

Twentieth Century Club hosts Banks

Taliesin architect remembers the life of Frank Lloyd Wright

Being a student of Frank Lloyd Wright was not a cloistered academic endeavor disjointed from the every day activities of the real world. It was, instead, a complete lifestyle, Aubrey Banks recalled to describe his many years as a protege of the famous Wisconsin architect.

Standing behind a smooth, curving lectern of honey-colored cherry, Banks made his remarks at the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center on Tuesday to members of the Sun Prairie Twentieth Century Club who had gathered for a guest luncheon.

The unique lectern's gentle curves and simple beauty, echoing the surrounding the building, were among Banks' contributions to the building.

Banks was an apprentice of Wright at Taliesin and a faculty member at the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture. He now works for the Architecture Network, Inc. in Madison.

Charged with making the space habitable, Banks designed and selected all the interior furnishings as well as tableware, flatware and other accessories which were chosen to harmonize with the "grammar" of the building.

Banks explained that architecture, like human language, is a mode of expression which requires structure to create meaning.

"Style comes from working with



Aubrey Banks

your limitations...You have to give a building grammar. If we just have words without the structure of grammar, there is not an expression of ideas," Banks said. "Without the structure of grammar, you're limited in what you can say."

In keeping with that philosophy, Banks said his choice of furnishings does not bear an imprint of himself; but rather, reflects the overriding structure of the building's sweeping bends and circles.

"I had no intent of making a personal statement," Banks explained.

From upholstered chairs, dining room seats and side tables to swooping light fixtures, flatware and saucers, the theme of Wright's design is carried into the smallest of details of Monona Terrace.

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★ Taliesin lifestyle described by Banks

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Banks was a key figure in the development of the building based on his long history as an apprentice and friend of Wright and his wife, Olgivanna.

Banks said he became an apprentice of the Taliesin Fellowship in 1952.

Banks said he became keenly interested in Wright's work and organic architecture while working as teacher at the University of Illinois.

"I read Mr. Wright's autobiography and, at least for me, I thought he was the only one who knew what he was talking about," Banks remembered.

He then wrote to Wright and inquired about the Taliesin Fellowship.

Wright's response to that letter

and decision to interview Banks changed the course of the young architect's life.

During that interview, Wright asked Banks, "What does your mother do?"

When Banks responded, "She's a piano teacher," Wright said, "That's where you get it," and accepted the new student.

At Taliesin, Wright immersed his students not only in their art, but also in a new way of living in the world and viewing their surroundings.

Apprentices lived at Taliesin year-round with Wright and his wife becoming parental figures to the students. In addition to design work, apprentices harvested crops, worked in the kitchen, and maintained the buildings among a myriad

of chores.

"We were just like a large family and Mr. and Mrs. Wright were just like my mother and father," Banks said.

Meanwhile, apprentices also took part in weekly social gatherings and cultural events, mingling with poets, musicians and scholars.

The uncommon combination of work clothes and black tie formality would prepare the students to relate equally well with ditch diggers and royalty.

The entire atmosphere of Taliesin, Banks said, was carefully crafted to inspire great architecture by offering students a rich, diversified life.

To provide this experience, the Wrights gave up their private life in

order to cultivate a legacy.

"He was not teaching us. He was giving us the opportunity to become artists," Banks said.

"He didn't care if his buildings survived, but that the idea of his buildings survived," Banks continued.

In all, Olgivanna was an integral part of Wright's life and the education of his students.

She handled all the day-to-day details of Taliesin and arranged all the social functions.

Because students of Wright tended to be "rebels," Banks noted, Olgivanna was faced with no small task.

"She was a great stabilizing force in Mr. Wright's life, she urged him on," Banks said. "She really was equal to Mr. Wright."

The specific architectural training was also unlike any other educational environment, Banks said.

There were no curricula or grades and students were never compared to one another, allowing each to develop at his or her own pace.

Wright reviewed student portfolios twice a year and judged students according to their own abilities and talents.

"You should be at peace with others and only in competition with yourself," Banks said.

Among the things Wright did define for his students was a basic principle of organic architecture: "You see a pattern in nature, and you are not to copy it, but to abstract from it," Banks said.