

THE MAJOR ARCHITECTURAL PRINCIPLES OF FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

ORGANIC ARCHITECTURE

By organic architecture I mean an architecture that develops from within outward in harmony with the conditions of its being as distinguished from one that is applied from without.

-- Frank Lloyd Wright

"Organic Architecture" was the term Wright used to define his work. By "organic" Wright meant that buildings should blend with their surroundings and draw inspiration from the nature of their settings. Organic architecture was appropriate to climate, time, the nature of the setting, and most importantly to the specific needs of the client.

Wright also believed that each part of an organic design should be related to the whole -- much like a flower or a tree. This philosophy prompted Wright to develop designs for furnishings, fabrics, lighting, art glass and even landscaping so that the total design was integrated. Ornament, too, was never an applied feature, but rather "integrated" into the building itself. "In Organic Architecture," Wright said, "it is quite impossible to consider the building as one thing, its furnishings another and its setting and environment still another. The very chairs and tables and even musical instruments, where practicable, are of the building itself, never fixtures upon it."

Wright's "organic architecture" was based on four fundamental ideas: (1) destruction of the box (2) the nature of the site (3) the nature of materials and (4) designing for democracy. These are discussed below. All quotes are by Frank Lloyd Wright.

1. The Destruction of the Box

Down all the avenues of time architecture was an enclosure by nature, and the simplest form of enclosure was the box.... As a young architect, I began to feel annoyed, held back, imposed upon by this sense of enclosure which you went into and there you were -- boxed, crated.... I was the free son of a free people and I wanted to be free. I had to find out what was the cause of this imprisonment. So I began to investigate.

-- Frank Lloyd Wright

Early in his career Wright came to observe that American homes and buildings were filled with confining, boxlike rooms. He realized that a new type of design was needed to free interior space. Wright was one of the first to embrace the open plan, which changed interior space by allowing more openness and flow. In a talk to members of the Taliesin Fellowship, he said that the living room of *Hillside Home School* may have been one of his first efforts at achieving this goal.

To eliminate the sense of confinement that Wright felt in boxlike rooms, he realized that he could remove the traditional corner supports and shift the center of support towards the middle of the wall. Thus the corners of the room disappeared altogether. In their place Wright put his famous corner windows. Now there was light and air where before there had been only darkness. By means of the cantilevered roof, walls became flexible screens that could be moved, shortened or extended or even eliminated to create maximum freedom of space. "In this simple change of thought lies the essential of the architectural change from box to free plan and the new reality that is space instead of matter," Wright wrote in *An American Architecture*.

Wright broke the box not only horizontally, but also vertically. Speaking of the *SC Johnson Administration Building*, he wrote, "In the Johnson Building you catch no sense of enclosure whatever at any angle, top or sides. You are looking

at the sky and feel the freedom of space....The old idea of a building is, as you see, quite gone."

Wright believed that he was the first to conceive of this idea of space until he read the Chinese philosopher Lao-tse who wrote the following in the 6th century: "The reality of the building does not consist in the four walls and the roof, but in the space within to be lived in." Wright was disillusioned that he was not the first to think of this until he realized, "Lao-tse said it. Yes. But, I built it."

2. The Nature of the Site

My prescription for a modern house: first, a good site. Pick that one at the most difficult spot -- pick a site no one wants -- but pick one that has features making for character: trees, individuality, a fault of some kind in the realtor mind. That now means getting out of the city. Then, standing on that site, look about you so that you see what has charm. What is the reason you want to build there? Find out. Then build your house so that you may still look from where you stood upon all that charmed you and lose nothing of what you saw before the house was built but see more. Architectural association accentuates the character of the landscape if the architecture is right.

-- Frank Lloyd Wright

Wright often admonished home builders to pick a site no one else wanted because it could open up great creative possibilities. He said that one should never build on top of a hill, but rather build on the "brow" of the hill so that the building is of the earth not simply perched on it. Nowhere is this more evident than in Wright's own home, *Taliesin*, which sits on the brow of a hill overlooking the Wisconsin River Valley.

Wright's buildings are intimately wedded to their surroundings -- they are as at home on the site as the stone and wood from which they are built. Wright

considered everything about a site before he would put pencil to paper. He studied the topography, and approaches to the site, he considered parking and where the sun rose and set. Perhaps most importantly he reflected on the site's natural features such as trees and rock outcroppings.

When a less than perfect site was available, such as a city lot, Wright often turned the views inward, as in the *Jacobs / House* in Madison, which has narrow, high windows facing the street, but large floor-to ceiling windows facing the interior garden.

3. The Nature of Materials

The country between Madison and Janesville, near Taliesin my home and workshop, is the bed of an ancient glacier drift. Vast busy gravel pits abound there, exposing heaps of yellow aggregateGreat heaps, clean and golden, are always waiting there in the sun. And I never pass on my way to and from Chicago without emotion.... The rock ledges of a stone quarry are a story and a longing to me.

-- Frank Lloyd Wright

Wright loved to work with natural materials. He respected the individual properties of natural materials and believed that each material's inherent qualities should be preserved and treated honestly. "To be modern simply means that all materials are used honestly for the sake of their own qualities," Wright said. Thus brick was seen as brick and wood as wood. Such materials were never painted, carved or covered over in any way which would hide their natural beauty.

One of Wright's unique means of emphasizing the nature of materials was to use the same treatment for the interior and the exterior. Wright used brick both

inside and outside of the *SC Johnson Wax Administration Building* and used stone in the same manner at *Taliesin*.

Some of the native materials Wright worked with were:

STONE

Read the grammar of the Earth in a particle of stone! Stone is the frame on which this Earth is modeled, and wherever it crops out -- there the architect may sit and learn.

-- Frank Lloyd Wright

Examples: *Taliesin, Seth Peterson Cottage*

GLASS

By means of glass, open reaches of the ground may enter into the building and the building interior may reach out and associate with these vistas of the ground. Ground and building will thus become more and more obviously directly related to each other in openness and intimacy.

-- Frank Lloyd Wright

Examples: *The Unitarian Meeting House, The Jacobs House I and II, SC Johnson Wax Administration Building*

CONCRETE

(Wright was one of the first to use steel reinforced concrete -- a now standard building material. He also developed a unique use for the lowly concrete block.)

What about the concrete block? It was the cheapest and ugliest thing in the building world.... Why not see what could be done with that gutter rat? Steel rods cast inside the joints of the blocks themselves and the whole brought into some

broad practical scheme of general treatment, why would it not be fit for a new phase of our modern architecture? It might be permanent, noble, beautiful. It would be cheap.

-- Frank Lloyd Wright

(Wright was referring to his designs for the textile blocks in which specially designed and cast concrete blocks were woven together with steel rods as in the *Millard House* in California.)

Examples: Wright's use of concrete for the *A.D. German Warehouse* in the interior and the frieze

BRICK

Anything used according to its nature in the category of organic architecture is beautiful; it truly is. A brick is a very simple thing you know. Just rectangular, but it has a great range of quality.

-- Frank Lloyd Wright

Examples: *SC Johnson Wax Administration Building, The Jacobs House I*

WOOD

Wood is the most humanly intimate and of all materials the most kindly to man.

-- Frank Lloyd Wright

Examples: *Romeo and Juliet Windmill*

4. Designing for Democracy

That is why I have always referred to this as the architecture of democracy: the freedom of the individual becomes the motive for society and government.

-- Frank Lloyd Wright

Frank Lloyd Wright came to see all of his work as part of an overall plan to create a new architecture for a new democracy -- a society based on the freedom of the individual. Wright often used the term "Usonia" to refer to the United States and began to design "Usonian Homes" for citizens of Usonia. These were innovative, yet modest structures, built for individuals of modest means. (The *Jacobs House* in Madison was the first one built.) Usonian homes were just one part of an overall plan Wright had for reorganizing and decentralizing American cities -- a plan he called "Broadacre City."

Because of the emergence of modern transportation and communication systems, cities based on traditional European models -- where people huddled together for commerce and social interaction -- were no longer relevant. In Broadacre City, Wright decentralized the city to create a new environment where the individual citizen had freedom of space and could flourish. It was, as Wright scholar John Sergeant noted, Wright's attempt to give architectural form to his concept of democracy.

As Wright described it, Broadacre City was to be "predicated on the basis that every woman, man, and child in America (or Usonia) is entitled to own an acre of ground so long as they live on it or use it, and every man at least owning his own car.... This design presupposes that the city is going to the country." The original model of Broadacre City, built by Taliesin apprentices in 1934, is on display at *Hillside Home School at Taliesin*.

Wright wrote several books on democracy including When Democracy Builds and its revision The Living City. According to Sergeant, Wright's thinking may

have been influenced by his return to his home state of Wisconsin in 1911. Wisconsin was considered one of the most politically progressive states in the country with such politicians as Robert LaFollette, Progressive Party candidate for president in 1924. Sergeant notes that the Progressive program in Wisconsin led to social advances that foreshadowed much of Wright's discussion of society in The Living City.