Monona Terrace Docent Training
Biographical Sketch
October 25, 2022

Heather’s introduction to the activity:

The primary purpose of your tour should be to interpret and promote Monona Terrace’s architecture, sparking an interest in people to learn more. But what about Frank Lloyd Wright’s controversial personal life? …. Well we can’t avoid that because the Monona Terrace story is entangled with Wright’s persona. He had enemies and some of these folks were in positions to slow or halt the project.

That said, many of Frank Lloyd Wright’s positive traits help to explain his successful career. We walk a fine line that acknowledges both the bad and good.

My criteria for successful presentation of Wright’s biography on tour is: balance of positive and negative, keeping details relevant to the Monona Terrace story, and being concise.

Childhood & Family

* Close family relations – especially with mother & mother’s family (Unitarians-the God-Almighty Lloyd Jones’s)
* Spent hours in Nature (family picnics, work on uncle’s farm, etc)
* His mother encouraged bending the facts of a situation
* Musical influence through his father
* Strong Welsh Heritage
* Two sisters and three step-siblings

Formative Experiences

* Mother’s belief that he would become a great architect- etchings of Cathedrals posted on nursery room walls
* Father left family, Wright changed his given middle name of Lincoln to Lloyd to align with his mother’s side
* Draftsman for Louis Sullivan whom Wright acknowledged as a mentor- Sullivan was working towards an American brand of architecture
* Building with Froebel Blocks
* Working on family farm
* Capitol fire and total collapse of one wing
* Work on construction of Science Hall
* “Office Man” for Professor Conover
* Voracious reader

Relationship to Madison

* Attended UW Madison (& Later received Honorary Degree)
* Only attended 2 semesters at UW Madison (while claiming otherwise in *The Autobiography*)
* Settled in Madison as a boy (after having moved throughout the country as William Carey Wright struggled to support his young family)
* Witnessed the fire that destroyed the State Capitol building
* Several haunts still around – Unitarian Church in Madison Park

Motivated By

* Man’s relationship with Nature
* Japanese influences
* Dreams of new ways to build and live
* Changing the way we live by changing what we live in
* Worshipped beauty, innovation and glory of natural world
* His belief that his architecture could transform lives
* Loved being famous and wanted credit for his designs
* Improving on someone else’s drawings
* Opposition
* Ego
* Recognition

Accomplishments

* Named greatest American architect in 1991 by the American Institute of Architects
* Reborn at age 70- Completion of Fallingwater, SC Johnson Buildings and Jacobs Usonian seemed to rejuvenate his career
* Built 511 buildings (and designed 1171)
* Appointment of his works to UNESCO World Heritage Sites
* 12 buildings on Architectural Record’s “100 Most Important Buildings of the 20th Century” list
* Architecture withstood earthquakes (Tokyo’s Imperial Hotel)
* 1/3 of his design projects done in the last decade of his life
* First American featured by European publisher Ernst Wasmuth

Quotes- more can be found at mononaterrace.com/docent-resources

* Early in life I had to choose between honest arrogance and hypocritical humility. I chose the former and have found no reason to change.
* From an apprentice- “He was 200% alive.” + 100 years ahead of his time
* I was not into it for the money [His inability to handle his finances was legendary]
* An ability to “shake buildings out of my sleeve”
* Wisconsin is my somewhere
* I believe in God, but I spell it N-A-T-U-R-E.
* Nature, that’s my church.
* Give me the luxuries of life and I will willingly do without the necessities.

Traits

* Larger than Life
* Charismatic
* Selfish
* Arrogant
* Broke rules
* Short stature
* Persevering
* Visionary
* Ahead of his time
* Ability to work well under pressure
* Overbearing personality/demanded total control over his projects
* Witty
* Persuasive
* Lived in the moment
* Transcendentalist- believing the closest one could get to God was through nature
* Confident

Things We Admire About Wright

* Bold
* Genius
* Prolific
* Held fast to his vision and created spaces no one had conceived of before
* Persisted
* Conviction
* Never imposed limits on himself (vision, feats of engineering)
* Overcame tragedy & scandal
* Whimsy was his good friend
* Built houses for the common man (i.e. Usonian Designs)
* Believed in the sovereignty of the individual and the primacy of Nature
* Talent
* Reinvention
* Go Big or Go Home!
* Open concept interiors were the forerunner of modern homes
* Buildings that are pieces of art

Vices

* Luxurious taste: i.e. Japanese Art Prints, financial instability
* Loved being adored by women
* Left his young family in Oak Park
* Inability or simple failure to pay his bills
* Arrogance
* Love for bright, fast cars (Cords, Lincolns, Packards, etc)
* Hunger for publicity/always seeking the spotlight

Wright’s Legacy

* Breaking the Box
* His students- he trained a whole new generation of architects to think differently about design
* Brought artful design to mundane spaces- homes, offices, etc.
* FLW Foundation
* Organic Architecture
* Wingspread, Fallingwater, Taliesin, Taliesin West, Unity Temple, SC Johnson Administration Buildings, the Prairie Style
* Profoundly flawed but genius is irrefutable