



Stoneflower

AN IMPORTANT STEP ON FAY JONES'S
PATH TO ARCHITECTURE LEGEND

BY ERIC FRANCIS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DERO SANFORD

Fay Jones's Stoneflower, glowing from within at twilight, demonstrates the architect's belief that "one of the most important elements in architecture is light."

One of the most important elements in architecture is light. So felt Fay Jones, the son of Pine Bluff and longtime Fayettevillian whose ethereal Thorncrown Chapel, perched on its Ozark mountainside in Eureka Springs since 1980, sent ripples through the architectural world that have not yet subsided.

But to find the true impetus for those ripples, one must look to another rocky Arkansas hillside where, fifteen years earlier, Jones first implemented many of the chapel's signature elements: the one-room simplicity, the walls of glass, the immaculate 2:4:5 proportions with their emphasis on the vertical.

That place is on Eden Isle in Greer's Ferry Lake and is officially styled the Shaheen-Goodfellow Weekend Cottage, but it is better known by a far more evocative name: Stoneflower.

In the early 1960s, Bob Shaheen and Curt Goodfellow were landscape architects who had been hired to work on the nascent Eden Isle residential

development, and they accepted a plot as part of their payment. They were already familiar with Jones's work, having done the landscaping at the Jones-designed Huntsville home of former Governor Orval Faubus, so they approached the architect about designing a weekend cottage getaway. On the cheap.

How cheap? Well, in 1965 the budget — the entire budget — was \$25,000, the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program noted in a report on Jones's work. Furthermore, the lot was steep and boulder-strewn, and the clients had some very specific requests: The structure should be a getaway cottage that embraced the lake view, with both a simple, open plan and someplace to do indoor planting (without attaching a standard greenhouse); furthermore, it should "visually eliminate all manufactured items — 'anything that looked like it was bought and stuck on.'"

For this, Jones apparently was to be paid no more than \$8,000.

The project challenged him, by all accounts. But the difficult site was counterbalanced by the beauty of its natural setting. Plus, Shaheen and Goodfellow were willing to throw in

some manual labor, and they'd been salvaging some building materials from other Eden Isle homesites — two-by-fours and the like — to be used for their project.

Jones put his pencil to work, and what resulted from that effort was a singular building, the seed from which Thorncrown Chapel would eventually grow.

Boulders that had lain scattered around the lot were piled together to form the foundation, low and wide and rooted in the earth, looking for all the world like someone had come along and simply shoved away all the dirt that had been hiding the foundation. More stones — great slabs — were laid to create walkways, a broad patio, and irregular stairs leading up to the front door, set back within those boulders. If Neanderthals had employed architects, this might have been their signature design.

Yet positioned atop this promontory was something altogether different. The heaving bulk of the stones gave way to tall, straight walls of wood, which framed windows of exceptional height on the east and west faces. This upper portion of the house was narrow and long, and

exceedingly tall. From its western face, a narrow deck, as long again as the house, stretched toward the lake.

Here it was that Jones hit upon his magic 2:4:5 proportions: Stoneflower is only twelve feet wide, but rises twenty-four feet above its foundation and stretches a full thirty feet from end to end — and the deck another thirty feet out, soaring above the lot that falls steeply away from the base of the cottage.

Built on boulders and clad in redwood board-and-batten siding, with a broad shed roof that extends well out from the walls and ends in delicate-looking rafter tails, Stoneflower truly does resemble something that grew there, simultaneously organic and otherworldly. Standing below it and craning your neck back, back, back to take in its intense verticality, it's easy to see that Messrs. Shaheen and Goodfellow got more than their money's worth out of their weekend cottage.

They got a masterpiece writ small.

Fay Jones's papers bide safely in the Special Collections department of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, where he was one of the first architecture students and the first dean of the School of Architecture. Cat Wallack is the architectural records archivist who oversees the Jones Collection, and she says that though Stoneflower received a fair amount of publicity at the time of its construction — *Life* magazine did a photo-laden feature on Stoneflower in 1966 — it remains fairly obscure among his works.

"I would say it's definitely one more people should be aware of," Wallack said. "As part of the evolution of his work, it's very important."

That evolution includes the two kinds of spaces Jones had already experimented with in earlier houses, such as his own: The cave and the treehouse, both of which are "very explicit" in Stoneflower's earth-hugging foundation and treetop vistas, she said.

"The other part of the evolution of his work is the vertical expressive qualities and the kind of joinery you see in Thorncrown and Cooper chapels," Wallack added. "Stoneflower is an earlier example of that approach."

Yet while hints of these elements can be pared from various houses and other buildings Jones had designed before, something special happened when he brought them all together in this comparatively humble weekend cottage.

"I think it's pretty dramatic and memorable," Wallack said, "in that while some of Fay's earlier work emphasizes the horizontal and that kind of relationship with the landscape, the verticality of Stoneflower really marks it as distinctly Fay Jones."

Shaheen and Goodfellow eventually sold Stoneflower, and it has had several owners since.



The shower is a personal waterfall, carved out of stone.



Clockwise from top: The sleeping loft is just that, with room for little more than a bed; the cottage is twice as tall as it is wide; the ground-floor den has seating built into the foundation — along with an immovable boulder coffee table.

Today it is owned by Bob Mosesso of Lowell and is still serving its function as a lakeside retreat, now as a private rental cottage.

And that is unquestionably its most noble purpose because, in all honesty, Stoneflower is not really cut out to be Home Sweet Home.

One of the most important elements in architecture is light. What you have to remember, though, is that there is light, and there is lighting.

Step into the cavernous interior of Stoneflower's foundation, and you will quickly find it lives up to that descriptor: stone floors and stone walls, stone bases for the sofa seating, and a flat-topped boulder set into the floor that serves as a coffee table you will never, ever move.

In here, the lighting is ... subtle. Recessed bulbs provide enough illumination to maneuver by, and when the sun is shining, you are rewarded with one of Jones's surprises: There are windows bridging the gap between the top of the foundation and the base of the upper structure, allowing sunlight to flow down the stone walls that suddenly become obvious as the indoor planting areas the original clients had requested. There's even a small running-water feature — essentially a short, pebbled creek — along one wall, and an impressive fireplace near the entryway.

Around the corner from this den is a short hallway with closet space, and the bathroom, which has rightfully been called a "grotto" in innumerable articles about Stoneflower. Care for a shower? Find the light switches, in their sometimes elusive recesses, then find the faucet handle, and suddenly water is cascading off a stone ledge into a stone-floored niche — your very own personal waterfall.

Opposite the bathroom hallway at the far end of the den, a spiral staircase winds up into the main structure. Here there is no poverty of light: The narrow ends of the single, open room are windows twenty-four feet tall, though the one to the east is partially covered by wide vertical battens, equally useful for sparing late-risers from direct morning sun and protecting the plate glass from errant drives from the nearby golf course.

Though the living area of Stoneflower can be called a single room, it has several clearly defined spaces. The staircase leads to a small dining area, which immediately flows into a kitchen nook that fits neatly under the loft in which the bedroom sits. Continue moving forward, and you're in the living room, which towers to the full height of the ceiling and faces the great glass wall of the west. Both walls are lined with built-in sofas that can serve as single beds in a pinch.

Keep climbing the spiral stair, and you find yourself in the sleeping loft. A queen-sized bed, built-in bedside tables, and a storage bench



Fay Jones's hit upon his magical 2:4:5 formula for proportions in the dimensions of Stoneflower, which is twelve feet wide, twenty-four feet tall, and sixty feet long, including the deck.

take up most of the space there; wooden rods stretched between rafters make do for closets.

And speaking of rafters, here is another element echoed in Thorncrown — the open, cross-braced beams that stretch every few feet from stem to stem in the building's upper reaches. Stoneflower lacks the innovative, peekaboo cutouts where the beams cross — a later innovation by Jones — but that doesn't diminish the visual impact of the beams, weaving together a structure that is still composed mostly of air.

If there is a word for Stoneflower, it might be cozy. And therein lies its shortcoming as a true home. The kitchen is tiny ("efficient," the real-estate ad would say), with a pint-size fridge and just enough counter space to clutter quickly. There's a tiny water closet ("half-bath") tucked away behind an adjacent door, and while Jones used every available inch for cabinets, they are still small and few.

But what Stoneflower lacks in utility, it makes up for in sheer beauty. Every detail shows a craftsman's touch. The cabinet doors are trimmed with eloquent geometrical touches. The wooden wall sconces and chandeliers may impart more mood than lighting, but look like something from a master woodworker's most exquisite dream. You wouldn't dare hang anything on the walls, which are thin beams of redwood bordering white stucco panels, a motif that rises all the way to the ceiling. Clerestory windows line the tops of the walls, allowing natural light in but, again, only in a fashion that serves the best interest of the design, not the inhabitants.

And there is that deck, more akin to a fashion runway than your typical vacation house. Just twelve feet wide and with railings so short they'd give any code inspector heart palpitations, there's

enough room for a table and chairs in the center, but more than that would make the space seem crowded. Almost at the far end, outside the railings, are two broad metal braziers, one doing duty as a barbecue grill. And at the farthest end of the deck is the only built-in seating that Jones saw fit to provide: a single bench stretching the full width of the deck.

In the more than forty-five years since the cottage was built, the lake view has largely been lost; the oak and pine trees, as is their wont, have grown up to canopy the hillside beyond. But out there on the deck, you may come to believe that Jones may not have put all that much stock in the lake view. Because when you sit on that bench at the end of a long day, with your back to the west, you find your eyes inevitably turned toward Stoneflower itself.

The tinted rays of sunset filter through the trees and bathe the glass-walled facade. The white stucco panels glow faintly between the exposed rafters of the overhanging roof. And the sconces and chandeliers fill the interior with a gentle warmth that, having seemed so dim just a few hours ago, now cannot be judged anything less than perfect.

Without question, this is the hour when Stoneflower is at its finest — when the light of the natural world around it and the lights within the walls achieve harmony, and the entire structure glows like a candle on its rocky hillside. When it becomes obvious that the stone and wood and glass are really all held together with something as insubstantial, and indispensable, as ...

One of the most important elements in architecture is light.

Light! Yes, Mr. Jones. Thank you. We understand now.