

Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture style: a history



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How organic is Frank Lloyd Wright's Architecture?

Although Frank Lloyd Wright would be considered a practitioner that embraced much of what came to be known as modernism and the international style, itself a spare and functional movement, most of his work contains elements of the organic ^[1], tantalisingly original and un-definable which softens the edges and adds richness to what would be considered pure form and clean edge. This is in addition to a reasonably early self-declared 'organic architecture', the general principles of which he followed for the rest of his professional life. Lind notes that (for instance) the Prairie Style buildings are epitomes of Wrights 'organic' declarations of fundamental principles, which were practised between the years from 1900 to the beginning of World War One. She reiterates that his definitions changed through his life, commenting that a definition of organic architecture that he gave in 1952 was more appropriate to the Usonian houses than the earlier Prairie Style ones. She does also state that his fundamental principles were interpreted in a variety of ways, but that he never deviated from them. (Lind; 1992: 29-31). Nevertheless, the evolutionary journey that Frank Lloyd Wright pursued in his design and production of what stand as some of the western world's most recognised and notable buildings covers a foray into organic, from both an incorporation of his organic philosophy, from a motif point of view, as well as the deliberate inclusion of both elements of the environment such as stone and timber, to the manipulation of environment and building to create an organic mass that is essentially, ultimately building in the international or modernist style. His early work was positioned at a point where the international discourses in architecture were battling between the mass produced and the hand made, reactionary to the production lines of <https://assignbuster.com/frank-lloyd-wrights-architecture-style-a-history/>

the late nineteenth century Industrial Revolution. Throughout his life, Wright certainly saw himself as practising architecture using an organic basis, as he declared in a 1958 television interview:

‘ But “ organic architecture”, which is the architecture of nature, the architecture based upon principle and not upon precedent. Precedent is all very well so long as precedent is very well but who knows when it is very bad? Now that’s something to guard against in architecture- know when to leave your precedent and establish one.’(Meehan; 1984: 83-4). This was a declaration made in the late 1950’s that today sits in the context of a variety of many other architectural definitions of the philosophy. Indeed, the mere definition of the architectural applications of organic appears problematic ^[2] . Whether *his* declared philosophy had meaning in his buildings, and how his definition of ‘ organic’ relates to the buildings he completed is the comparative exercise. In approaching this, how this central philosophy, developed over the years, affected his approach to the buildings that he created, forms the core of my discussion when I consider specific examples. In addition, one cannot look at a central theme such as the quality of the organic in his architecture, without being able to appreciate the context in terms of materials available, the influence of the Boston Orientalists ^[3] , Japanese arts and architecture, and his attitude towards nature and its incorporation on a number of levels.

The philosophy

This stance that Wright held, where architectural precedent is mostly meaningless, and that the reality of the site determines the particulars of the

building to be constructed is mostly articulated in the series of interviews televised in 1958. Here, in a series on a Chicago network, two half hour programmes of ' Heritage' hosted by William MacDonald discussed the ' Philosophy of an architect' and ' Organic Architecture'.(Meehan; 1984: 75)

Wright is voluble about the manner in which ' modernism' and organic interface. Modern architecture, he declares, began as a striving to break down the box, a form characteristic of the ancient and traditional architectural paradigm. It is documented that originally his ideas regarding the modernist movement were derived from enthusiasm that later waned when he realised that the initial ideas of extension of the box did not necessarily have any greater impact on the environment. (Meehan; 1984: 59) ' Whereas the new idea was to eliminate the box and let everything that was in go outward and associate with its environment. So environment and interior and life itself become as one. Glass and steel and architecture became what we call " modern". Isn't it? So, to get the real idea of the thing we've got to use some word like " organic" -means integral, of the thing, now and preceding from the interior of it outward. And, so there is something exterior chosen and used for effect. Therein lies the essential difference between what we call " organic architecture" and what is carelessly called, for the lack of a better term, " modern architecture". (Meehan; 1984: 90)

With regard to his production of buildings where glass predominated, the material was regarded as a manner of connecting with the landscape, rather than a barrier or symbol of an ugly modernity. Elements that define contemporary architectures purporting to be modernist, such as simplicity were still very much part of Wright's ideal, with the paring down of the

complicated to provide surfaces that had a life of their own and could be embellished or otherwise.

He saw that an intrinsic connection with material and landscape was fundamental to the production of specific buildings and part of the responsibility of the architect. Giedion sees his work as being the sole definer of his philosophy, and that words cannot begin to express where he came from or what his intentions were (Giedion; 1959: 412) His comment to MacDonald, the interviewer on this occasion, regarding site was ' Well, it would seem from this that with this " organic"(architecture) choice of site would not only be extremely important but would, in part, in part at least, determine the form or forms of the building.' (Ibid; 90). Indeed, the value of the site was deemed so important that not only did clients require his input, but also the contribution of the building to the natural landscape would be such that were the building to disappear, the landscape would be poorer for it. (Ibid: 91) Throughout his life, Wright's attitude towards his ' organic' architecture was to evolve and mature, thus one finds definitions, which he was fond of publicly declaring, often slightly contradictory.

The Japanese influence

The organic nature of the Japanese architectural form, siting and decoration was, contentiously, an integral part of the shaping of Wright's ideas and designs. Tallmadge, (in Nute; 2000: 3) ^[4] commented in 1927 that Wright had derived ' that intimate liaison between art and nature which makes his work sink into and be lost in the embrace of rock and shrub and tree.' This was supported by Behrendt who declares the connection between the Japanese houses that are ' fitted into the landscape that the building almost

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imperceptibly blends with nature, the same tendency towards an organic structure' (Ibid; 4)

Early on in his long career, connections with the Japanese culture were made, and these possibly had one of the most enduring philosophical contributions to his outlook. Initially, the prevalent culture of 'Japonaiserie'^[5] that developed out of the Exposition of 1851, and supported by the Arts and Crafts and Ruskin in Europe, trickled through to America^[6]. Manson sees initial introduction to the Japanese being at the point of preparations for the Chicago Fair of 1893, where Wright was busy with the Transportation Building for Adler and Sullivan. Part of the exposition, a Japanese Imperial Government display of a Fujiwara Period Temple and its associated decoration and furnishings, 'constituted the first wholesale introduction to the Middle West of Japanese Art and architecture. For Wright, the Japanese exhibit was the confirmation of a dawning curiosity.' (Manson; 1984: 34) Lind describes this building as 'Known as the Ho-Ho-Den, its fluid spaces were covered by a broad, sheltering roof with generous overhanging eaves. Light poured in from all sides. The walls moved. Opening up spaces, releasing the box.' (Lind; 1992: 27) Manson goes on further to note that 'It must be conceded that there is an affinity between Wright's concept of architecture, as it was to develop, and the art of old Japan. Whether this affinity amounts to actual indebtedness is a moot point and one which Wright has always hotly debated.' (Manson; 1984: 35)^[7]

'Whilst working on the *Unity Temple* (1905) in Oak Park, Illinois, connections with the Japanese Ambassador resulted in his being sent 'The Book of Tea'

by Lao-Tse, which articulated concepts that he had been considering for a while, particularly on this project. The principle of his statement derived from Lao-Tse's 'the reality of a building is neither the walls nor the roof but the space within' assisted him in defining the planning of the Unity Temple in such a manner that this could be achieved. Frustrations where he suggested that this relationship between the interiors and the life that was led in them had not existed for the last five centuries was partly solved. (Meehan; 1984: 77). Further connections were established when a decade later he visited Japan on commission to build what was to become the *Imperial Hotel*, (Tokyo) constructed by the Mikado for his visitors. This had the secret ingredient of steel that could be used in tensile situations, and responding to the high earthquake environment, became lauded as it stood throughout the great earthquake in 1923. (Meehan; 1984: 15)

The incorporation of the organic

The impact of Owen Jones' book, a seminal Victorian work in the collection and typical compartmentalisation of exotic detail, '*The Grammar of Ornament*'^[8] is seen by Manson to have possibly been an early influence, as whilst he was working with Silsbee, he is known to have made a hundred tracings of ornament from Jones' book. (Manson; 1984: 21). However, gaining inspiration from the direct forces of nature as an influence in his work was instilled at an early stage, whilst still working for Sullivan.

His need to have a direct involvement with the tactile and textural natural environment is mentioned by his son in the following passage;

' One Sunday morning he had on the table beside him a group of shells, conchs, turbans, clams, pectens, cowries, murexes and volutes. He pointed to the shells and told us to observe how this one germ of an idea for housing a creature in the ocean could take so many shapes. He noted the intricate fluting and sculptured patterns on different shells, the wide range of colours and designs, and how no two shells of even the same substance were identical.' (Eric Lloyd Wright in Dunham; 1994) This analogy was continued by Wright into the discussion of an oak tree and its manifest units. ' Nature will show you the way to build.' (Dunham; 1994: 8-9) Dunham notes himself that ' Nature played a major role in the designs of Wright's buildings: the nature of the client, the society, the geographical location, the materials and the ability of the workmen.' (Ibid: 16). McCarter reinforces this need for experimentation with form and material by saying that ' He would stop work each day in the studio, sending his draughtsmen out into the nearby fields to collect wildflowers, which he would then arrange..' (McCarter; 1997: 66). *Ikebana* , the Japanese art of flower arranging was usually the result and was situated for comment or criticism in his studio. His continual flirtation with the elements of Japanese architecture, in definition much connected with the landscape, natural materials and a spiritual philosophy again reinforces this incorporation of the organic elements of nature.

Materials

A short discussion of materials is important at this point as not only were the indigenous materials of a region intrinsic to the aesthetics and feeling of a building, but the possibility of new material stretched boundaries which made much of his work possible, and further enabled the possibilities of the

organic materials that were used. Importantly, as in the *Imperial Hotel* (Tokyo, 1905), the use of structural steel that had strength in tension meant that the structure could be reinforced, and yet match the landscape that it inhabited. Another example is the development of pre-cast concrete products, which made elaboration and decoration of internal and external surfaces more possible, thus intensifying the levels of detail and organic expression of, particularly, his houses built in the 1920's. (Fleming et al; 1980: 351) Also, the raking organic form of the *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum* (New York, 1960) could not have easily been achieved without the use of modern materials in particular, structural steel and concrete. (Ibid: 352)

More importantly, it was Wright's attitude towards the material that was to prove so important in his philosophy. His insistence that the tactile qualities of the material have to be ascertained through handling and use is often quoted. '.. a man can't do much in architecture unless he gets his hands into the mud of which the bricks are made.' (Meehan; 1984: 105) But, the intrinsic life of the materials is what makes them and determines their positioning in the building and the landscape. ' We are learning now that materials themselves all live- that stone has character, that brick has character, wood character; that they all have characteristics that may become alive in the hands of the imaginative artist through sympathetic interpretation in design,' (Wright in Meehan; 1984: 60)

The early years

Manson suggests that much of what happened in Frank Lloyd Wright's early life and the upbringing that he had influenced the singularly independent

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character that he became both as a person, and as an architect. (Manson; 1984: 1-2) A strongly defined Welsh ancestry, together with a father that initially was forceful and ' With a certain ferocity he had taught young Frank, by the age of seven, to play Bach upon the piano.' (Ibid; 2) His father later deserted the family, leaving his mother, a ' very integrated and resolute person whose character is intimately bound up with the development of her son' (Ibid: 3) in care of Frank and his siblings.

His early professional years are seen as being up until 1910 (Manson; 1984) just after he left to work in Germany for a short period in what Larkin called his ' Exodus and New Era'(Larkin; 1993: 105). These included an initial apprenticeship under Silsbee, then a significant and influential period with Louis Sullivan, who was to guide his early ideas to a large degree.

Frank Lloyd Wright's association with Sullivan from 1888 ^[9] situated him in an office environment that fed much off the contemporary architectural environment, and in the words of Wright, were considered radical and ' the only ' moderns' of the time.' (Meehan; 1984 : 12) Sullivan took the idea of the high rise building to unprecedented limits and could only have encouraged the idea as to the limitlessness of boundaries in his student. Not only was he responsible for this physical and material influence, as Sullivan was emphatic about the connections between mankind and the cosmos, and the need for a building to be intimately connected with its natural environment. (Menocal; 1981: 3)

Frank Lloyd Wrights home and studio (Oak Park, Illinois, 1899-1909) can be considered the epitome of this early period ^[10] , Wright moved his office into

his home in Oak Park in 1897 and was to be his operating base until 1909. This house was purpose built for him and his family, and itself existed as an organic structure, being continually altered and added to throughout the course of the family living in it. A geometric basis provided the form of the building, which, contrary to his later work, was roofed with a steep pitch. McCarter asserts that much of the interior spaces are reminiscent of the Japanese approach and that it is highly probable that the influence was available at this period through publications and that Wright used the constant remodelling of his house as a basis for experimentation of ideas which would be later implemented or not, if that was the case. The important elements of this building are the use of light and space, and the use of materials such as brick and dark timber shingles. The house as a space for experimentation during the development of his ideas and philosophies is notable, and its own organic nature and evolution can be considered a justifiable example of the level of abstractness to which the term 'organic' can be interpreted.

The Prairie House (1899 – 1910)

The Prairie house, a basically cruciform or windmill plan shape, was initially seen as being a building that was specifically appropriate for the 'American suburban home, a type of house characterised by a degree of both spatial freedom and formal order previously unknown in either the Old or New World.' (McCarter; 1997: 43) The connection with the early American house has reference in the centralised position of the hearth or fireplace, whether it forms the junction of the cross or the centre of the pinwheel/ windmill. This was recognised by Wright as being able to access natural light from three

sources (Giedeon; 1959: 399) The initial publicity for the Prairie house as a style came in the form of publication not in an architectural magazine, but in the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1901. His recognition that the design needed to appeal directly to the functional user was paramount in its success as a plan and suburban housing type.

The contact between landscape and building is epitomised in the quotation from Mumford, who writes that ' Mr Wright's designs are the very products of the prairie, in their low-lying, horizontal lines, in their flat roofs, while at the same time they defy the neutral gray or black or red of the engineering structures by their colour and ornament.' (Mumford; 1955: 182). Frank Lloyd Wright, as a son of the prairies, was driven by his response to the landscapes, the long low and flat and the simplicity of the space. This reduced the rooflines, where the building was seen ' primarily not as a cave but as broad shelter in the open, related to vista; vista without and vista within.' (Wright in Larkin; 1993: 36) his destruction of the box meant that rooms were interlinked and flows between them were largely uninterrupted.

In the *Dana-Thomas House* , (Springfield, Illinois; 1902) the directly organic is particularly evident in this house, where not only is a rich and abstracted display of the sumac plant embossing glazed plaster panels that cover the house, (Lind; 1992: 27) but the interior displays include butterflies, ferns, leaves and stalks.(Larkin; 1993: 46) the flows between the majestic spaces are largely uninterrupted, both horizontally and vertically- it was the first of Wright's buildings to have a double volume living room, yet the massiveness of this structure is broken down by the manipulation of the external walls. The treatment of surface also owed much to the imposition of an organic

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ideal, where walls were scumbled to create a dappled effect, the timberwork was rich and prolific, and in this case, the surfaces were embossed with ornament. The decorative influence is from the outside prairie environment; Scrub bush, cacti, and the yellow coloured stone (Knight; 2001: 42). In addition, it is important to note that the Dana house has elements of the Japanese influence in its upturned eaves, reminiscent of pagoda type temples (McCarter; 1997: 47)

The Robie House (Chicago, 1908) is considered by Lind to be an excellent example of Wright's 'Organic' architecture ideal, (Lind; 1992: 28) This is largely in its response to the environment is perfected to the extent that the cantilevered overhangs are placed to restrict light in summer and to maximise sunlight in the colder months. (Knight; 2001: 74) but also in its manipulation of material with glass and steel and concrete, creating the soaring cantilevered overhangs and at the same time bands of floating light, contracting with the warmth of the brickwork that characterises most of the exterior of the house. His use of material here is notable- the bricks used were long and thin, and the pointing used to create effect. The perpend were pointed in a brick coloured mortar that was flush pointed, whereas the horizontal coursing was expressed by deeply raked pointing in a white mortar bed (McCarter; 1997: 95) Flowing spaces abound, but, at the same time, elements are used to separate function such as the fireplace between the living and the dining room. The unexpected placing of the walls and the fragmentation of expected mass, together with the long low walls and punched out openings brought about much debate at the time of its construction (Giedion; 1959: 408). Yet again, material, space and

environment combine to create a building disregarding its precedent and standing alone in its own landscape.

The Usonian Period (1932 – 1942)

This period, a term coined by Wright from the author Samuel Butler ^[11], embraces the notions that define America as a country, such as unity, freedom, and unity of all. (Meehan: 1984: 96-7) The term eventually gained connotations of freedom and unity, particularly in the means of uniting the inside and outside spaces in buildings; integrations of interior and exterior landscapes. The changed architectural environment that existed as a result of many different socio- economic factors meant that the approach towards planning, forms and materials had to reflect the new order. In addition, pressure on the cities as suburbs rapidly spread as a result of the ever more affordable motor car meant that a total rethink in social housing became applicable, thus projects such as *Broadacre City* (1934), a proposed series of isolated tower blocks connected by roads where the Organic principle brought the functioning elements of the city into a defined space in a country setting.

One of the most enigmatic of the houses from this period is *Falling Water, the Edgar Kaufmann House*, (Mill Run, Pennsylvania) built in 1935. Not only is the building in complete and active harmony with its landscape, but its form incorporates those materials from which it arises, stone, timber, glass. The site especially spoke to Wright, and rather than having the waterfall as something that should be looked at, the situation of the house directly over the waterfall means that it becomes an active part of its site ^[12]. The form of the house is not monolithic, but moves both vertically and horizontally on <https://assignbuster.com/frank-lloyd-wrights-architecture-style-a-history/>

the site, creating its own set of ledges and alcoves. The vertical planes of stone and glass and the horizontal planes of concrete create juxtaposition as well as a dynamic that is in keeping with the continuity of the stream below it. Open planes that lead straight out into the environment Larkin sees as a participative exercise; one cannot appreciate directly the cascades below the house unless one moves out onto the horizontal and planar terraces to explore further. Also, he notes of the synergy between the horizontal and planar surfaces, reflecting the huge slabs of rock that lay in the river below, that ' Although this is pure conjecture, it was not unlike Wright to read quickly the conditions of a building site and to let its most salient features, even accidental ones, inspire his design.' (Larkin; 1993: 155) Rock from the landscape was directly incorporated, down to the hearthstone that was previously a bathing rock for the Kaufmann family. The manner in which the fieldstone was laid was carefully detailed, and a variation introducing a softer edge in the rounding of the parapet walls acted as the progenitor to other buildings, both domestic and industrial in the future (Ibid: 157) Wrights embracing of the new materials of steel and concrete, much loved by the Modernists in their boxlike applications, had an early application in the cantilevered slabs that are described as ' nothing short of daring' (Ibid: 161). However daring the structural applications of this house, its setting and synergy with its landscape are the elements that endure, creating an organic mass which would leave the landscape poorer were it to be removed.

More problematic displays of the organic in buildings are naturally going to be found in the industrial and public applications. An industrial building from this period that highlights the Usonian notion as well as a need to

incorporate the outside without diminishing the practicality of the box is the *S. C Johnson and Sons Administration* building (Racine, Wisconsin; 1936) . First impressions of the interior are of ‘ mushroom-shaped dendriform columns’ floating in a sea of light. (Larkin; 1993: 179) Like *Falling Water*, it pushed the boundaries of materials, in this case, cold drawn steel mesh columns that were designed in an unusual manner and continually given organic metaphorical comparisons, and extruded glass. Wright commented on the socio- architectural applications of this building by saying that ‘ Organic architecture designed this building to be as inspiring a place to work in as any cathedral ever was in which to worship.’ (Larkin; 1993: 181) A later, and more immediately recognisable laboratory extension to the factory had as its design rationale a central core with the various levels cantilevering from a central core, embedding the notions of space and boundless freedom in line with the Usonian tradition. Wright saw this as a successful example of his organic principles in that it responded to the nature of the materials, and its relationship with the landscape and its extension into the landscape between inside and outside using the mechanism of glass. (Meehan; 1984: 86)

The later years (1943 – 1959)

This period is important as the buildings here reflect, in many cases, a culmination of his life works, ideals, and approaches. In addition, it marks the period in which his output was most prolific, and the maturity of his ideas could be expressed without fear of lifelong ridicule, although projects such as the *Solomon R Guggenheim Museum* were not without acerbic criticism and opposition. *Taliesin West* (Scottsdale, Arizona, 1937-1959) is in many senses

a seminal example, as not only was it built over the last decades of his life, but it was a house that he inhabited and a space from which he taught. Frank Lloyd Wright described his approach as being derived from the site-space, colour, texture, which were extant landscape forms. Ogilvanna, his third wife, remarks that the buildings look excavated from rather than constructed on the landscape (Wright; 1970: 104) Local materials ^[13] were incorporated in a variety of ways, desert rock was combined with cement in a rough off shutter reminiscent of the unplanned landscape. Redwood and canvas provided the bulk of the other materials, harmonising with the colours and the textures of the landscape. Ogilvanna comments on the harmony with landscape, supporting the deconstruction of the box in terms of Wright's Organic Philosophy, that ' The sense of space permeates Taliesin West so breathtakingly that the buildings, the desert and mountains become fused, the walls vanish and at times the camp looks like a mirage in the desert appearing and disappearing in a shimmering, ethereal light. (Wright; 1970: 106). Also, the means that Wright demanded for appropriate engagement with the natural environment was emphasised here in the manner in which the students in his programme were made to physically react with the desert, climate and materials. In addition to the means by which the apprentices were trained, they were also a large part of the building force that constructed Taliesin West. (Larkin; 1993: 302). Thus the levels to which this building reflects any definition of the organic exist strongly in its visual and structural relationship to and with the landscape, the materials that it incorporates in the structure, the means by which its apprentices are drilled in the art of organic construction, the incorporation of water and pools and sound and light and texture.

From a non-domestic point of view, it is important to look at a public building in order to see how the elements of the organic were incorporated. Perhaps one of Wright's best known buildings, the highly contentious *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum* (New York City; 1943-1959), is a good example, as not only is its mere form derived from, perhaps, some of his sketch drawings, but the manner in which it opens horizons for the continual display of art works fits in with his approach towards his organic philosophy. Indeed, Larkin notes that this building represents a culmination of all his ideals regarding his 'organic architecture' and was the fore-runner in the means in which steel and concrete would be used in the balance of the twentieth century. (Larkin; 1993: 202) It is also testimony to his pushing the boundaries with regards to the innate abilities of the new materials. Wright himself stated that 'The whole building, cast in concrete, is more like an eggshell- in form a great simplicity- rather than like a criss-cross structure. The light concrete flesh is rendered strong enough everywhere to do its work by embedded filaments of steel either separate or in mesh. The structural calculations are thus those of the cantilever and continuity rather than the post and beam.' (Wright; 1970: 167) Descriptions by Wright's wife upon the initial visit are permeated with organic references, such as 'mother-of-pearl' 'a cloud of delicate blue-grey light' the ramp being likened to a 'swan's curved neck' (Wright; 1970: 164) the spiral culminating in a delicate ribbed oculus window that casts a suffused light below sufficient to view the art works on display. This example as a culmination of his life's work, and one that continued to uphold all his precepts of organic architecture also proves the permeability of the boundary that would appear to exist between

the organic architecture of today and the modernist paradigm in which he was often forced to work.

Conclusion

That the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright cannot exist in an environment devoid of connections with the organic is impossible. Not only did he have a strong idea as to what he considered organic himself, based on a few simple but strong guiding principles, largely where the building is accountable to itself and its site and its integrity is a large part of this combination, but also the incorporation of the directly organic at multiple levels from material to ornamentation displays this. His early tracings of Owens book on ornament, his lifelong flirtation with the elements of Japanese art and architecture, his collection of Japanese prints and woodcuts, all contributed in a manner in the production of such building and landscape related projects as *Taliesin West* and *Falling Water*. The relationship between the building and the site, the building and the landscape, the spare yet engaging spaces, the enrichm