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FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S TESTAMENT

Sibyl Moholy-Nagy

Frank Lloyd Wright, *A Testament*, 256 pp., illus. plans., New York: Horizon Press, 1957. \$12.50.

Frank Lloyd Wright, who will be 90 years old on June 8, 1959, is rarely thought of as a tragic character. The ruddy face, the undiminished productiveness, the aggressive wit seem to bespeak a personality exceptionally favored by fate. Yet the latest and presumably last of his books, *A Testament* reveals a pathos that moves the heart with an unexpected compassion. Not that Wright himself asks for the reader's condolence. Nowhere in these 240 pages of aphoristic paragraphs does he depart from the homiletic pattern of "a prophet sustained." Without admitting any defeats, he presents his well-known mixture of poetic pantheism:

"... I came to feel that in the nature of Nature—if from within outward—I would come upon nothing not sacred. Nature became my Bible."

ranting attack:

"... the steeple marked the box to pray in, the dome the box to rule in. ..." Now, latest in the succession of habituated boxation, is the open box with glassified poster-facade standing on urban streets from Chicago to New York—representing contagion.¹ Box to box, boxes within the box. ...

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¹ This quotation and the following one are from the "Princeton Lectures" as published in *Frank Lloyd Wright: A Pictorial Record of Architectural Progress*, Boston Institute of Modern Art, 1940; as is the quotation on the last page of the article beginning "The more a design." All others are from *A Testament*.



Fig. 1. F. L. Wright: Robie House, Chicago, 1908. Photograph by Aaron Siskind and Richard Nickel, courtesy of Architectural Forum.

unabashed self-glorification:

"The fact that modern architecture has been originated by a contemporary in Chicago was simply not to be borne [by the American Institute of Architects]."

The tragedy of Wright, revealed in his concluding testament, lies in his passionate love for America. Wright sees himself not merely as an architect but as an American architect who, at the end of a long life of titanic labors, finds himself deprived of an architectural bequest in public buildings that would have testified to his love for America. Far above romanticism, aggressiveness and personal histrionics stands his dedication to create "an indigenous and varied architecture for my American people." Out of the profoundness of this love he can dare to paraphrase architecture with coined expressions shunned today by every intellectual, and still sound completely true.

"How soon will 'we the people' awake to the fact that the philosophy of natural and intrinsic building we are here calling organic is at one with our freedom—as declared in 1776? . . . The ideal of innate aristocracy of which our forefathers dreamed is betrayed for votes in the name of democracy. But the Declaration was originally made the thesis of a solid new faith in man as individual. . . . From the

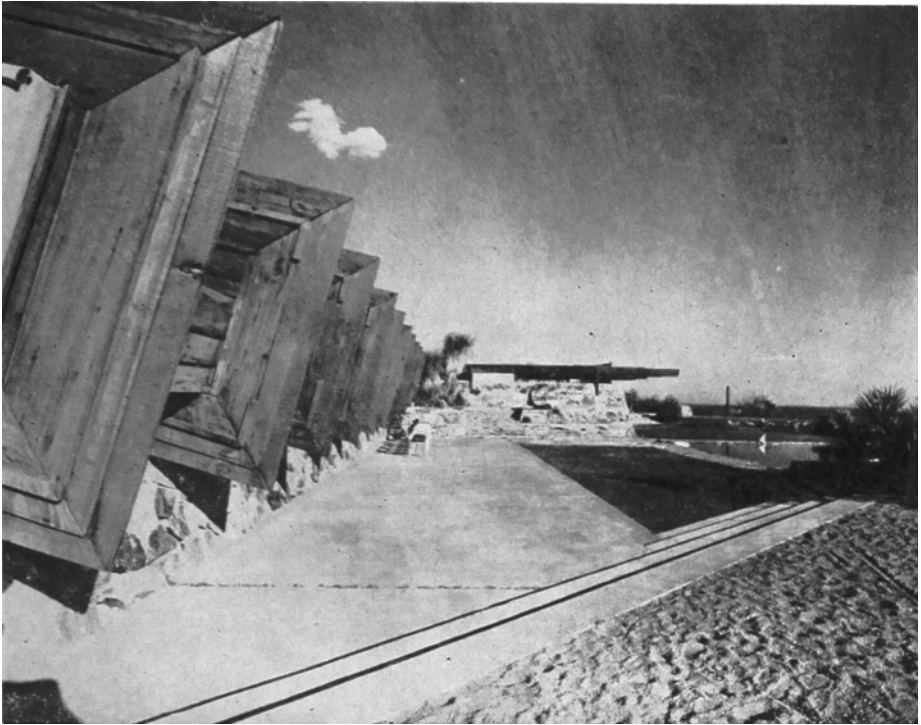


Fig. 2. F. L. Wright: Taliesin West, Workshop Wing, Arizona, 1950.

prophetic nineteenth century work of Louis H. Sullivan, twentieth century architecture issued by way of the Hillside Home School, the Larkin Building, Unity Temple, the Coonley and Robie houses, the Imperial Hotel and the block houses (The Millard, etc.) of 1921 on."

In other words, twentieth century architecture in America issued from Frank Lloyd Wright, American. But his definition of "architecture being inevitably the basis of indigenous culture" is not a patriotic cliché. It is a lived, built, proven reality that serves as common denominator of seventy years of building. No other architect in history ever took on an entire continent and proposed to express its innermost character. "Falling Water" is the northern Mountain Fortress as such. The Robie House (Fig. 1)² and the other Prairie

² For recent information on The Robie House see *Architectural Forum*, October 1958, p. 126.

Fig. 3. Louis Sullivan: Wainwright Building, Saint Louis, Mo., 1890.



houses are predicated on the horizontality of the Plains country and its abrupt climatic contrasts; and the sun-cured wood framework of Taliesin West (Fig. 2) is the sparse soul of the desert. The clashing contrast between these loving concretizations of the region as essence, and the guiding principles of the abstract architecture of today, constitutes the Wright epic. As all prophets, he cannot let go either of unending hope or of blackest pessimism, veering from a merciless analysis of American decay to an exalted vision of American leadership.

"Whether we yet know it well or not, we of the Machine-Age are growing inevitably toward organic unity not only in our architecture but in every feature of our national as well as our private life; no *re-birth* in philosophy, art or religion for us now in any form. Birth itself. . . . Already the idea is again vital and fascinating. The triumph of spirit over circumstance is evident nation-wide."



Fig. 4. Le Corbusier: Apartment Building, Berlin, 1936.

And right beside it:

"Man in his upended street must know he is becoming a mere numerical item, on the way to being a thing. His inherent instinct for love and beauty is not only becoming suspect but useless to society. . . . Ugliness is inevitable to this inorganic, therefore senseless, waste motion of the precious life of our time become a form of involuntary homicide."

There is no overlooking the fact that Wright as a preacher's son knows the effectiveness of prefacing the glory of salvation with a vivid description of hell; but the blood and thunder passages are rare, much rarer than in his previous books. Rather, there is a profound sorrow in his admission of democracy defeated:

"Landlordism, now a disease of our profit system, fights skyscrapers with skyscraper. The frantic attempt to salvage urban investment destroys all human values and tries to make the human creature like it."²

an a feeling of urgent responsibility and leadership inherent in the work of the builder:

"A conscientious architect learns to understand the nature of human



Fig. 5. Le Corbusier: Chapel at Ronchamp, France, 1957.

nature so well that the character of his structural ability may eventually justify calling organic architecture man's love of presenting man to Man. Democracy needs this inspiration to keep democracy alive and the American people free."

And yet America, her federal, local and most of her large industrial agencies, have boycotted Wright for sixty years—from the Columbian Exposition of 1893 to the Embassies Program of the State Department of 1957. In true noblesse Wright never refers to this bitter fact; but its effect is nevertheless evident. It is evident in his most recent designs which seem almost frantic assertions of a man insisting to be noticed before he must stop to build. The overstrained originality of the Price Tower, a skyscraper transplanted



Fig. 6. Le Corbusier: Swiss Dormitory, University City, Paris, 1931.

into Oklahoma; the flashy propaganda for the mile-high Illinois, a tower for 130,000 inhabitants, which would defeat his earlier attempts at multiple housing and every word uttered by Wright in the name of humanity, seem alien to Wright's uniqueness. This uniqueness was a fusion of building technology and building spirit through the fire of a genius born from the earth on which he builds. Some of his latest projects seem reminiscent of the shouts of desperation with which Louis Sullivan concluded a brilliant and frustrated career when he insisted on the absurd façades of the Transportation Building and the Bayard Building because he could not make himself heard with the elegant simplicity of the Wainwright Building (Fig. 3). Frank Lloyd Wright must build as an American. The moment he leaves this basic orientation and competes with "The International Style" he lacks conviction. This is his tragedy and his greatness.

The extreme distinction between him and Le Corbusier, the other architectural genius of this century, hinges on this point. Le Corbusier, a man without a country, developed *Architecture as Idea*. His many unrealized projects represent virtual architecture—building in essence but not in reality. His relatively few executed designs serve as confirmation and justification of this architectural ideology. They are independent of site, materials and expedient function, representing "archetypes" that have been duplicated for use in Marseille, Nantes, Strasbourg, Berlin (Fig. 4); or they represent the intensely personal vision of the architect as pure artist, such as the Chapel at Ronchamp

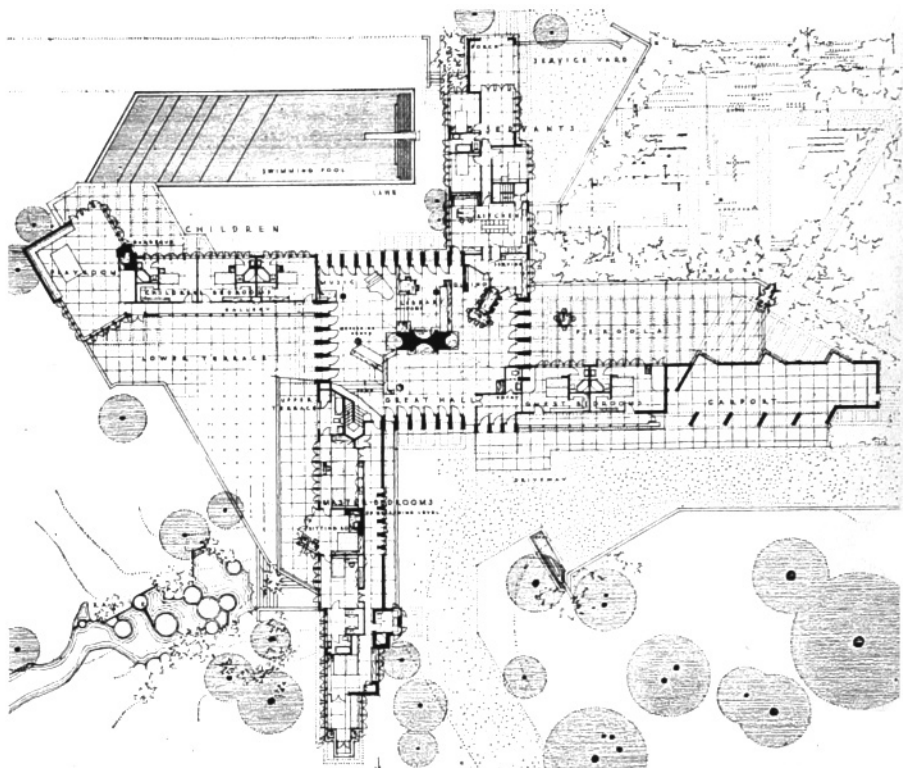


Fig. 7. F. L. Wright: Plan of Wingspread, Wind Point, Wis., 1937.

(Fig. 5) or the public buildings for the Punjab. As his fame grows, Le Corbusier's spirituality becomes more and more rarefied, liberated from all material and regional restrictions.

Frank Lloyd Wright, on the other hand, never created archetypes or architectural sculpture. His work is at its best when it is pragmatic, countering with sheer genius the obstacles of site, materials and function. It is the most irrefutable proof of Wright's organic truthfulness that his buildings cannot be divorced from their site, or converted to a use for which they were not intended. It is easily conceivable that Le Corbusier's Swiss Dormitory in Paris (Fig. 6) could be a clinic or an office building and be situated in Peking or Fairbanks. Wright's buildings have to be demolished when their purpose fails—the Larkin Building, the Midway Gardens, or the barely saved and now purposeless Robie House; and his site planning takes hold of the outdoor

space and moulds it with the same intense originality with which Le Corbusier transforms concrete into sculpture. Wright's building penetrates the landscape even as the landscape penetrates the building (Fig. 7). No spot on which Wright has built will ever be again featureless and reusable. Wrote Le Corbusier in 1942:

"The Modular facilitates normalization, industrialization and mass production, not only in France but in every continent. For produce will know no frontier."

Wrote Frank Lloyd Wright at about the same date:

"It was for the illustrious sovereignty of the individual that I wanted to build"—holding up like Atlas the whole inviolate world of the single man otherwise totally unsupported.

There exists a general agreement among historians, philosophers and art critics that American culture must needs be eclectic, being the result of constant influences from Europe. In architecture this has certainly been true. Even our most gifted architects of today are hardly imaginable without their European idols. Among American designers only Louis Sullivan and Wright cannot be traced to any European sources. After he had been a practicing architect for ten years he sloughed off the English Arts and Crafts Movement and the "Shingle Style" of Downing and McKim. With the Ward Willetts House and the Hillside Home School in 1902, and especially with the interior of the Larkin Building in 1904 (Fig. 8) a specifically American architectural style had been born. A comparison of this style and of the work of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe poses a question of principle on whose answer will depend the future of America's visual landscape. This question is whether architecture should be the expression of a country's unique physical and psychological characteristics, or whether modern man no longer derives any value from this uniqueness and therefore wishes to express his unity with world-technology in a uniformly technological architecture. Wright by no means denies building technology.

"Fresh cultural life, now to issue from the reality within, begins a *new* world. In all we must learn to see ourselves as we are, as modern man—and this be our true culture."

But the difference between him and the International Set lies in the interpretation of the word *new* which he himself italicizes. "New" for the building technician is the latest curtain wall construction, the most elaborate mechanical equipment, still more expensive mullion materials, and piloti or sunshades connoting newness as such, no matter how hackneyed their use. For Wright newness is "a deeper hunger spiritually than we seem to know" craving a continuously original interpretation of nature and of natural means.



Fig. 8. F. L. Wright: Interior of Larkin Building, Buffalo, N.Y., 1904.

"The more a design is creative revelation of intrinsic nature, whatever the medium or form of expression, the better. . . . Beautiful buildings are more than scientific. They are true organisms spiritually conceived; works of art using the best technology by inspiration. . . ."

Wright is exceedingly clear about "the overwhelming tides of conformity" that force client and architect alike into patterned technological solutions. *A Testament* is his last fervent appeal to resist this trend. Like other American prophets before him: Thoreau, Emerson, Greenough, Whitman and others, he sees himself neatly isolated on his spiritual island while all around him "buildings speak with a foreign accent." Yet he rallies once more his most persuasive optimism to carry his simple and powerful message across the din of commercialism and propaganda:

"that a new nation cannot derive its spiritual incentive from historical continuity as can the peoples of Europe, but that this new nation has in a rich, varied and beautiful nature the inspirational equivalent to history; and that the men who founded this nation dedicated it to the proposition that every man has a right to his unique unduplicable personality whose finest, subtlest, most far-reaching realization is in the house in which he lives, works and worships."

It is a moving experience to see a very old man plead for the survival of his mission, prefacing it with a word by Tennyson that expresses an almost humble pride in the values he alone created, and an unquenchable hope for the America he cannot believe beyond salvation:

"Most can raise the flowers now
for all have got the seed."



On April 9, 1959 Frank Lloyd Wright died in Phoenix, Arizona. His quick and unexpected death seems fitting for an extraordinary man. He was spared a slow decline and died with his pencil in hand. Two large and commanding structures: the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, and the Reformed Synagogue in Elks Park, Philadelphia are still in progress. Wright was a fighter, and nothing would be less appropriate than dedicate to him a sentimental eulogy. A critical evaluation, not of his philosophy but of his actual building record, has been attempted by this author in the May issue of *Progressive Architecture*. It might stand as a supplement to the characterization of Wright as architectural teacher which—in the broadest sense—he felt himself to be, not only for America but for mankind.