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Frank Lloyd Wright

HARRY SECKEL

ARCHITECTURE is a strangely anonymous profession. Few architects ever become well known to the general public and those who do seldom owe their renown entirely to architecture. Of the Americans, the most famous, by far, are Thomas Jefferson and Stanford White. Jefferson was President of the United States and White was shot by Harry Thaw. These are marks of distinction from which spreads their architectural fame.

The most widely known architect in America today is Frank Lloyd Wright and his reputation is not altogether due to his buildings. But there is a difference, and an important one, between Wright and his two famous predecessors. Thomas Jefferson and Stanford White are popularly known as architects because of circumstances not only apart from their work but essentially unrelated to it. In the case of Frank Lloyd Wright there is an intimate relation between the man's work and the unusual life and personality that have caught the public eye.

When Wright was sixteen he entered the University of Wisconsin. He wanted to study architecture; but engineering was the nearest thing to his choice that the local university afforded, and Wright was too poor to study away from home. For three dreary years he kept his nose to the grindstone. Classes at the university were dull and tedious and, at home, poverty was becoming oppressive.

Then one day in 1887 young Frank did what dissatisfied Wisconsin boys always do. He left home and went to Chicago. He arrived there, as the boy from the country always does, with seven dollars in his pocket and proceeded to seek his fortune.

Finding a job was no easy matter, and three anxious days of searching brought no results. His money was gone and he was hungry. Then, on the fourth day — a job!

He was thrilled to be in an architect's office and he went to work as so many young draftsmen have before and since, enthusiastic in his conviction that by drafting very diligently he would someday become a great architect. The young man Mr. Silsbee had hired for eight dollars a week showed promise.

A year later opportunity knocked loudly. Adler and Sullivan, one of the largest architectural firms in Chicago, was looking for a man. Wright applied for the job and got it. Though he did not know it, he had taken the most important step of his career.

Louis Sullivan was an exceptional architect. He saw clearly the sham and falsity of the architectural masquerading in vogue. "There is a certain grim, ghastly humor in it all," observed Sullivan; "Miscellaneous crippled fragments of ancient architecture firmly fastened to a modern steel frame; architecture at variance with climate or purpose, lugged to buildings and pasted thereon wherever place may be found. And all these things meaningless — all purposeless — an imposition upon honest intelligence. The true function of the architect," insisted Sullivan, "is to initiate such buildings as shall correspond to the real need of the people — to seek a sane, organic art of expression."

Today this is familiar doctrine. A half century ago it was heresy. Sullivan's was a voice in a wilderness.

It was extremely difficult for Louis Sullivan to find an assistant whom he did not consider professionally incompatible. Men that were sufficiently skilled for the job were invariably, by consequence of their training, not fit for Sullivan. Furthermore, his conceit was insufferable;

his walk, an undisguised swagger. There were few people who could get on with him.

Young Wright filled the bill nicely. He had a sense of design and he could draw. He had but a smattering of office usage and was unschooled — to Sullivan's eye, unspoiled. Moreover, Wright, notwithstanding the flowing tie and longish hair, was a raw, provincial lad. Sullivan was a man of the world, educated and traveled. Sullivan sensed that Wright idolized him and they got on famously.

Wright, who was now approaching twenty-one, wanted to marry. His employers gave the prospective groom a five-year contract and advanced him enough money to build a little house in Oak Park. The neglected youngster, who had tramped Chicago's streets only two years before, now had a wife, his own home, security for at least five years, and work he enjoyed under a leader of his profession. At twenty-one, he was the highest salaried draftsman in Chicago.

The young couple had a joint bank account and they issued checks blissfully until they began to come back. No funds? Never mind, the first of the month was not far off. There would be more.

The husband loved beautiful things and had no sales-resistance. He collected prints. As long as one had the luxuries of life, the necessities, he felt, would take care of themselves. The butcher and the grocer were kept waiting. Debts piled up. The first baby arrived within a year and two years later there was another. Soon a third was expected. The young husband found that, on these terms, two cannot live as cheaply as one.

He began to accept small commissions on the side and executed them at home in his spare time. This eased his financial situation for a time, but it was not long before

wind of this extra-mural activity reached his office. For the first time in six years Wright was to taste the acid of Sullivan's invective. Wright insisted that he hadn't known he was violating his contract or doing anything unethical. He hadn't been undertaking this outside work secretly, he maintained. It just hadn't occurred to him to mention it at the office. Master and apprentice both became temperamental. The contract was dissolved.

Wright now found himself in an awkward position. He knew practically nothing of the historic styles that were considered so important in current practice. The office he had just left was regarded with suspicion by most architects, and Sullivan's work was the basis of Wright's training. It was not an easy matter for him to find another position without starting again near the bottom of the ladder. He therefore decided to strike out on his own. He rented an office, had his name painted on the door in gold letters — and hoped for the best.

He soon developed an active and interesting practice. He was pioneering. While his contemporaries were dutifully treading the mill, he was adventuring into fresh fields. When Daniel H. Burnham, one of Chicago's leading architects, offered to send him abroad for an extended period of study he declined the offer. Burnham proposed the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris, followed by a sojourn in Rome for a thorough training in classic architecture. All expenses would be paid, including the care of Wright's family. There would be a job waiting upon his return. But Wright had been oriented in another direction by Sullivan. He abhorred the classic. Paris? Rome? Never! He was on the road toward a new architecture.

He was developing a new type of residence and never had there been a more crying need for it. The gloomy Victorian dwelling then in vogue was an ill-planned,

badly proportioned nightmare. It was piled high in a strained and ungainly effort to be imposing, broken up in a restless jumble of tortured fragments vainly striving to be picturesque. It was turreted, pinnaced, bay-windowed, gabled and dormered. Over it all writhed a crazy riot of jigsawed, spindled gingerbread.

Wright visualized something quite different. Against the flat landscape of the Midwest he felt that height was to be avoided. His compositions were low and extended, the long dimension resting parallel with the ground rather than rising perpendicular to it. Attics were done away with. The roofs, with very broad overhanging eaves, were low pitched. Windows were grouped in horizontal bands, those of the upper story lodged close under the wide horizontal plane of the eaves. Gardens and terraces were conceived as part of the composition forming a transition of horizontal planes between the flat landscape and the building. Inside, the ceilings were astonishingly low and spaciousness was in evidence horizontally rather than vertically. The traditional conception of a room was discarded. Wherever privacy was not a prime consideration doors were done away with; and even partitions were used sparingly. Instead of remaining segregated cubicles, rooms flowed one into another.

This was the house with which Frank Lloyd Wright startled the citizens of Illinois, almost half a century ago. It was a clean house with the gewgaws of the epoch left out. There was no iron deer on the lawn.

The ultra-conservatives didn't like Wright's "prairie houses" because they were "different." But the architect was convincing in his enthusiasm; and, as the years went on and more and more of his houses sprang up in the community, people became used to them. In fact, a

neighborhood pride began to develop around this local architecture. By the time Wright had been in practice fifteen years, the region had a style indigenous to itself.

Not yet forty, Wright was winning recognition. A steady stream of commissions came to him. By way of recreation he liked to design his wife's clothes. He continued to collect the beautiful things he loved so much. In 1906 he took a trip to Japan. He revelled in the treasures he brought back with him.

It would seem to have been a rich full life, but Frank Lloyd Wright was bored. He was losing interest in his work. He wanted to be free. Domesticity, he decided, weighed heavily upon him, so he asked for a divorce. It was refused, but the refusal was not very effective. A short time later Mrs. Wright found herself alone with the children. Her husband was living with somebody else in Tuscany.

He returned to America still legally bound to the family at Oak Park and proceeded to build a new home for a new family at Green Spring, Wisconsin. This retreat was to be more than a mere dwelling. It was to comprise a two hundred acre farm, largely self-supporting. There the master was to live and work surrounded by disciples who would come from far and wide to bask in the light of his genius. It was to be a little world of his own creation.

Wright has always taken an almost childish delight in curious names, symbols and the like. The first dispute he ever had with his wife at Oak Park was occasioned when he wanted to carve mottoes all over the house. The new Wisconsin home, he decided, would be named *Taliesin*. This, he solemnly explained, was the name of a Welsh bard. It meant something like "glowing forehead" or "shining brow." Was he himself not partly Welsh?

Soon a rugged low building of native stone sprawled comfortably along the brow of a hill. From this miniature Olympus, Wright smiled benignly upon the world below. At last he was living his life exactly as he chose to live it.

Two years later Wright was away supervising the construction of a building when a telephone call summoned him home. A Barbados Negro, who worked on his place, had suddenly gone mad. In the space of a few moments seven people had died by his hand and Taliesin was in flames. By the time Wright arrived at the scene, all he had left such a short while before was gone. Taliesin was a charred and smoking ruin. She for whom it had been built and her two children lay murdered.

Wright set himself to the melancholy task of reconstruction and a year later a second Taliesin stood in the place of the first. And then, at a time when it was most welcome, came a change of scene. Wright had been chosen to build the Imperial Hotel at Tokio.

Oak Park, Taliesin, Tokio, each a phase, a new life within the life of Frank Lloyd Wright. Once again a conventional world gaped, for when Wright left for Japan he was not alone. Once again he had found a kindred spirit.

He applied himself to his commission with the true architect's approach. With an open mind, he studied the particular problem in hand. Meanwhile, the Japanese world in which he lived would occasionally remind him of an impending danger. A crazy lurching drunkenness of his bed would awaken him at night. Sudden shocks would bother his table at dinner. A swinging of the very ground upon which he walked would recall — the trembler! This was the terrible adversary with which he, Frank Lloyd Wright, was to wrestle.

He quickly became convinced that there was no un-

yielding construction that could be depended upon to withstand the fury of the quake. Rigidity, however strong, could be destroyed. Well, then, why not *flexibility*? Why not a building that could adapt itself to every swing and shiver of the trembler? Why not a building composed of structurally independent parts connected by joints that would permit each part to move? Accordingly, everything was jointed — footings, walls, and floors — wherever one section met another.

The new building had a fortunate site of filled-in swamp land. Under an eight foot layer of cheese-like soil was a sea of mud. To the layman, such a site might seem the very worst upon which to rest a large and heavy building. Not so! Flaccidity of site constitutes no great hazard if it is uniform. Doesn't water hold up ships? The worst foundations are those that offer varied resistance. When part of your house rests upon rock and part of it upon mud — beware! If the site is all mud and can be counted on to stay mud of uniform consistency, you are safe. And, in Tokio, a cushion of soft mud is an excellent shock absorber. The soil having but little resistance, it was preferable to distribute the load evenly, rather than concentrate it upon a few points. Small concrete pins were sunk two feet apart each way over the entire area that was to carry footings. Any weight applied upon one of these pins was resisted simply by the friction offered by the soil to the descending pin. A heavy load upon any one of them would have pushed it out of sight into the mud below. But no one pin had a great load to bear. There were hundreds of them and, together, they were able to sustain the evenly distributed weight of the building.

The architect stayed in Japan all through the slow process of construction. When he left, after four years, it

was with the satisfaction that comes of a job well done.

Two years later Tokio was demolished by a terrific quake. Wright was in Los Angeles at the time. He fidgeted uneasily when he saw the headlines of the *Examiner*. Tokio had been wiped out. For days he tried to get news of his building, but specific information from devastated Tokio was not readily forthcoming. All he could learn was that the entire city lay in ruins. The trembler had been one of the most terrible in history. Then, finally, came the news that he longed to hear. The Imperial Hotel was still standing, undamaged.

Wright was now absorbed in a new type of architecture. Concrete would offer a very economical means of building except for the expense involved by the wooden forms or molds into which it is poured. This type of construction virtually means building, and paying for, two structures. A wooden one is built first, the concrete one is next poured into place, and the wooden structure is then pulled down. Why not abandon this method, suggested Wright, in favor of a standard prefabricated concrete block that could be set up as masonry?

Now the concrete block was nothing new. It existed long before Wright adopted it, but its existence was a lowly one. Wright proceeded to glorify it. He took one of the most miserable of building materials and made of it an exquisite thing. Structurally, he increased its potentiality. The new blocks were improved and varied in appearance. Some of them were textured, some plain, and some of them a bit different in color from their fellows. They were hollow and so fashioned that they could be set up with steel strands running through them and could be poured full of concrete after they were in place. In sum, this handsome new concrete block was the means to a reinforced-concrete construction, in which

concrete, itself, replaced the usual molds made of wood.

The houses Wright achieved with his new blocks are cubistically sculptural and richly patterned. Those who like to link up everything with a parallel or prototype have decided that they look Mayan. This new type of construction attracted considerable attention but its application never became widespread. Builders found, to Wright's indignation, that it usually proved more costly than the method it was designed to supplant.

Wright's work was now destined to suffer an interruption.

Ever since her husband had left the little home at Oak Park, Mrs. Wright had steadfastly refused to grant him a divorce. Now, after some fifteen years, she decided to acquiesce and Mr. Wright found himself marriageable. A tardy ceremony was subsequently performed and the couple that for years had been braving public censure finally became Mr. and Mrs. Wright and returned to Taliesin to "settle down." But, before long, the veteran newlyweds were separated. Then, about a year later, Taliesin once again burned to the ground.

Once more Wright set himself to the task of reconstruction. He was still in debt, but insisted that rebuilding, on a bigger scale than ever, be started right away. And so Taliesin, something of a phoenix by now, rose again out of its ashes.

Meanwhile, the new Mrs. Wright, separated but not divorced, was enraged to find that she had already been replaced by a successor, for once again Frank Lloyd Wright had found a kindred spirit. But Mrs. Wright No. 2 was not of the same gentle calibre as the former Mrs. Wright of Oak Park and Taliesin was soon thrown into confusion by a law suit. The baby — of course there was a baby! — made excellent newspaper copy.

To make matters worse, Wright managed, at this time, to violate the immigration laws, the Mann Act and a few other statutory measures. During four weary years his life was a nightmare of legal and financial complications; a seemingly hopeless mess of attorneys, judges, commissioners, process servers, immigration authorities and bankers. He was sued for divorce, dunned for debts, and threatened with arrest. He had mortgaged everything he possessed, and the bank threatened foreclosure. And of all this Wright understood precisely nothing. He was sure that he was being cruelly wronged and adopted the air of a martyr.

The tangle was finally unraveled. A divorce was negotiated and once again a tardy ceremony was performed. For the third time Frank Lloyd Wright became a married man.

The fifty-nine-year-old architect settled down to his work. His activities as a practicing architect were now becoming overshadowed by his teaching. For years his practice had been slowly falling off. From the very beginning of his career, certain adverse forces had been at work.

Way back, before Wright was with Sullivan, architecture in America consisted largely of the clumsy efforts of local builders. While Sullivan sought to raise the standard by developing a new style of architecture, most architects felt that the solution lay in importing a style. Some architects had favorite styles; some, less partial, shifted their allegiance from one to another; while others chose to mix them indiscriminately.

Then, in 1893, the Chicago Columbian Exposition gave the Midwest its first big eyeful of classic architecture. The peanuts and pink lemonade of the Fair enjoyed no more success than the imposing rows of columns, the pediments and cornices of the buildings. The architecture of

Greece and Rome had no business in Chicago, but it was looked at rather than thought about. It was imported and sophisticated. The Fair-goers loved that. It was like having finger bowls and speaking French.

Graeco-Roman architecture had come to stay. Scores of young architects went abroad to study and came back trained in the classics. Wright and Sullivan saw their own efforts toward a new architecture threatened. Hitherto competition had been relatively weak. After 1893 it became increasingly strong.

Sullivan's fortunes dimmed. His commissions dwindled in number and importance. The haughty airs of his better days melted away. He finished his existence in poverty and died in 1924, forgotten and neglected.

Wright was somewhat less seriously affected. During the years at Oak Park he was chiefly concerned with small residential work and in this field the classics, at first, played an unimportant part. But, in the years that followed, he too found competition increasingly strong.

In Wright's eyes, Greece, Rome and the Renaissance became symbols of evil. Eclecticism and the schools that sponsored it became the objects of his bitter attacks. As he found less and less occasion to wield the T-square, he found more and more incentive to wield the pen. Writing and lecturing, hitherto incidental, now became important factors in his life.

His mode of expression is unique. He does not seem clearly to understand his own cause and therefore cannot lucidly express it. But he is moved by sincere and deep-rooted impulses, and he does not hesitate to use phrases that seem to him to characterize these inner feelings. Often these phrases mean little or nothing. Rarely are they specific or definite. Never do they combine to constitute a complete and well-ordered theory.

"Buildings," says Mr. Wright, "like trees are brothers to the man, buildings, trees and man all are out of the ground into the light." The straightforward look and bland smile that follow show clearly that Wright, at least, is convinced. To Wright's admirers, his words transcend mere method; they are too clairvoyant for dull logic and prosaic order. To his opponents, they are a mess of confused ravings.

Formerly it was the fashion to ignore Wright. Now it is the fashion to recognize him. The decline of eclecticism has made him something of a prophet and he plays the part with gusto. Wright's status is now unique. He is a living old master whose modernism of almost half a century ago is famed. His position in the architectural world can be better appreciated, perhaps, by an imaginary parallel. Suppose Gauguin to be still alive today. Fancy what a figure he would make in art circles and remember that Frank Lloyd Wright of Oak Park was a contemporary of Gauguin!

It is to Wright's credit that today at sixty-nine he is not content to rest on the accomplishments of his younger days. Work to him is still an adventure. He is still an innovator.

In his new building for the Johnson Wax Company at Racine, Wisconsin, Wright has abandoned the conventional window in favor of a wall band of light-diffusing glass tubing. The building is constructed with a new type of concrete column tapering from the ceiling to a base of fairy-like slenderness.

His new Kaufmann residence at Mill Run, Pennsylvania, is suspended or cantilevered over a waterfall. As in much of Wright's work, this house is not treated as a box with rigidly defined limits. It is conceived rather as a grouping of horizontal planes, not ending directly above

or below one another, but overlapping in a curious interplay that seems to weave the outdoors into the house. It is difficult to say just where the exterior ends and the interior begins.

Wright shares the notion, now current in his profession, that the architect should play a more important part in molding the social order. In his latest book, *Architecture and Modern Life*, written jointly with Professor Brownell, Wright devotes himself less specifically to architecture than to sociology. Broadacre City, his design for an ideal community, is not an architectural solution to modern life but rather an architectural suggestion for what Wright considers a better way of living.

He does not believe in the academic methods of architectural education and offers his own substitute. At present, some thirty disciples comprise the Taliesin Fellowship. They work in the fields, bake bread, milk the cows and chop wood. The idea is to develop "a sense of the thing as a whole." They do construction work about the place and help with whatever drawings are necessary. They engage in musical and theatrical activities and have talks with the master. The fee is eleven hundred dollars a year.

Never has a person been more generally misevaluated than Wright. People either despise or idolize him. One must peer through a cloud of adoration and aversion to see the real man and his architecture.

Personally, he is what the French would call a *numéro*. He is small, white-haired and has a flair for dress. He is immaculate and dapper, and follows a style that is his very own. In the country, or at a building under construction, he will sometimes appear in rough clothes, but even then his apparel suggests the deliberate effect of a costume.

He has a pride in himself that at times is rather childish, but it is of the kind that amuses rather than irritates. When he tells how his Imperial Hotel withstood the Tokio quake it is somewhat as an angler might describe a very large fish.

He shamelessly parades his rather miscellaneous erudition. Occasionally he enriches his conversation with a Japanese word.

He adores adoration. Disciples are a necessary part of his existence.

In short, he is an architectural Isadora Duncan. How much like Isadora the arresting personality, the enormous ego, the illogical, piquant, clairvoyant mind, the odd mannerisms! How similar the unconventional life, the silly publicity!

Like Isadora he has a sense of showmanship. He makes the usual seem unusual. Whenever, for example, an architect departs from the current methods of construction his move is opposed or accompanied by dire predictions. Building ordinances are always conservative, and contractors or workmen invariably look askance at a strange method simply because it is unlike the one they have always followed. Their pessimistic warnings are everyday occurrences of little significance. Nobody ever hears of these things — except when they happen to Frank Lloyd Wright.

His architecture is as individual as the man himself. He is a confirmed non-traditionalist yet stands apart from other modernists. Your typical modern architect believes in a reasoned adjustment of architecture to present-day living, to present-day building methods and materials, to present-day economics. It is an intellectual, almost scientific doctrine which Wright views with scorn. For reasoning such as this he has no respect whatever.

“Is the rising sun logical?” he demands. But the old order of eclecticism he attacks with reasoned argument. In fine, he rationalizes. He reasons as far as reasoning accords with what he, himself, does by instinct.

What are these instincts that give this man the inherent power he possesses?

The first is a genuine decorative sense. Wright is one of those rare creatures who, when casually placing a few miscellaneous objects on a table, will naturally place them in harmonious arrangement.

The second is a highly sensitive understanding of the nature of materials. He has the true craftsman’s appreciation of the stuff with which he works. A sheet of clear glass, a waxed pine floor, stones set upon stones, these things mean much to him. By virtue of his sympathetic handling of them, they come to mean something to the lay person too. He never designs a building as some architects do, indifferent as to just what material will be used for its execution. Not Wright! It is the material itself that inspires the form.

The third instinct, and perhaps this should be placed first, is what might be called a sense of growth. He has an abhorrence of buildings that seem set upon their sites. He has a horror of anything that seems “added on.” His buildings fit into the landscape. They grow up out of the ground. Windows seem to have arrived naturally at their right places. They never look like holes punched into a wall that resents their presence. Ornament appears to have flowered into place. He believes that architecture should be organic — the term is his own or, originally, Sullivan’s.

Wright’s architecture is not without its idiosyncrasies. Often, for the emphasis of a major idea, minor elements suffer a sacrifice. Thus there are occasional impractical

quirks in his planning and occasional defects in minor points of construction. And the major points so vigorously expressed are themselves often questionable. Wright strives, as in the Kaufmann residence, to marry exterior and interior space. Is this better than the usual frank expression of the sheltering division between the house and the outside elements? Or, to take another case, the Hanna residence at Palo Alto is made up of hexagonal and triangular shapes. Isn't the usual rectangle simpler and more practical?

Never has a man's work more clearly reflected the man. Wright's architecture is dynamic, fascinating, eccentric. It is a passionate, hot-blooded architecture that appeals to the emotions rather than to the intellect. It is fraught with imperfection but it is never banal or dull. It is Wright himself translated into concrete, stone, and steel.