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NOTE

Precedent and Progress in the Work of Frank Lloyd Wright

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"Progress before Precedent"—that *unthinking, unthinkable thing!* Frank Lloyd Wright said in 1914.¹ He was well aware of the role of precedent in his architectural development, and wrote about it on several occasions. One precedent which gave rise to a central characteristic of his mature work he did not mention, however—an unlikely precedent for Wright, the inglenook. What is it? A hearth (ingle) in its own alcove (nook) usually including seats. How did Wright encounter it, did it attract other designers of the day, what became of it at his hands?

Looking backward, the inglenook can be identified clearly by the late 15th century. In Tudor England then the yeomen were rising in prominence and evolved a distinctive form of substan-

Architectural examples cited but not illustrated here are easily found in H.-R. Hitchcock, *In the Nature of Materials: 1887–1941; the Buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright*, New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1942; H.-R. Hitchcock, *The Architecture of H. H. Richardson and His Times*, Hamden, CT: Archon, rev. ed. 1961; A. Saint, *Richard Norman Shaw*, New Haven: Yale University, 1976 (Studies in British Art). A nucleus of historical information was provided by M. Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1971, and *Country Life*, 30 August and 6 September 1973. Further examples of inglenooks can be seen in H. Muthesius, *Das moderne Landhaus und seine innere Ausstattung*, Munich: Bruckmann, 2nd rev. and enl. ed. 1905; J. D. Kornwolf, M. H. Baillie Scott and the Arts and Crafts Movement; *Pioneers of Modern Design*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1972; V. J. Scully, *The Shingle Style and the Stick Style; Architectural Theory and Design from Richardson to the Origins of Wright*, New Haven: Yale University, rev. ed. 1971; H. A. Brooks, *The Prairie School; Frank Lloyd Wright and His Mid-West Contemporaries*, Toronto: University of Toronto, 1972. Joseph T. Butler and David G. DeLong kindly advised on early American inglenooks. Avery Memorial Library provided rich resources and courteous help. R. L. Sweeney, *Frank Lloyd Wright: An Annotated Bibliography*, Los Angeles: Ingalls, 1978, proved to be valuable.

1. This slogan of the Architectural League of America had been criticized by Wright as early as 1900. See Sweeney, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, nos. 38 and 124.



Fig. A. Abbas Hall near Sudbury, Suffolk, early 16th century, kitchen nook with built-in seats and small niches on each side (Cook, *The English Country House*; Edwin Smith photograph).

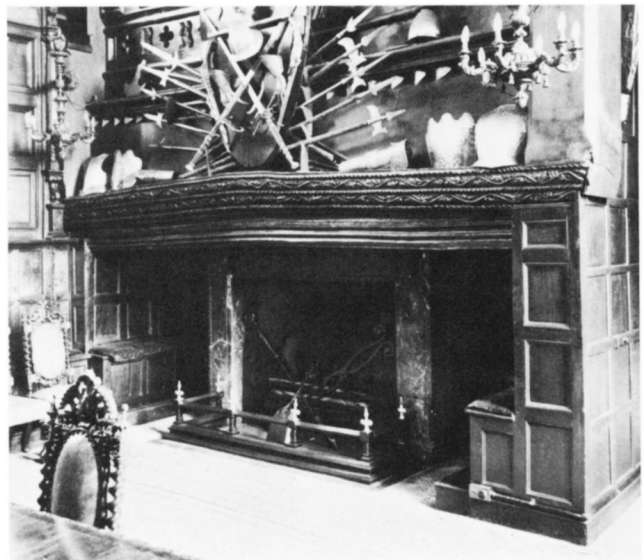


Fig. B. Speke Hall, Liverpool, later 16th century, inglenook added to hall (Nicolson, *Great Houses of Britain*; Weidenfield Publishers photograph).

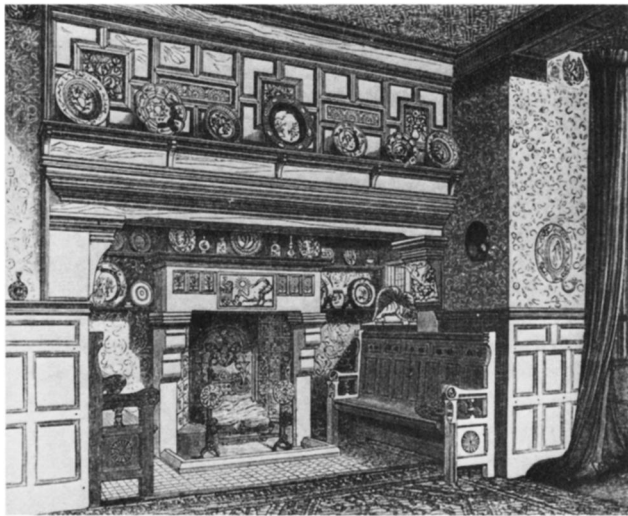


Fig. 1. W. Eden Nesfield, Farnham Park, Bucks., 1865, inglenook (Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*).



Fig. 2. R. Norman Shaw, Willesley, Cranbrook, Kent, 1864–1865, inglenook in dining room (*Country Life*, 30 August 1973).

tial farmhouse with marked features, the inglenook being one. Beginning with seating of some kind arranged within the ample chimney breast of a working kitchen, sheltering one or two people from the prevalent cold, it was changed to a more seemly form, rather like a window embrasure, ensconced in the fireplace of the hall. It became a snug alcove off a main room, suggesting companionable intimacy. I've not found in the literature how common or uncommon inglenooks may have been in the 16th century in Britain. For a while, anyway, they held their place until classicism showed them the door (Figs. A and B).²

Ingenooks were revived in the mid-1860s by two clever and enthusiastic young architects, Eden Nesfield and Norman Shaw (Figs. 1 and 2).³ From them the fashion spread rapidly throughout British drafting rooms, and within a decade it was adopted by advanced designers in America. On both sides of the Atlantic, despite increasing use of central heating, architects liked the coziness of inglenooks and the dramatic shift of scale from large room to tight alcove. At first, dwarf windows were incorporated at either side of the fireplace, admitting localized light for reading and needlework. The featured area was more richly detailed and decorated than the room around it, often a dining room which thus could double as an extra sitting area.

2. An outdoor museum at Cardiff is said to show relocated houses with inglenooks. The phrase, *sous le manteau de la cheminée*, suggests that inglenooks played a role in polite usage across the Channel. Simple examples (some encompass bedsteads) survive in north-European peasant homes, but they are difficult to date. In Colonial times in North America inglenooks were arranged in one-room houses or kitchens. Seemingly this modest usage had no effect on American architecture of the later 19th century.

3. Apparently inglenooks were revived far earlier in nonresidential buildings. The two grand rooms at the northwest corner of the Reform Club by Charles Barry, London, 1838–1840, one on each main floor, have inglenooks, one Ionic and the other Corinthian in detail. Perhaps research would reveal more early examples. I thank the Hon. Godfrey Samuel for the opportunity to visit the Reform Club.

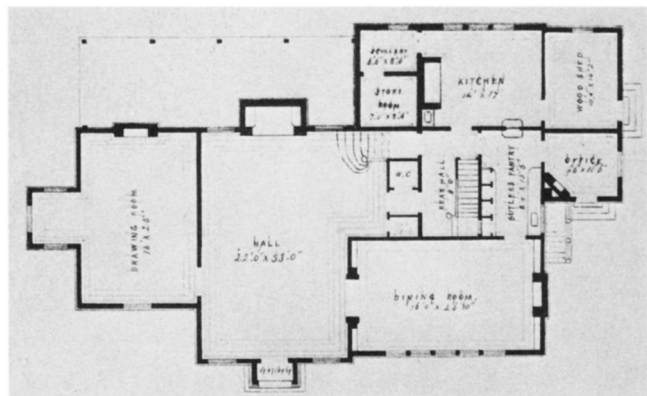


Fig. 3. H. H. Richardson, Codman house project, 1869–1871, plan (Hitchcock, *The Architecture of H. H. Richardson*).

American architects, led by H. H. Richardson, designed inglenooks based chiefly on those of Shaw, whose works were well published (Fig. 3). However, the Americans accented associational values differently than the Victorians: overt hospitality was emphasized more than quiet intimacy. Moreover, once Shaw had shown the way in his own town house, the country-bred character of inglenooks was overlooked and they were accepted in city and suburban homes, as a matter of fact more freely in America than in Britain (Fig. 4).

In time changes were rung on the theme. Particularly, one begins to find inglenooks, hearths included, underneath main staircases, with upper galleries looking down into the hall. This location made the inglenook a pivot for the movements of sociability and family life; now more than a quaint feature, it tended to symbolize the idea of home (Figs. 5 and 6). Other variations were tried by well-known architects (Figs. 7, 8, 9, and 10).⁴

4. H. Muthesius, in the third volume of *Das englische Haus, Entwicklung, Bedingungen, Anlage, Aufbau, Einrichtung und Innenraum*, 3 vols., Berlin: Wasmuth, 1905, illustrates a ready-made inglenook!



Fig. 4. R. Norman Shaw, own house, London, 1876, dining room inglenook, private drafting room above (Saint, *Richard Norman Shaw*).

It was Richardson, however, more than anyone who set the tone for American architecture in the 1880s; his art predominated far more than Shaw's overseas. Young Wright, hardly in his 20s, inevitably began to design architecture in fairly Richardsonian forms, influenced by the two men he worked for in turn, J. L. Silsbee and Louis H. Sullivan. The inglenook entered his repertory at the very start of his career. In 1886 or early 1887, before leaving Madison, Wisconsin, for Chicago, Wright designed a little chapel project in the Silsbee manner where an inglenook lends an unusually domestic air to a rural community structure. This does not seem inept in plan at least, and already indicates Wright's individuality. I've not found an inglenook in the residential designs Wright carried out for Sullivan in the years 1888 to 1893.

It was 1889 when Wright built his own small home and opened a new chapter in the history of inglenooks. Paying slight heed to historic references, Wright combined current details into a unit of notable originality. An inglenook, three by eight and a half feet, occupied the heart of the house, opening to the living-room to reveal a low, round-arched fireplace of brick and on each side a stiff wooden bench; above one bench an opening connected inglenook and dining room. Continuous friezes made the rooms appear higher than the nook. Benches and masonry fireplace, as well as the seeming change of height, conformed to British precedent, but the dominant position and openings connecting main rooms gave this inglenook new meaning. A remodeling in 1895 emphasized the relationship of rooms. This inglenook is not only a symbol of domesticity, it is the physical

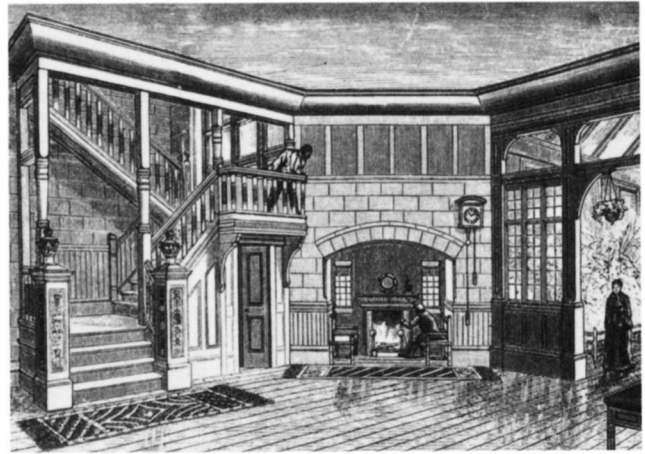


Fig. 5. H. H. Holly, *Modern Dwellings in Town and Country*, 1878, grand staircase (Scully, *The Shingle Style*).

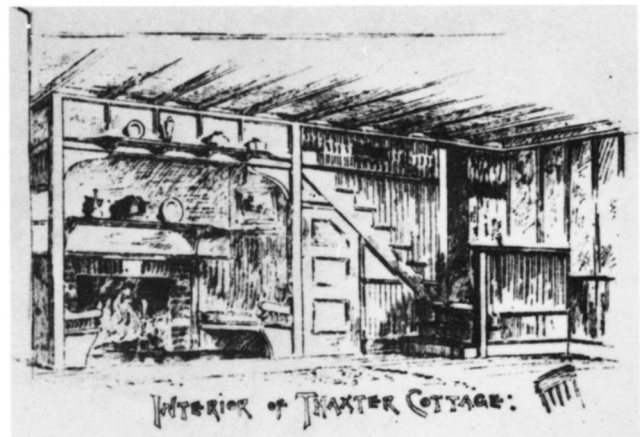


Fig. 6. John Calvin Stevens, Thaxter cottage, Casco Bay, Maine, hall (*Art Gems from the American Architect*, 1887).

core of the structure and from it elements of the house jut outward to make contact with the exterior environment.

In 1889 one might have thought this inglenook a superfluous elaboration in a closely budgeted home; today it can be recognized as the seed from which was to spring one of Wright's main architectural means. By 1904 or 1905, when he had matured his prairie-school manner of design, virtually all of Wright's houses were extended from cores identified with chimneys and fireplaces, while his buildings for business or worship were similarly centered around cores—of space, not matter, namely the Larkin building and Unity Temple. His first independent structure, his home in Oak Park, managed to demonstrate both possibilities: its inglenook combines a core of space and a core of matter. Wright's great works in the first decade of this century, the rich outpouring that established him as an architect of high genius, remain tantalizing until the seminal role of the inglenook is realized.

The shift from treating inglenooks as picturesque addenda to treating them as symbols of home was occurring almost simul-

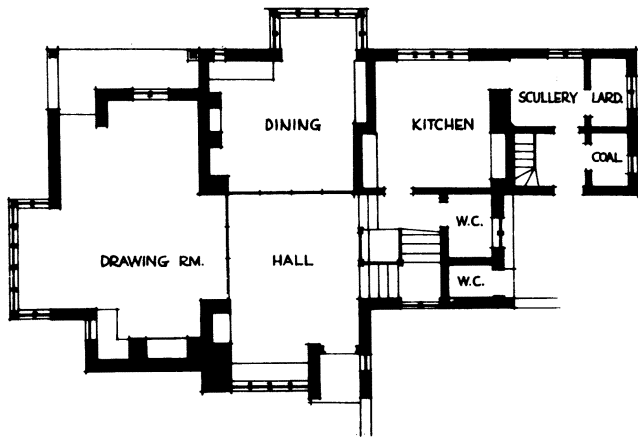


Fig. 7. Ernest George, cottage, Harpenden, Herts., ca. 1888, plan (Kornwolf, M. H. Baillie Scott).

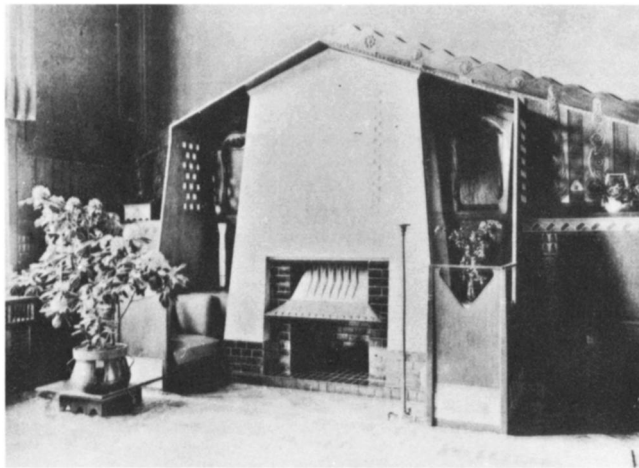


Fig. 9. J. M. Olbrich, own house, Darmstadt, 1901, hall. Olbrich and Baillie Scott shared the patronage of the Grand Duke of Hessen (Kornwolf, M. H. Baillie Scott).

taneously in Britain and the United States. Now Wright intuitively was pushing ahead of this, approaching the insight that was to guide his designing for the next half century: the realization that the essence of architectural expression was control of space, and that mastery over materials and technologies was ancillary to the mastery of space, that is, the ability to characterize spatially the nuances and relationships of human needs and aspirations. Not surprisingly the inglenook suffered many alterations in the course of this evolution. Its mutations proceeded from the enclosed core, to the half-open core, to the liberated core—an island that coordinates spaces around it; yet the core always included a hearth and some trace of an alcove.⁵ Wright was not the only explorer in this architectural area, but he was the most active. The fascination of Wright's architecture lies in

5. See, e.g., Wright's Winslow house, Taliesin, and Wingspread in Hitchcock, *In the Nature of Materials*.

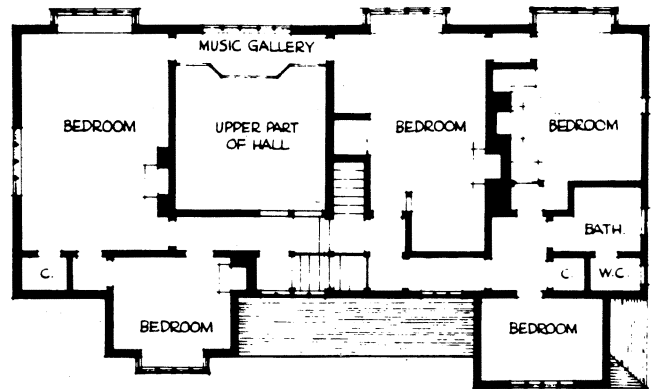


Fig. 8. M. H. Baillie Scott, Bexton Croft, Knutsford, Ches., 1894-1896 (Kornwolf, M. H. Baillie Scott).

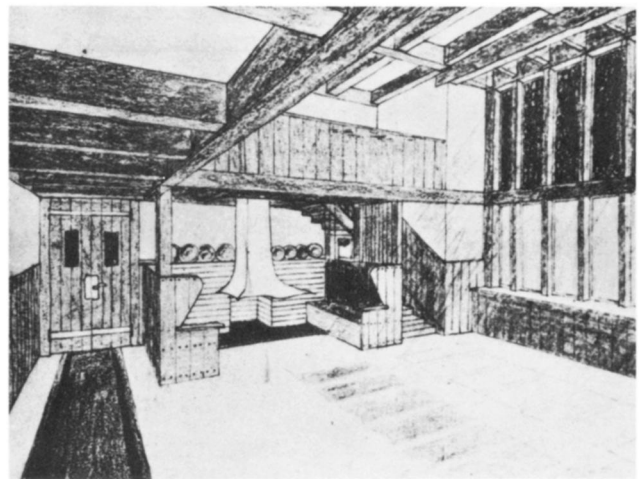


Fig. 10. Adolf Loos, hall project ca. 1901? Some scholars date this to the 1890s (Kornwolf, M. H. Baillie Scott).

great part in the unhurried consistency and profound ingenuity with which he pursued these possibilities. It is worthwhile to look at late examples of his work in this light (Figs. 11, 12, and 13).

This random survey of inglenooks and their sequels allows a few conclusions to be drawn. What begins as a somewhat bookish re-evocation of an ancient, prosaic device soon assumes greater importance: it becomes a symbol of social ideals. Transported across an ocean, this development loses some associations while gaining related ones of lesser subtlety. At the hands of a young American designer the theme, already liberally interpreted by many architects, evolves into new, terse, and eloquent arrangements. This shift removes it from the historic and societal associations long established, giving it fresh power in which human meaning, esthetic deftness, and architectural cogency combine to form an important and original advance. Precedent prepared the way for progress even though precedent alone never could have led to so much radical innovation.

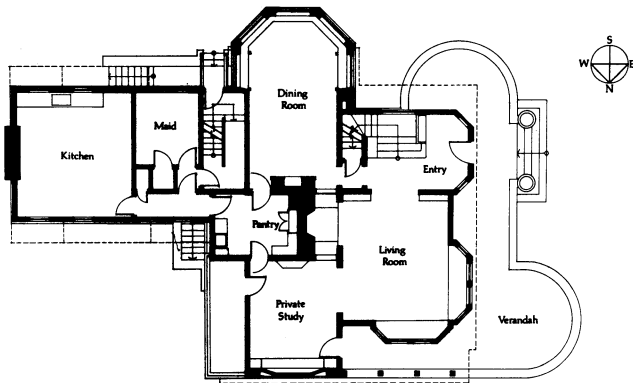


Fig. 11. Frank Lloyd Wright, own house, Oak Park, Illinois, 1895. Compare this to the original plan of 1889 (The Restoration Committee, *Plan for the Restoration . . . of the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio*).

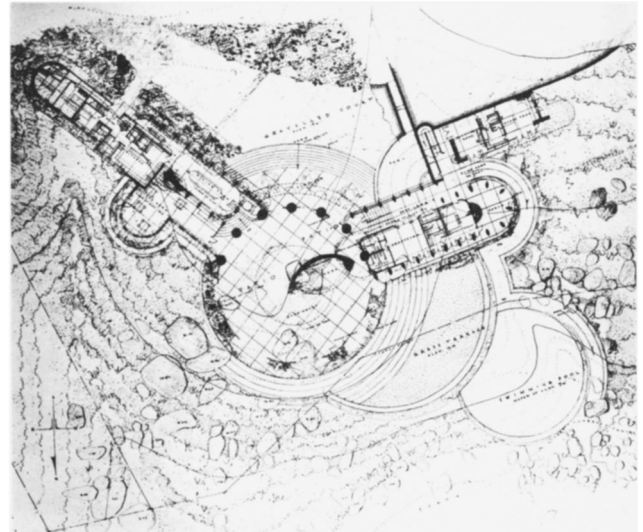


Fig. 12. Frank Lloyd Wright, Bailleres house project, 1952, plan, nook at center (*Drawings for a Living Architecture*).

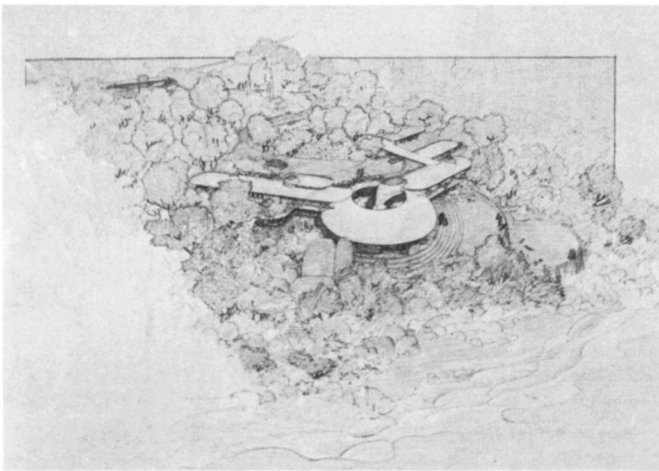


Fig. 13. Frank Lloyd Wright, Bailleres house project, 1952, aerial view. The “nook,” visible through a glazed opening in the roof, now contains a fountain and “air conditioning!” (Izzo and Gubitosi, *Frank Lloyd Wright: Disegni, 1887–1959*).