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The Ramirez Solar House

A Holistic Approach to a National Register Nomination

Nominations to the National Register of Historic Places have evolved over time. Early nominations included only a paragraph or two of description, a significance statement that was simply a capsule building history, and little or no discussion of the property's setting or outbuildings. Site managers or later site owners could not use this documentation for guidance in assessing the significance of secondary structures and landscape elements or in determining whether property elements should be retained or restored.

Recent National Register nominations have recognized that historic buildings do not exist in isolation. A building is an integral part of a larger environment that includes outbuildings and landscape features. These elements contribute to the property's significance and integrity and should be discussed in National Register documentation. Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area (NRA) followed this approach when developing the nomination (still pending in the review process) for the Ramirez Solar House. The nomination looks at both the architecture of the house and the design of its surrounding cultural landscape.

The Ramirez Solar House is the park's most unusual building. The house was originally a rambling, wood-framed and stone, Shingle-style country retreat with intersecting gambrel roofs. Its design, typical of Pocono Mountain resorts of the time, was later mockingly called "rustic-baronial."[1] The house was built in about 1910 for wealthy New York City residents. Damaged by fire in 1942, the house was sold the following year. Two years later, it was converted to a passive solar residence for Gustavo Ramirez.

The upper story was removed; windows were salvaged and reused; sheathing and other materials were retained; the servant's quarters were modernized; and the pantry was transformed into a small kitchen. The dining room and reception hall were converted to a living room with a corner cut from the space to form a porch. Two bedrooms were added on the main floor. An original veranda with massive stone piers and overhanging eaves obscured the view from the living room. This space was converted to a terrace to allow for spectacular views of the Delaware River Valley beyond by removal of the roof and wood floor, truncation of the piers, and filling to grade. The exterior space was designed as an integral part of the living area and as a transition from house to landscape.[2] Some elements of the original plan remain. For example, behind a door in the living room is a partial stairway to the second story.

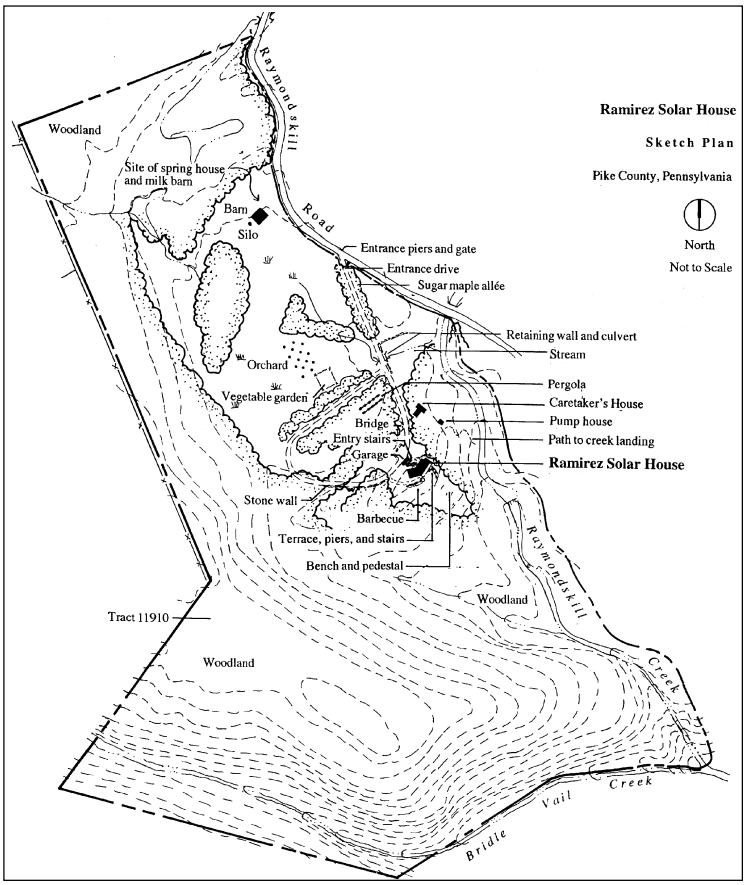
A window wall, 18 feet in height, formed the south wall of both the living room and the south bedroom. A wide roof overhang provided the window with full shading from the highest path of summer sun, yet allowed the lowest path of sun to enter. Only a small portion of the lower window wall was operable. It was equipped with double-glazing with sealed air space for the full height. To further protect against winter temperature extremes, a winter window was installed eight inches behind the bottom half. The two windows formed a trough to catch cold air behind the radiators which warmed the air prior to transmission into the room. Radiators placed under the new north clerestory windows handled cold air in a similar way. According to a 1945 article in "House Beautiful," "Sun now heats these rooms on sunny cold days. Coal fired heating plant heats house at night and on cloudy sunless days."[3]

Architect Henry Wright, Jr., designed the transformation of the house to a passive solar dwelling. In the 1930s and 1940s, he was an editor with "Architectural Forum." During his tenure with the magazine, he became increasingly interested in passive solar architecture. Wright's

designs of the 1930s and 1940s were all classic solar houses.[4] Each featured a shed roof permitting a tall open wall on the south elevation and a short, enclosed wall on the north elevation, with larger windows on the east wall and fewer, smaller windows facing west.

In 1995 and 1996, John Milner Associates, Inc., in collaboration with OCULUS of Charlottesville, VA, drafted determinations of eligibility and National Register nominations for properties in Delaware Water Gap NRA. The Ramirez House was submitted for the National Register under Criterion A for exemplifying the 20th-century recreation context of the recreation area and under Criterion C for exemplifying early passive solar architecture, for its incorporation of native materials, and for its relationship to the dramatic surrounding landscape.[5]

This nomination traces the history and evolution of the house while placing it in the context of the development of passive solar residences. Research revealed it to be one of the earliest examples of modern passive solar architecture in the eastern United States. The nomination describes the house as an amalgamation of late Victorian and modernist architecture.



Ramirez Solar House sketch plan showing topography and landscape elements. Illustration by Liz Sargent, OCULUS.

In documenting the cultural landscape of the property, landscape architect Liz Sargent of OCULUS followed the procedures outlined in National Register Bulletin 30, "Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Rural Historic Landscapes." In its landscape features, the Ramirez Solar House property clearly exemplifies the recreational context of the area. The siting of the main house atop a prominent knoll with views to the surrounding landscape, an extensive use of native materials, particularly stone, and deliberate connects to picturesque landscape features are representative of response to the area's natural beauty.

Walkways from the house provide connections to natural features. They include a cascading stairway to a woodland garden and barbecue and a rustic path with stone and log steps that leads to a picnic area and swimming hole. A stone pergola sits beside the entry drive on a knoll overlooking a stream valley. The property also incorporates a dramatic approach and arrival sequence, including a stone-pillared entrance, sugar maple allée, river stone walls and a stone bridge, open meadows, a stone garage, and a sinuous stone stairway leading up to the main house entry.

The Ramirez Solar House is currently vacant and in need of repair. The work done to prepare the National Register nomination will help park staff assess the significant elements of the property's landscape and develop treatment recommendations for this unique property. Its ultimate listing on the Register will ensure that the national significance of the Ramirez Solar House is recognized.

Notes

1 Joanna M. Kendig, AIA, and Thomas E. Solon, AIA, "Tomorrows House Today: Solar Heating the 'Wright' Way," Preserving the Recent Past 2 Conference, (Philadelphia: Association for Preservation Technology, 2000).

2 "Can an Old House be Remodeled for Solar Heating?" *House Beautiful,* June 1945.

3 Ibid.

4 Biographical information concerning Henry Wright is taken from his FAIA nomination file in the archives of the American Institute of Architects, Washington, DC.

5 Douglas C. McVarish and Liz Sargent, "Nadler Solar House," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 1996.

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