one of only two complete buildings, in New York City designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, the other being the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, a designated New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark.

Wright himself never visited "The Crimson Beech" or its site -- he had planned to in 1958, but cancelled the visit due to illness, and then did not have the opportunity before his death in April, 1959. The supervising architect for the project was Morton H. Delson who had studied and worked with Wright from 1950 to 1959. He was selected by Wright to be his representative in the Northeast, and later stayed with Taliesin Associated Architects, who continued Wright's work after his death. Delson was responsible for the original siting of the house, placing it to take fullest advantage of the southern exposure and to provide a basement level at the rear on the steep slope. He has continued to advise the owner on all architectural matters pertaining to the house.

Description

"The Crimson Beech" (Cass House) is a low, L-shaped, horizontally articulated residence set into the steep hill site so that it is seen as one level at the front (street) side and two at the rear. The house has always retained its original exterior paint scheme. The long wing contains four bedrooms, a gallery, a slightly sunken living room, and a basement level, while the other shorter wing has a kitchen-family room and a carport (with a storage room on the north end). The "core" at the juncture of the two wings (with a low, broad chimney) and the lower rear level are smooth-faced red brick (from Auburn, N.Y.)¹⁹ laid with raked horizontal joints and flush vertical joints. The rest of the house is of stud wall construction faced in cream-colored, sand-textured Masonite with reddish-stained redwood battens with a "drip milled into the underside."²⁰ The street side has the entry and two sets of windows near the juncture and a continuous row of single clerestory windows along the bedroom wing. The rear side has continuous double rows of windows, and sets of varnished mahogany and glass doors which lead onto red concrete terraces on both levels (the upper terrace having a low brick wall with metal railings). The east facade has corner windows, with transoms that follow the slope of the roof, placed as a continuation of those at the rear; the west facade has the same window configuration, adjoining the core that has squared walls set with windows. All lower windows are of a stock wood-framed "awning window" type while all upper sash are fixed; all frames are stained to match the battens. The overhanging "Bermuda roof," painted a similar reddish color, is asymmetrically gabled on the house and flat over the carport; made of terne that was molded and soldered in a horizontal batten pattern, it is trimmed with varnished mahogany soffits and fascia that have a notched

pattern. A swimming pool, with concrete stairs and surrounding walls of brick similar to that on the house, designed by Mr. Delson, were additions to the rear in 1970. The house has been very well maintained by the original client and no other significant alterations have occurred to the exterior over the years.

The house is set on a 3/4 acre lot and sited on a slightly lower level than the street; a macadam driveway (originally intended to be red brick)²¹ leads from the street to the carport and is flanked by brick entrance posts, the eastern one having a "Wrightian"-designed mailbox. The site was originally wooded, and was cleared only enough for construction and for enhancement of views to the south. Much additional landscaping, including pine trees, has been added over the years to the steep rear slope, particularly after a 1963 hillside fire. The front yard has low shrubbery and other plantings. The original copper beech tree for which the house was named was destroyed in a 1967 storm and has been replaced.

Report prepared by Jay Shockley,
Deputy Director of Research

Edited by Elisa Urbanelli,
Research Department Editor

NOTES

1. This section of the report was compiled from the following sources: Kaufmann, Meehan, Pfeiffer, Storrer, and Twombly.
2. Pfeiffer, 11.
3. Meehan, 119.
4. Ibid., 124.
5. "Usonia" was Wright's name for an Utopian America.
6. Pfeiffer, 11.
7. Wright, 79.
8. This section of the report was compiled from the following sources: Erdman, Erdman & Associates, "FLW: America's Foremost...", "Here is Prefabrication's...", "Immigrant and an Idea...", Manly, Meehan, NYT (Oct. 14 & Dec. 21, 1956), Storrer, and Twombly.

9. "Immigrant and an Idea...", 139.
10. "FLW: America's Foremost...", 120.
11. Although Storrer lists only six built Prefab No. 1 houses, he has now revised that number to nine, according to Delson. Manly mentions "nine homes were sold after the expensive first model was erected."
12. NYT (Dec. 21, 1956), p. 20.
13. "Here is Prefabrication's...", 117.
14. This section of the report was compiled from the following sources:
"Architectural Bulletins," Cass, Delson, Engels, Erdman, "FLW House Revisited," Hall, "Here is Prefabrication's...", NYT (July 3 & 5, 1959; Mar. 24, 1988), "The Other Wright Building," "A Prefabricated House...", Shepherd, and Sweeney.
15. Hall, sect. 2, p. 2.
16. The head contractor was a Knute Barmen, according to Mrs. Cass.
17. Other examples listed in Storrer include: Bott House (1956), Kansas City, Mo.; Lindholm Service Station (1956), Cloquet, Minn.; and Fasbender Medical Clinic (1956), Hastings, Minn.
18. Manly.
19. Delson.
20. "Here is Prefabrication's...", 119.
21. Cass.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that "The Crimson Beech" (Cass House) has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, "The Crimson Beech" (Cass House) is the only residence, and one of only two complete buildings, in New York City designed by American master architect Frank Lloyd Wright; that it is an example of one of the "Prefab No. 1" prefabricated houses designed by Wright in 1956 for builder Marshall Erdman & Associates of Madison, Wisconsin, the Erdman prefabs being Wright's last major attempt to address the problem of well-designed moderate-cost houses; that the components were shipped from Madison to Staten Island and assembled under the supervision of Wright associate Morton H. Delson in 1958-59 for William and Catherine Cass; that the low, L-shaped, horizontally articulated residence, faced in cream-colored painted Masonite with redwood battens and smooth-faced red brick and featuring a carport, aterne metal gabled roof, and clerestory windows on the front and large expanses of glass on the rear, exemplifies the Wrightian vocabulary characteristic of his Usonian houses and the residential design quality for which Wright was well known through his long career; and that the exterior of the house, well-maintained by the original client, has had no major alterations since its completion, except for the addition of a swimming pool and adjacent stairs and brick walls by Mr. Delson in 1970.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of Chapter 21), of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark "The Crimson Beech" (Cass House), 48 Manor Court, Richmondtown, Borough of Staten Island, and designates Tax Map Block 2286, Lot 18, Borough of Staten Island, as its Landmark Site.

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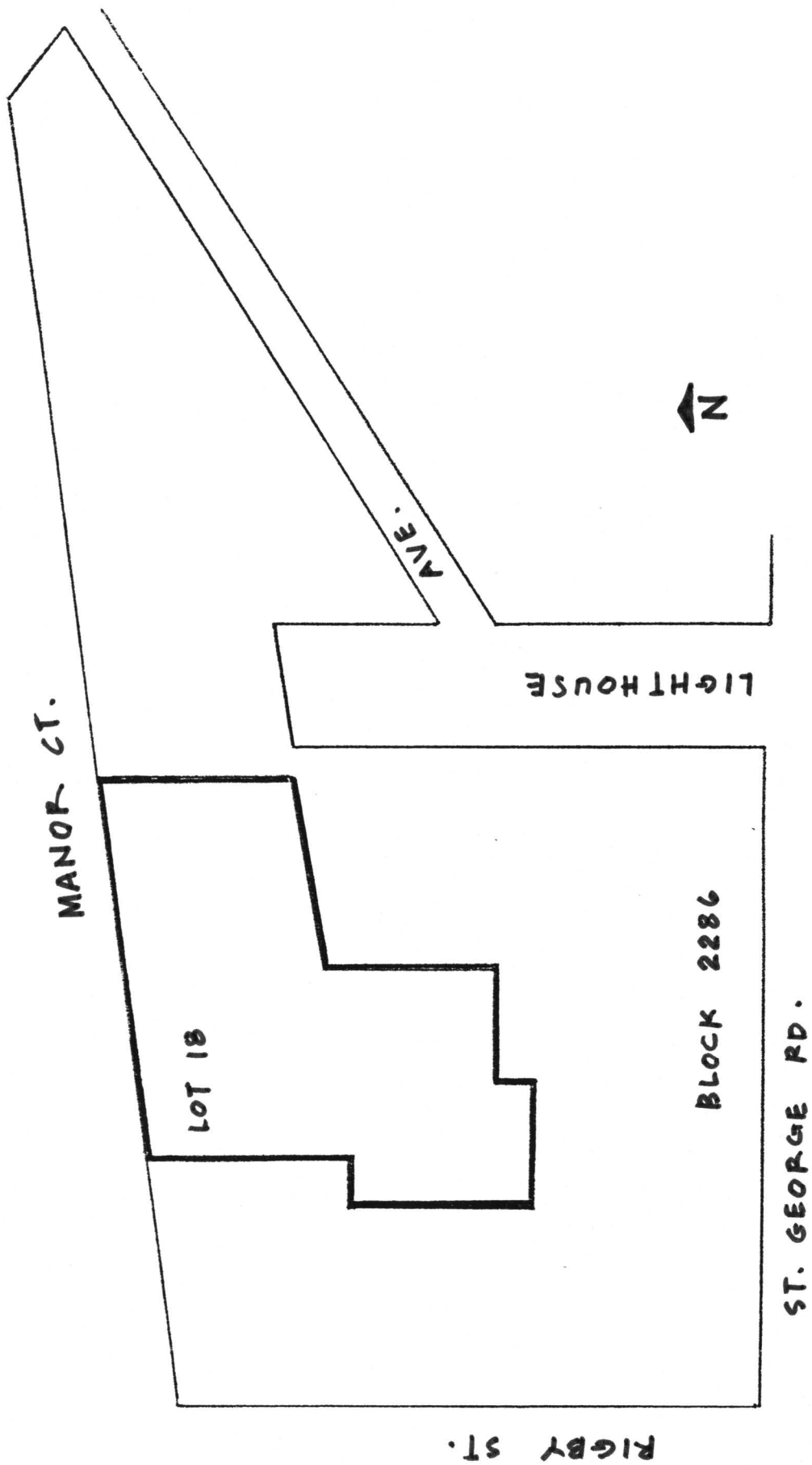
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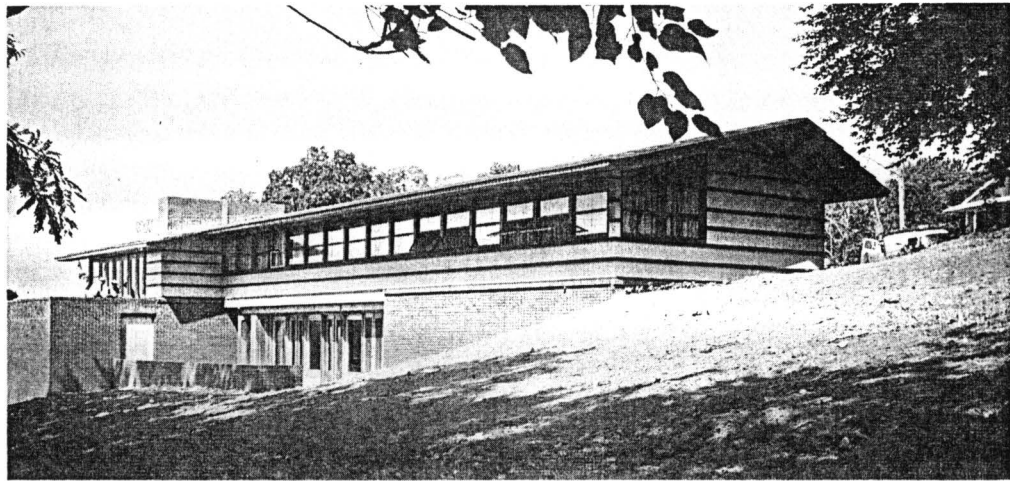
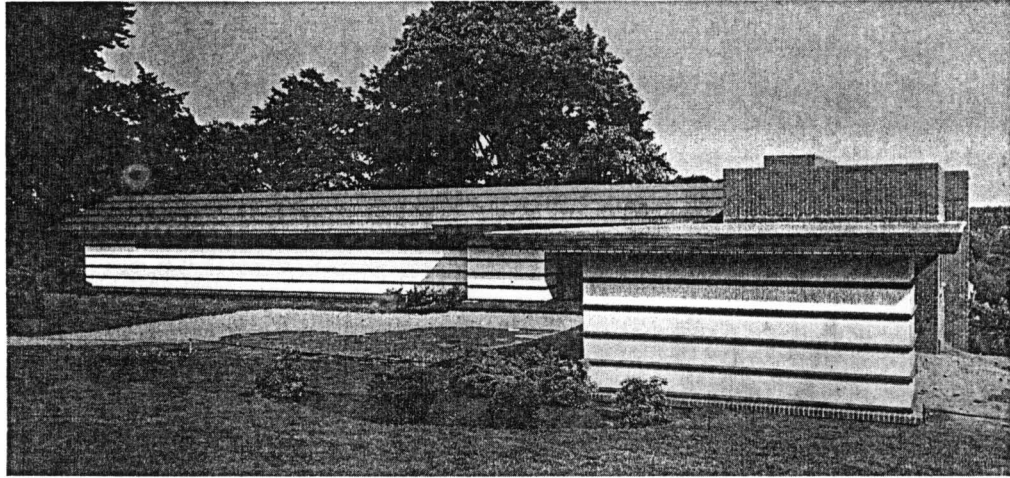
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"THE CRIMSON BEECH" (CASS HOUSE)
48 MANOR COURT, RICHMONDTOWN
STATEN ISLAND





"The Crimson Beech" (Cass House)

Photos: Cass (c. 1959)



"The Crimson Beech" (Cass House)
Front Facade



"The Crimson Beech" (Cass House)
Entrance



"The Crimson Beech" (Cass House)
Front Facade



"The Crimson Beech" (Cass House)
Rear Facade



"The Crimson Beech" (Cass House)
Rear Facade