

Wright demonstrating the ideals of organic architecture in taliesin west

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Exterior image of Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Arizona “ Organic can merely mean something biological, but if you are going to take the word organic into your consciousness as concerned with entities, something in which the part is to the whole as the whole is to the part, and which is all devoted to a purpose consistently, then you have something that can live, because that is vital” (1) (Meehan 52) The famous American architect by the name of Frank Lloyd Wright based his designs on what he called “ organic architecture”.

His philosophy of what modern architecture should be is one as unique as his buildings, but nevertheless he was a pivotal figure in the progression of modernism in the United States. As described by Kathryn Smith, his winter home in Scottsdale Arizona “[reveals], more than any of his other buildings, a closer understanding of Wright the man as well as Wright the architect. ” (Smith 92) This winter home is known as Taliesin West and is an epitome of organic architecture.

Wright’s work has previously been demonstrated with the International Style, but upon deeper understanding of his architecture one can come to the conclusion that it does not exactly agree with the movement. He allowed his work to be included in first exhibition of the International style in the hopes of demonstrating the immense difference of his structures compared to the work by Le Corbusier’s, Alvar Aalto, Walter Gropius and many others. Before exploring the relation between Taliesin West and Organic Architecture, an investigation of his lectures and writings must be completed to thoroughly grasp his principles of design.

Comprehending his journey until 1936, when he bought the land to construct his new project, will grant the knowledge needed to effortlessly connect the two. Wright started his career at an early age, in 1885, in the city of Chicago. He first worked for architect Joseph Silsbee, then spent five years under the direction of Alder and Sullivan. In 1893 he made the decision to commence his own firm and went through a large learning curve for the next seven years - being a young, ambitious architect with no true reputation and little individual experience. The first decade of the 1900s saw Wright's first real break-through with the Prairie House.

The ideas he demonstrated in this school of thought have a clear connection to his later developed definition of organic architecture. " Reproductions and variations of foreign styles did not seem to Wright an authentic expression of American culture... " (Twombly 59-60) The drive to appropriate the types of buildings to their suitable land in America pushed Wright further in his designs. The time period expanding from 1910 to 1930 gave rise to many hardships for Wright. In 1911 he built his new home in Wisconsin, named Taliesin, and in 1914 it was the place of the tragic death of his wife and two children.

Wright remarried but in 1927 got divorced for Olga Lazovich Hinzenberg to whom he stayed married until his death. By the 1930s Wright's Organic style had clearly matured and he became confident in his principles, nonetheless he would continue the exploration of his style through experimentation. He opened the Taliesin Fellowship in 1932 in his Wisconsin estate. This fellowship was not to be like a school at all - " instead of teachers, pupils,

and pedagogy” he envisioned having “ skilled craftspeople, novices, and physical labor. (Twombly 212) This is a direct result of “ Wright [believing] that education should be in doing, not in the classroom. ” (Twombly 212) A former apprentice of the Fellowship, by the name of Bruce Brook Pfeiffer, describes that upon their first encounter with the desert in 1928 (when Mr. and Mrs. Wright went to Phoenix to collaborate on a hotel called the Arizona Baltimore) “ they would take weekend trips out on the desert. They thought the desert was a wonderful place. The air was clean, beautiful and dry. (Pfeiffer) Following the gradual decline of Wright’s health, he was recommended to relocate to a warmer climate and so the desert was the ideal location. He previously stated “ living in the Desert is the spiritual cathartic a great many people need” (Smith 88) In 1936, after the inspection of several sites, Mr. and Mrs. Wright purchased eight hundred acres of land in Paradise Valley, located approximately twenty six miles of Phoenix, Arizona. (Smith 88) When he visited this site Wright said “ it’s a look over the rim of the world. ” (Pfeiffer) This desert floor landscape would be Wright’s and the Fellowship’s new winter home.

To now further explore Wright’s own definition of the term “ Organic Architecture” it is essential to note that he used the word “ nature” with two main definitions. The first way in which he used the term alluded “ to the outdoors ... or the “ external” nature. ” (Twombly 304) In this context there were four major ways in which nature informed his designs, the first of these being the need to be close to the outdoors and nature itself. The inspiration that could be drawn from surroundings as models for architectural forms and construction principles was also a crucial influence to his designs.

The use of materials that would connect to the immediate nature was very important in the making a construction organic. Lastly, in the designs Wright created, there was always a sensitivity of the local climate conditions. Wright's second definition for the term "nature" refers to a philosophical view on the environment. This use of the word related to a concept he called the "internal" nature of a house. Wright's statement that "architecture rightly defined is the structure of whatever is" (Meehan 54) clearly relates to the "idea" of the house which he connects to his philosophy.

Wright also believed that through the study of nature one could find specific characteristics to everything and these characteristics make every item be what they are. His philosophy also encompasses the idea that essence, which every item contains, exists before perception. This philosophical view of nature is difficult to apply or relate to a specific building because it is more relevant to the thought process behind the design. Floor Plan of Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Arizona Taliesin West is known to be one of Wright's best examples of organic architecture because it so clearly demonstrates these principles. The buildings are neither large nor monumental, but they command a presence on the landscape. Under Wright's first definition of the word he states an organic building must connect to ground and be close to the outdoors. A primary example of that demonstrates this is the masonry wall surrounding the buildings. This wall creates an extension into the natural landscape and seems to connect them as one. (Pfeiffer) Large openings to the outdoors along with massive windows create a direct link to the outdoor Desert. Wright was also great at capturing views with his huge windows.

One of his fellowship workers explains how he would capture two perfect views into one window by framing the mountains in the top half, and framing the desert floor on the bottom half. (Pfeiffer) This created a great show whether someone was standing or sitting. To compare with the surrounding landscape there are “ small pools extended throughout the plans [that give] a luxury of water and fountains in contrast with the dry Desert. ” (Pfeiffer) Although Wright brings in this new element of nature it still emphasises the need to connect to nature.

Another aspect of his primary definition is to use forms found in nature and on the land as inspiration for building forms. While speaking to his students he has presented the argument that “ you are never going to get out of yourselves anything more than you are, then you can take in, than you can see as yourselves. ” In this statement he refers to the importance of going in nature and examining it with a close, intensive look. This is how one can gain the knowledge nature has to give and discover the construction principles it applies. The slopping roof of Taliesin West showcases this state of mind.

The roof is jagged and peaks, as to blend in with its background. Wright was an exceptional fan of the abstract mountains in the background of his land. He described the desert landscape saying “... here, everything is fresh, original edges pretty much preserved, erosion still going on at a terrific rate making chasms. ” (Brierly 5) The slopping walls also seem to derive from this inspiration. The lines carved into the wall that surrounds the complex was a direct inspiration of when Wright saw the water erosion lines on a canyon he visited. Pfeiffer) The roughness of the desert is also resonated throughout

the construction of the edifice. Masonry Wall, Exterior image of Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Arizona He further uses materials as an important part of a construction being organic. In this case, the canvas roof was a great inspiration for him. When he first arrived in Arizona for an earlier project, he decided to build a camp site for himself and his workers instead of staying in a hotel. In the campsite, which he called Ocatilla, they used canvas as roof material and this was the beginning of his admiration of the material in this climate.

He loved the soft, natural glow of light dispersed in the space by the canvas. He was determined to keep this canvas roof in Taliesin West and so he did. He also often modified it when he would return from a summer spent in Wisconsin. When the material needed to be replaced due to inconvenience he made sure to experiment fully and pick a material that would give the same effect of lighting. The Desert rocks he used in the masonry walls of the buildings and going around the building are a prime example of selective material use.

All the rocks used in these structures were taken directly from the land on which they were built on. This gave the resort a multi coloured facade that blended in the surrounding land impeccably. By using these materials Wright also strengthened the connection between Taliesin West and its building ground. Bruce Pfeiffer also describes how they used a method called “ desert rubble masonry wall” to make these walls. They would build a wooden frame and place the flat side of the stones facing outwards and proceed by filling it in with concrete.

He goes on to describe how they would fill in all the small holes with rounded rocks and describes it as “ each of the walls at Taliesin West [being] an artistic creation. ” (Pfeiffer). The third major material element of the construction is the use the redwood. This material was used to support the roof, creating an abstract mountain like rooftop, and throughout the interior of the building. The wood is local to the surrounding area of the Desert. The colour of the wood compliments the landscape and the multicoloured walls of the structure.

Lastly, Frank Lloyd Wright was a great believer that a house should always “ go with the natural climate”. (Twombly 310) This is the concluding manner in which nature informs Organic Architecture. This is a concept that Wright had been applying for an extended period of time and can be traces back the Prairie House. In Taliesin West he designed deep overhangs for the roof to create much needed shade in the long sunny days of the Arizona climate. He also had blinds made of the canvas which could be close the large arches leading to outside on overly sunny days.

These blinds ended up being replaced by actual glass windows to regulate the heat of the building. Another prime demonstration of this is again the used of the canvas roof. The lighting it gave to the rooms was a perfect complement to the intense Arizona sun. Wright often experimented with the arrangement of the canvas and the wood beams. The lighting of a space is very important for the atmosphere it creates. When the canvas roof became too much of an nuisance because it would leak a lot and was becoming expensive to replace every few ears, Wright experimented and made sure to

replace it with a material that would give the same glow to the space. He initially only replaced part of the canvas with glass, but eventually it was all substituted by glass (Smith). When using the word “ nature” in terms of his philosophy, Wright was somewhat less direct. He used the word in this sense to stand for the essence of a building and the “ working of the [organic] principle. ” Taliesin West applies to all the dimensions of his “ organic principles” and would therefore be Organic architecture. The characteristics he believed everything in nature had also applied to the Desert itself.

When speaking of this inspiring landscape he would say “[a]characteristic thing in the desert here is, of course, the desert itself” (Brierly 4) When Wright envisioned Taliesin West, it was his initial purpose to have an ever changing, organic structure. He would adjust it as needed as time passed. A former apprentice of the fellowship once pointed out that “ Thanks to [their] seasonal migrations ... Mr. Wright was able to view ... Taliesin West with a fresh eye each time he arrived at [it]. ” A demonstration of this is the rearranging of the wood beams and canvas to adjust the light.

Another dimension of this philosophy is the fact that everything in nature contains an essence. These essences are all active. Nothing possesses a static essence. They can be partially the same but will always be different as time passes. (Twombly 312) This is what happened in Taliesin West since its original plans “ were based on the life of the Fellowship” (Smith 89) and it now holds the same presence it did when it was originally built “ with the spirit of youth and exuberance of life” (Twombly 235) but has different

purposes and slightly different configuration. Exterior image of Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Arizona

Wright had an exceptional career and is recognised to be one of the most pivotal and influential architects of modern architecture in America. Through his upbringing close to nature and his eternal patriotism to America he had a clear vision to a country filled with culture - with this culture being reflected in its architecture. Wright was a man that believed the base of any culture is its architecture. Wright built structures with specific characteristics which made them uniquely themselves. Taliesin West had details that could ever only be found in it and nowhere else.

It has been made clear to me through the study of Wright's philosophy that the fact that a building would hold these specific details about itself that make it uniquely it, is the fundamental definition of what organic architecture. The essence built into the complex is the reasons it is and organic design. Taliesin West can be said to be " part of the desert on which it sits" (Smith 90) Bibliography Brierly, Cornelia. Desert life: Desert Foliage At Taliesin West. Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, 1988. inForm, Arch. Taliesin West. n. d. April 2012. Meehan, Patrick J. Truth Against the World: Frank Lloyd Wright speaks for an Organic Architecture.

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