FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT - TOWARDS A MATURITY OF STYLE (1887-1893)

by H. Allen Brooks

This discussion on Frank Lloyd Wright will cover only the six-year period between 1887 when he created his earliest known architectural design and 1893 when he launched into private practice by designing the rightfully famous Winslow House at River Forest, Illinois. I do not propose to examine these few years between Wright's twentieth and twenty-sixth year in any great detail but rather to concentrate on his process of self-education which, among other things, included the synthesizing of specific aspects of contemporary American architecture. It is remarkable to note, even at this early date, how he transformed received inspiration into something ever more characteristic of his post-1900 maturity.

Wright was born in 1867 at Richland Center, Wisconsin, and, except for one important interlude in Massachusetts, remained in the American Middle West where his Welsh grand-parents, the Lloyd-Jones, had immigrated in the 1840s and first cleared the land. As a teenager, by then living at Madison, Wisconsin, the young Wright spent summers working on his uncle's farm at Spring Green some 30 miles away. These experiences, vividly recorded in his *An Autobiography*, developed in him a love and respect for natural things — whether earth-given materials, the structural principles implicit therein, or the visual satisfaction derived from these forms. Such lessons remained with him for life.

His entry into the study of architecture, a profession that his mother had long since decided he should follow, was precipitated early in 1885 by his parents' divorce. To help support mother and younger sisters he left secondary school and obtained employ with a local engineer-architect who was also Dean of Engineering at the university where Wright subsequently registered as a part-time student and attended a few courses, including descriptive geometry and mechanical drawing. These amounted to less than an academic year of training.

1886 was the final summer for Wright in Wisconsin, and it was also the moment when Joseph Lyman Silsbee, a Chicago architect, was commissioned by Jenkin Lloyd-Jones to construct a small Unitarian chapel at the location of his brothers' farms. Architecturally this was an important experience for Wright; symbolically appropriate also — because it is beside this chapel that Wright was laid to rest in 1959. By then the chapel had become an integral part of the large domain surrounding Taliesin, Wright's home for nearly half a century.

Although not pretentious in terms of size or design, the chapel is a fine little building wherein one sees much of the basic grammar to be found in Wright's later work (fig. 1). Notice the way Silsbee has horizontally unified various elements of the design. A forward-set water table provides a solid base (the same kind of thing found in H.H. Richardson's work somewhat earlier) but, although it is slightly shrouded by bushes, one can see that the masonry foundation actually comes up to the height of the window sills. Also notice the strong, unbroken horizontal of each material and how the windows relate precisely to these various horizontal bands. There is no spatial gap between the water table which doubles as the sill for the windows, nor is there a spatial gap between the tops of the windows and the soffit on the underside of the roof. The elements have been reduced to an absolute minimum and horizontal lines are allowed to run continuously, all of which we associate with Wright's mature work, yet which we find so different from Norman Shaw's work in England during this same decade or even earlier. You don't find here that rich variety of materials that Shaw and his contemporaries were seeking, what with their intention to introduce many different textures and colours — and a good deal of visual agitation — into the architectural form.

The Shingle Style architects, as we shall see with Wright, were searching for something quite different. They wanted calm and repose rather than agitation, a solution that would reduce the elements to the smallest number rather than the greatest. If you read Wright's writings, such as *An Autobiography* or *The Future of Architecture*, you constantly come across this word 'repose'. Many of the factors that help create this repose are already suggested in this work by Silsbee: the wall surface is the same material as the roof; only one wood material and one masonry material are used. Thus the number of materials is held to a minimum and horizontality is stressed throughout.

Wright actually made a sketch of the Silsbee chapel, signing it as delineator, which further confirms his interest in, and knowledge of, this work.

Next we turn to the earliest known architectural project by Frank Lloyd Wright which was, in fact, a small Unitarian chapel apparently intended for Sioux City, Iowa, and published in 1887 (fig. 2). Here many of the Silsbee elements are repeated, such as the basic plan, the high masonry water table carried up to the window sills, lintels flush with the soffit, and so on. Yet this

Wright design lacks the unity that existed in the Silsbee chapel due primarily to the greater variety of roof forms, the variations in how materials were cut and treated, and the localized bits of ornament. This design is closer to the English Queen Anne tradition, what with its greater picturesqueness, than is the Silsbee chapel that Wright had used as his point of departure.

In this, Wright's first architectural exercise, he produced something less strong and positive than his source. Henceforth, however, he would add something new, and very much his own, to what he studied. But before pursuing this matter I wish to say more about the tradition of American domestic architecture which he encountered, this offshoot of the Queen Anne that Vincent Scully has named the Shingle Style. As an example I illustrate the Bell House, Newport, Rhode Island, of 1882, which is an early design by the firm of McKim, Mead & White whose work, as we shall see, was known to Wright.

Although the interior of the Bell House lacks the unity of the firm's later work or, for that matter, of Silsbee's chapel, it is the plan that I wish to focus on here. After all, Wright's greatest contribution to architecture was in the realm of interior space, and we shall see how, from the outset, this problem attracted his attention. The plan of the Bell House may be used to illustrate a typical Shingle Style, or Queen Anne, arrangement (fig. 3). The fact that the house was intended only for summer occupancy eliminated any concern over retaining heat — on the contrary, the need was for openness to allow cooling sea breezes to pass through. Thus the plan is even more open than otherwise would be the case. Note the generous openings, often with sliding doors set within or on the walls, and the large entrance hall with its fireplace and major staircase for promenading where one can be seen and observed. Yet what I wish to establish here is the difference between this characteristic McKim, Mead & White plan and Wright's later plans — a difference that can best be described in terms of baroque space, and the implicit movement which such space implies.

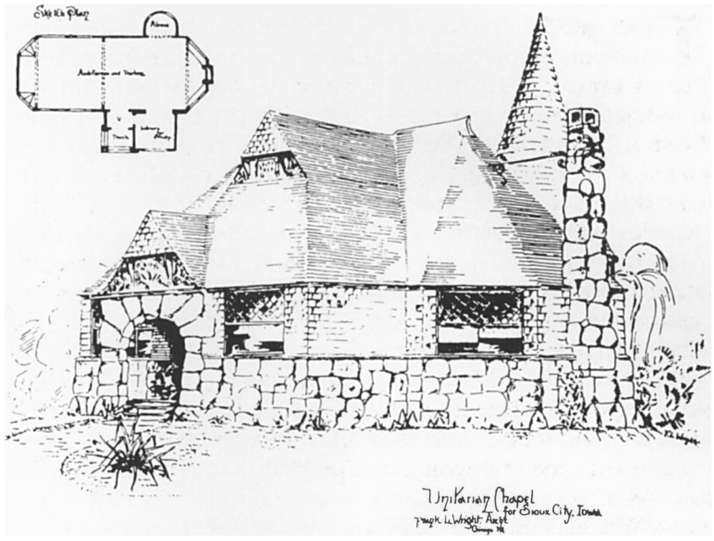
Baroque space is organized along an axis; it goes from point A to point B with a focal point at the end (B). Both visual and physical movement through this space is resolved; there is no ambiguity. What I am about to say is that Wright was really a superb baroque architect. No 17th century Italian architect could surpass him in this respect.

In the Bell House there is seldom a resolution to the space — seldom an axis with a focal point. You enter through the front door, yet opposite you the door into the dining room doesn't quite line up — and the dining room fireplace is also out of line. Of all the possible axes within the house only one lines up, and that is between the fireplaces in the reception and drawing rooms. I don't wish to imply that the plan is deficient for this reason, rather that McKim, Mead & White were not concerned with this problem — they had other goals, as did the various Shingle Style architects of that time.

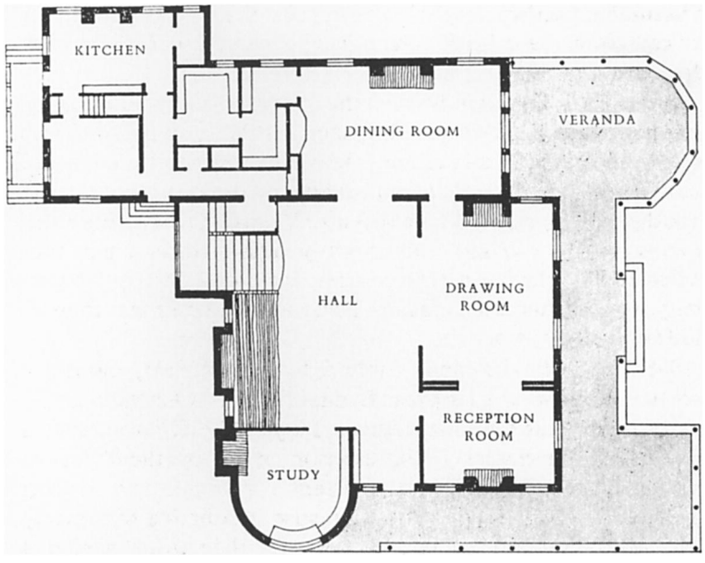
One can almost make the Bell plan into a Wright plan by strengthening and resolving the axes, by lining up apertures and placing the fireplaces in line, and also by emphasizing the cruciform aspects as well. Such adjusting, as we shall see, is precisely the thing that Wright did do to McKim, Mead & White's plans.

Two other plans by that firm are illustrated here: the Appleton House, Lenox, Massachusetts, 1884, and the Cowdin House, Far Rockaway, New Jersey, 1885 (figs. 4, 5). I wish to compare them with Wright's project for the Cooper House, never built (fig. 6). This plan, which includes an elevation of the proposed barn at the top, has completely eluded the historian; it has not been published

1. Joseph Lyman Silsbee: Unity Chapel, Helena Valley, Spring Green, Wisconsin, 1886 (photograph by H.A. Brooks)



2. Frank Lloyd Wright: Project for Unitarian Chapel, Sioux City, Iowa, 1887 (Hitchcock, In the Nature of Materials*)*



3. McKim, Mead & White: Isaac Bell House, Newport, Rhode Island, 1882, plan (Hitchcock, Architecture 19th and 20th Centuries*)*

since 1900 when Robert C. Spencer, Jr. used it, along with nearly 80 other postage stamp-sized illustrations, in his early article on 'The Work of Frank Lloyd Wright'. It is through this 82-year-old source that I 'discovered' it. Its date is unknown but I would place it about 1887 or very shortly thereafter.

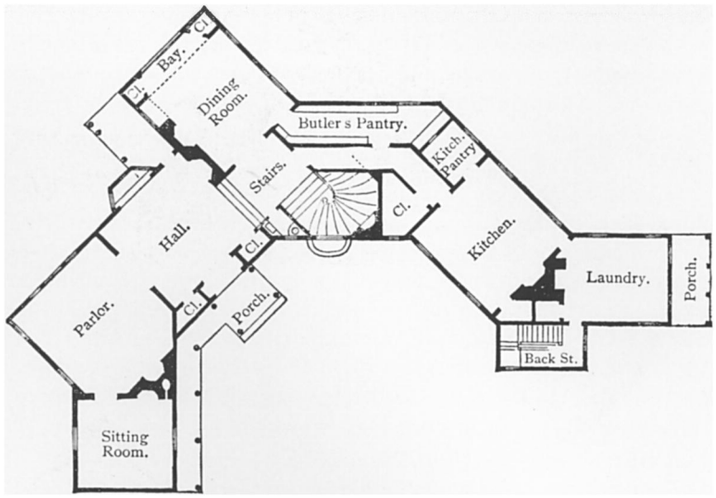
A brief look at these three plans should reveal the points that I intend to make. First of all, the Wright plan has so many similarities with these very unusual McKim, Mead & White plans as to make Wright's knowledge of these plans seem evident. A musicologist would call this a 'variation on a theme by...'. After all, the Wright building has the same profile as the McKim, Mead & White plans, and the positioning of specific rooms is almost invariably similar. Wright has used these two plans, not to copy them, but as an exercise in spatial organization. It is not a typical rectangular (box-like) plan that he has chosen as his point of departure, but rather plans that destroyed the box with their far-flung projections. This is significant.

What the 20-year-old Wright has brought to this spatial organization is nothing short of miraculous. With absolute confidence and control over his art he has transformed the McKim, Mead & White plans into a completely resolved baroque space. The entire interior, except for private areas such as service and bedroom, has been organized along axes, and each axis has a terminal focal point at either end. Upon entering the front door one sees directly on axis the hall fireplace, which is the principal focal point within the house. It is also of great symbolic importance. The other two main axes of the house, one through the family sitting room and the other through the library and music room, also focus upon this same hearth. Their opposite terminals are, respectively, a fireplace and a light source (the library window). Light is always skilfully used by Wright. And note how each opening between the rooms is centred precisely on axis. The dotted lines on the plan refer, of course, to the ridge and eaves of the hipped roof overhead, yet we may visualize them as axis lines of the interior space. Even the dining room is on (a 45°) axis with the entrance, its window being the focal point in the opposite direction.

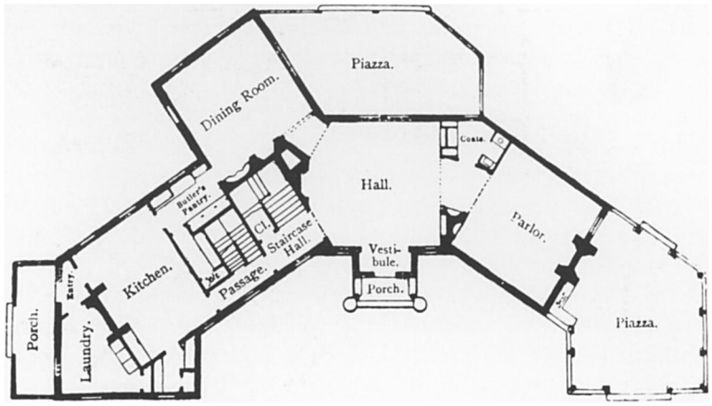
This visual (with its option of physical) movement through space remained a basic characteristic of Wright's architecture throughout his career, so it is fascinating to observe how intuitively he came upon the idea so early on in life. Also note how he turned the plan away from the main street, which is to the right, thus foreshadowing another characteristic of his mature work.

While marvelling at what Wright has brought to, and rejected from, a McKim, Mead & White scheme, we should also comment upon what Wright ultimately rejected from his own Cooper plan. Simply stated, it was its complexity. Never again was he to combine right angles, 45°-angles, octagons, circles, and semi-circles in a single plan. In fact, the use of each of these geometric forms came to characterize different periods in his long career. The right-angle we associate with the prairie years, the 45°-angle with projects from the 20s and their progeny, the octagon (and hexagon) with the 30s (Hanna House) and 40s, circles with the Guggenheim Museum, and arcs of circles with houses like the second Jacobs House or the Llewellyn Wright House of 1953. Just as Wright restrained himself from using too great a variety of materials, so too did he limit his use of geometric shapes.

Although this Cooper House drawing has already given us tremendous insights into Wright, his interests, and his manner of synthesizing, it also has other revelations to disclose. Observe the barn elevation at the top of the Cooper plan (fig. 6). Compare it (when reversed) with H.H. Richardson's Ames Gate Lodge at North Easton, Massachusetts, from the early 1880s (fig. 7). Here, even more directly than with McKim, Mead & White or Silsbee,

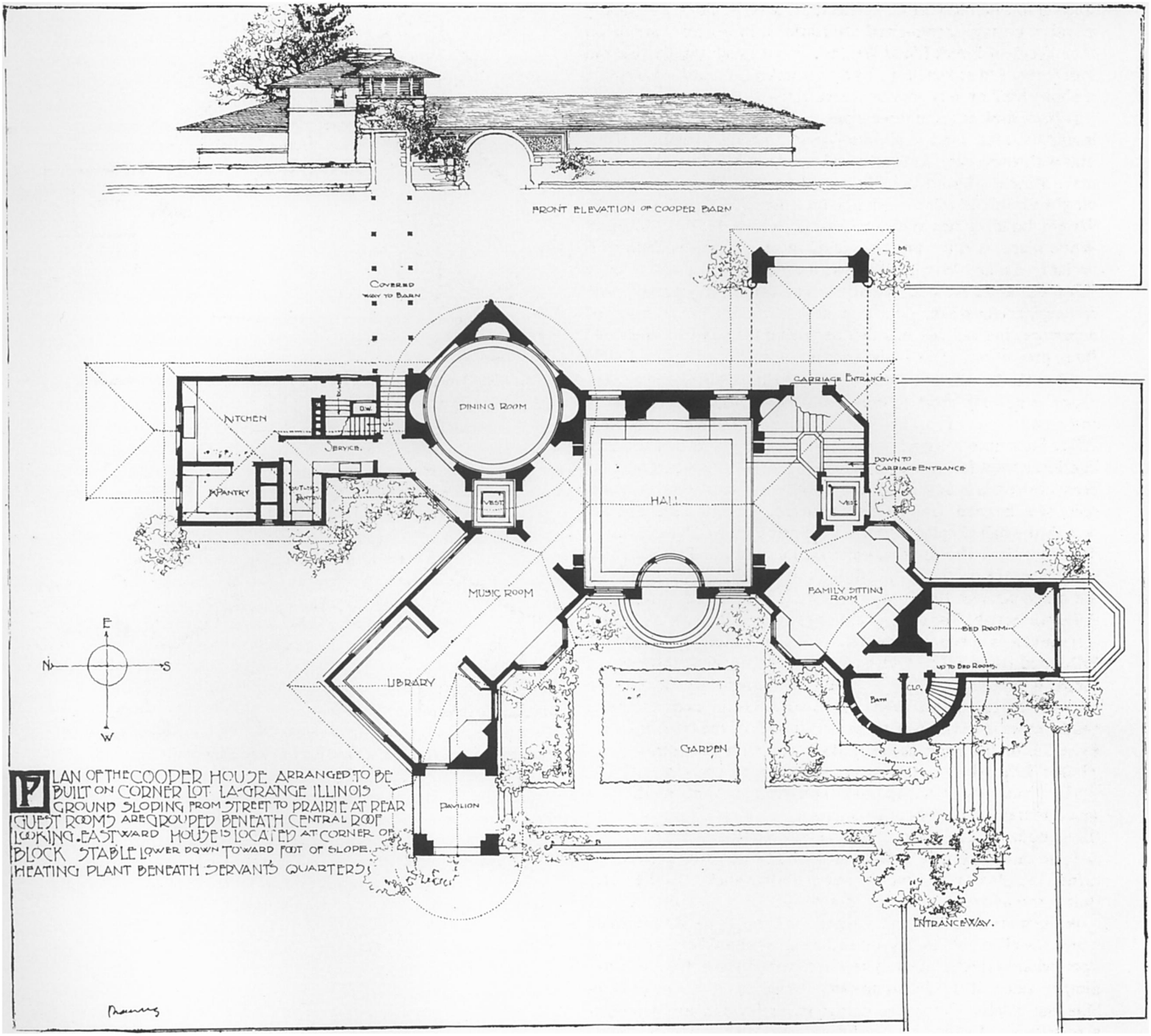


4. McKim, Mead & White: Appleton House, Lenox, Massachusetts, 1883-84, plan (Scully, The Shingle Style*)*

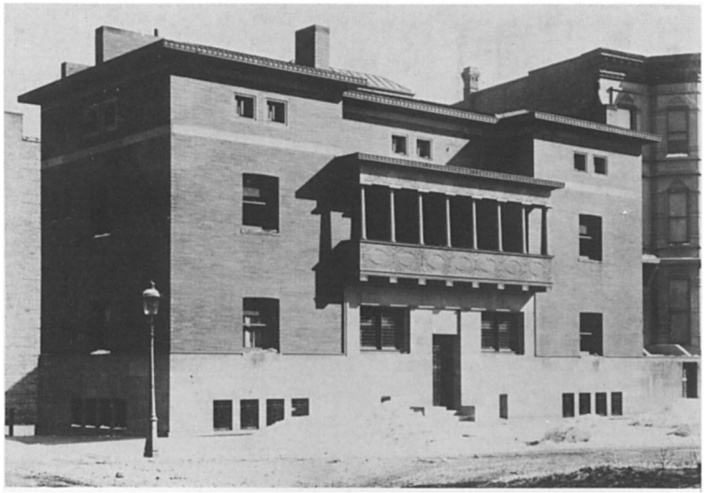


5. McKim, Mead & White: Cowdin House, Far Rockaway, Long Island, New York, c.1885, plan (Scully, The Shingle Style*)*

7. H.H. Richardson: Ames Gate Lodge, North Easton, Massachusetts, 1880-81 (Scully, The Shingle Style*)*



6. Frank Lloyd Wright: Project for Cooper House, La Grange, Illinois, c.1887-88, plan and elevation of barn (Courtesy of The Frank Lloyd Wright Memorial Foundation)



8. Frank Lloyd Wright: James Charnley House, Chicago, Illinois, 1891 (Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago)

9. Adler & Sullivan: Wainwright Building, St Louis, 1890-91 (Hitchcock, Architecture 19th and 20th Centuries*)*

Wright is restating Richardson's favourite theme, a theme familiar to us from so many of his libraries. Is it any wonder that in the family photograph album at the back of *An Autobiography* (1932) Wright included a photo of a man who was neither a relative nor a person that he had ever met — Henry Hobson Richardson! This is a measure of the degree of his respect.

The favourite Richardson theme is that of combining a long, low, horizontal mass, punctuated by a large arched opening, with a circular (stair) tower set against a transverse gable. Richardson constantly adjusted and played with these four elements in his designs, and Wright has all but matched Richardson at his own game. Even a few boulders are thrown in at the base of the arch as if in homage to the master.

Therefore this one fragmentary little plan of the Cooper House, about which we know nothing concerning the commission, reveals a great deal about the working of Wright's mind, and the process by which he sought to obtain an education.

In the early spring of 1887 Wright left Wisconsin in order to seek employment and training in Chicago. It is usually assumed that pure coincidence landed him a job with Silsbee, yet from what we now know I see his choice as no surprise. After all, he was already a great admirer of Silsbee's work. But after something over five months he left Silsbee for the office of Adler & Sullivan where he was to remain until entering private practice in 1893.

Adler & Sullivan were architects of commercial buildings, whereas Wright was more interested in the problem of the single family home. Therefore when the firm felt obliged to undertake a residential commission the task of design was usually allocated to Wright. A case in point is the James Charnley residence in Chicago, the family being close friends of Sullivan's, and Wright (albeit under the name of Adler & Sullivan) had already designed neighbouring vacation homes for both Sullivan and Charnley at Ocean Springs. Yet some months before Wright undertook the Charnley's city residence, as Henry-Russell Hitchcock has already pointed out, Sullivan designed the Wainwright Building at St Louis, and Wright obviously tried to apply the same intellectual process to his Charnley House design. *An Autobiography* records how impressed he was with Sullivan's solution to the Wainwright design — how one day Sullivan walked into the office, rolled out paper on Wright's desk, and before his very eyes created the epoch-making solution to the tall office building — which remains basic to our design arsenal even to this day.

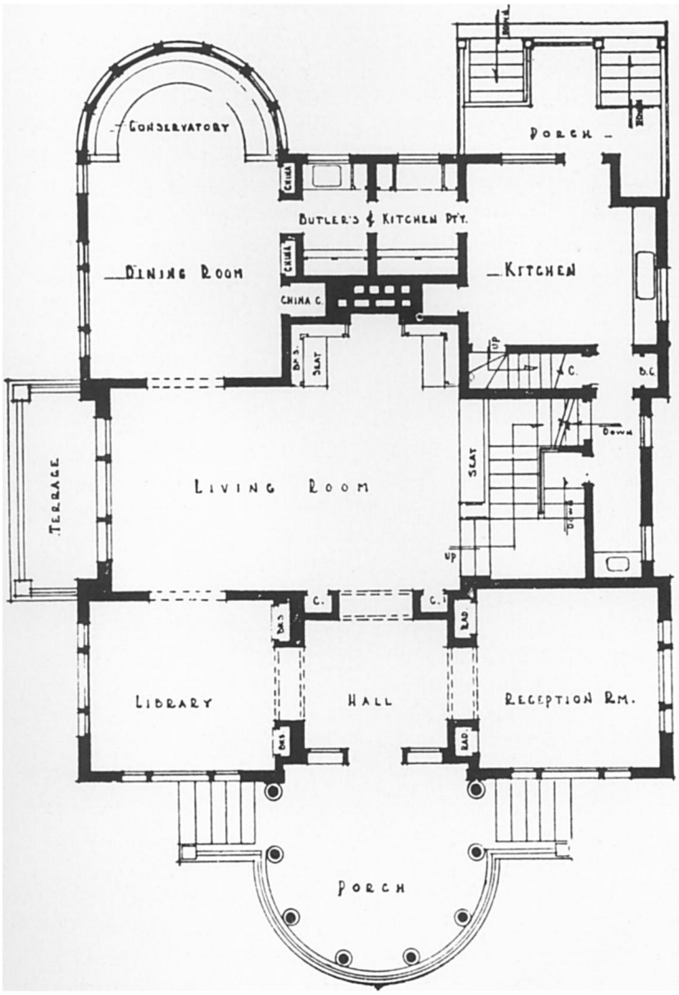
Thus what Wright took from Sullivan was an idea, an intellectual approach to a problem. The Wainwright Building and Charnley House don't look alike, yet the same thought process was applied to each (figs. 8, 9). Sullivan vertically divided his building into three zones, each with a different fenestration. We see that Wright has done the same: entrance level, the intervening living floors both with similar fenestration, and then, separated by a horizontal band, the service floor with its smaller windows. Finally, a vigorously projecting cornice without a visible roof. Even the materials follow the same sequence in the two buildings: smooth ashlar masonry for the street level, brick for the intermediary floors, and terracotta for the cornice. This solution may not be the most characteristic, or visually pleasing, of Wright's early works but it clearly stands as a milestone in his effort to synthesize the best ideas in contemporary American design.

By the 90s a new wave of classicism was overtaking the architectural scene. Even the Wainwright Building reflected this with its clarity of form, symmetry, regularity, etc. One sees the same thing in Norman Shaw's Fred White House, Queen's Gate, London, of 1888, a design so different from Shaw's earlier work. In America McKim, Mead & White became leaders in this field.

Wright also was affected, as is already seen in the Charnley House, but even more clearly in the Winslow House, his masterpiece of 1893. Yet in the year between these two works, 1892, Wright designed the George Blossom House in Chicago (fig. 10). He called it a 'bootleg' design because he undertook this private commission in contravention of his contract with Adler & Sullivan; he therefore designed it in a style that he hoped would not attract Sullivan's notice. Employing Classical motifs such as pilasters, columns, capitals, etc., this house would have been called 'Colonial' in the jargon of the day and, happily for Wright, it did not catch Sullivan's eye. Certain features in this design suggest that Wright is still aware of McKim, Mead & White's work, specifically their H.A.C. Taylor House in Newport, but this is not the subject that I want to investigate now. Rather it is the plan — and its relation to the exterior.

Although Wright has largely restricted himself to the rectangular form, the interior plan is charged with activity as it pushes and pulls in different directions. The architect is obviously unhappy with the restraints imposed upon him by the box. The front door (approached after a right-angle turn) is on a major axis with the living room fireplace as its focal point, while from the fireplace one looks back through the hall to the extended semi-circular porch (this shape reflecting the archways of the hall). A second, and parallel, major axis extends from the semi-circular conservatory through arches into the living room and library where a window is placed exactly on centre. A minor axis unites library, hall, and reception room, with simplified Palladian windows serving as focal points (their arches reflecting the arches of the hall). Yet the most sophisticated and complex of all the axes is the one running the length of the living room. Here, instead of pushing out from the rectangular shape of the house, the wall of the house is actually drawn *in*. This is clearly seen by looking at not only the plan but the central bay of the exterior. It's a small change in plane but a very significant one. Wright is making an early attempt at bringing exterior space into the body of the house, while simultaneously (by means of the projecting terrace with its enclosing balustrade) allowing the interior to penetrate outward. There is a real push-pull set up here. At the opposite end of this axis one sees a handsome staircase gently screened by balusters through which light flows down from a large, ornamental window on the second floor. Thus, although conforming to the restraints imposed on him by the Classical exterior, Wright has nevertheless developed a very baroque type of interior plan.

The year after designing the Blossom House, Frank Lloyd Wright left Alder & Sullivan and went into practice on his own. His first commission was from William Winslow for whom he built that imposing classical house in River Forest. In this discussion I have dealt only with his earliest formative years and have not even begun to survey the large number of designs that he produced during these six years. Rather I have severely limited my selection in order to give more attention to each, and to emphasize my central theme of Wright's process of self-education and how this involved synthesizing specific aspects from the best of contemporary American design.



10. Frank Lloyd Wright: George Blossom House, Chicago, Illinois, 1892, exterior view (Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago) and plan (Hitchcock, In the Nature of Materials*)*