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FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

ARCHITECT

VISIONS AND REVISIONS SINCE 1910

BY TERENCE RILEY

In a recent newspaper article, the architect and planner Denise Scott Brown stated that Frank Lloyd Wright's "work and thought form a towering mountain in the field of architecture that has had to be re-evaluated with every shift in architectural philosophy over the last fifty years."¹ In anticipation of The Museum of Modern Art's retrospective exhibition *Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect*, Ms. Scott Brown wondered, "What revisionist stance will the Modern take?"

Before considering this question, it is important to explore previous shifts, as well as continuities, in the perception of Wright's work over the decades; as the historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock observed, "No book on Wright can ever altogether supersede those that already exist."²

Wright himself authored the first comprehensive views of his work. In 1910, he published the so-called Wasmuth Portfolio, one hundred meticulously reproduced drawings constituting the architect's own retrospective of his work to date. He also curated and designed an exhibition of his work of the Prairie Period at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1914. These projects not only presented Wright's own perspective of his work of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also reflected the wide renown he and his work enjoyed during that time, despite his self-proclaimed obscurity. While the selection of works included in the projects reflects Wright's personal interpretation of his work, the design of both book and exhibition were also expressive of his aesthetic concerns. The Wasmuth Portfolio, which Wright subsidized with both his own funds and those borrowed from his clients,³ was an elaborate fine-art edition

with gold-tipped, individually printed plates reproducing drawings prepared specifically for the publication. The installation at the Art Institute had a similar aesthetic self-consciousness. The drawings were suspended from black cords in carefully studied asymmetrical compositions. Accompanying the drawings were architectural models, stained glass, and furniture designed by the architect, interspersed with urns and vases—also designed by Wright—holding elaborate arrangements of dried flowers and weeds.

Some two decades later, Philip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock's appraisal of Wright's significance in the 1932 International Style exhibition, at The Museum of Modern Art, was more critical, representing the diminution of the architect's reputation among those who saw Europe as the cutting edge of architectural innovation. While Johnson and Hitchcock acknowledged Wright as an American master, they also insisted that "throughout the world there are others beside Wright to lead the way toward the future."⁴ For the young curators, the "others" were Le Corbusier, based in France, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, from Germany, and J. J. P. Oud, from Holland, all of whom had an interest in abstract, planar architecture that transcended their respective national boundaries. Wright's position was that the Europeans' interests were inspired by his own experiments with abstract space and form during the first decade of the century, particularly as expressed in such projects as the Larkin Building. Even so, in the years between the publication of the Wasmuth Portfolio and the MoMA exhibition, Wright's extremely ornate designs for such projects as Midway Gardens and the Imperial Hotel had taken him in a different direction from that which would inspire a new gen-

eration of architects. Moreover, personal misfortunes complicated Wright's career in the years leading up to the International Style exhibition, and after nearly a decade in which he received very few commissions and built next to nothing, the belief that Wright's time was past was not difficult to accept.

Wright was certainly resistant to such a judgement, and in the late 1920s and early 1930s he began a series of publications and lectures, including *An Autobiography* and the Kahn lectures, delivered at Princeton University, to defend his vision of modern architecture. Through these efforts, Wright sought to establish his own lineage as a disciple of Louis Sullivan and the Japanese print, with no influence from European sources, classical or otherwise. In terms of forcing a re-evaluation of his work and contemporary stature, however, neither his publications nor his lectures were as compelling an argument as the series of projects he completed in the mid- to late thirties: Fallingwater, in Mill Run, Pennsylvania (1934–37); the S. C. Johnson and Son, Inc. Administration Building, in Racine, Wisconsin (1936–39); and the first of two houses for Herbert Jacobs, dubbed the Usonian House, in Madison, Wisconsin (1936–37). Fallingwater, which instantly became one of the most famous houses in America, played a particularly important role. Dramatically perched on a woodland site overlooking a waterfall, the house not only restored Wright's public image as an important contemporary architect, but validated his personal architectural history as well: by basing the



Larkin Company Administration Building, Buffalo, New York. Interior; Light Court. 1902–06 (demolished 1950). Photo courtesy The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.

composition of Fallingwater on his design for the Gale House, of 1910, he reinforced his claims to both independence of and antecedence to European developments.

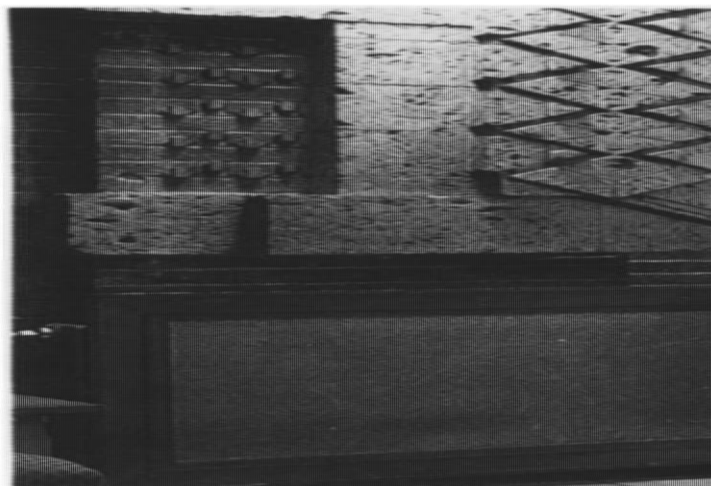
Wright's efforts to reorient the direction of modern architecture also took the form of an ambitious, polemical project which he began in 1934. Broadacre City was a model for a deurbanized, automotive America which was to have stretched from coast to coast. Wright promoted this vision both in print (*The Disappearing City* was published in 1932) and in a 1935

traveling exhibition that included a twelve-foot-by-twelve-foot model of Broadacre City.

Wright's stunning accomplishments of the 1930s caused Hitchcock and many others to not only re-evaluate but, for the most part, to reverse their opinion of Wright. In his 1942 book, *In the Nature of Materials*, Hitchcock tempered his previous position, saying that "[Wright's] work alone balanced the European work that was shown" in the International Style

exhibition of 1932. Hitchcock's change in attitude had been reflected two years earlier, in The Museum of Modern Art's first major exhibition of Wright's work, *Frank Lloyd Wright, American Architect*, curated by John McAndrew. Hitchcock's book and McAndrew's exhibition represented a new generation of critical enthusiasm for Wright's ongoing architectural invention. Hitchcock predicted: "Of Wright, as of Titian, we may believe that in the eighth decade of his life and the sixth

Imperial Hotel, Tokyo, Japan. Northern fireplace, parlor. ca. 1912–23 (demolished 1968). Photo: Ezra Stoller. © Esto; all rights reserved.



of his architectural career more work lies ahead which will equal in every way what is past.”⁶

Not all historians were willing to endorse such a broad reappraisal, however. Grant Manson’s influential research on Wright’s work to 1910 focused more narrowly on the Prairie Period. His attitude toward Wright’s work after 1910 was respectful but decidedly more ambivalent than Hitchcock’s: “Only the future will reveal where the apex of so great a career actually falls.”⁷ Manson’s preference for Wright’s earlier work was confirmed two decades later, when, in publishing his research as a book (*Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910*), he declined to expand its scope beyond the Prairie Period. While for Wright the Wasmuth Portfolio presented his view of his work to date, Manson viewed the period represented in the portfolio as an endpoint, referring to it as a “golden age.” It might be said that Manson’s initial research and Hitchcock’s book, completed just two years apart, represent a permanent split among critics and scholars: those who are drawn to Wright primarily as a figure of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and those who are more willing to follow the architect’s trajectory through the decades.

Not least among the latter was Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., son of the client who commissioned Fallingwater, born the same year as the publication of the Wasmuth Portfolio. His 1952 publication, *Taliesin Drawings*,⁸ focused exclusively on Wright’s work from 1940 onwards. Others sought to find a continuum throughout Wright’s life’s work. His entire career was surveyed in Vincent Scully’s book *Frank Lloyd Wright* and in The Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition *The Drawings of Frank Lloyd Wright*, organized by Arthur Drexler, then Director of the Department of Architecture and Design. Both of these appeared shortly after the architect’s death in 1959. (While Scully and Drexler’s treatment of the architect’s oeuvre was broad, it was equally brief, reflecting, perhaps, a reticence to deal with so complex a figure too close to his own time.)

The task of putting Wright’s monumental career into historical perspective was quickly eclipsed, however, by the philosophical polemics inspired by the 1966 publication of architect Robert



Broadacre City. Project, with later revisions. Model (made by Frank Lloyd Wright and the Taliesin Fellowship). 1934–35. Painted wood, cardboard, and paper. 12'8" x 12'8". The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. © 1993 The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.

Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. In this manifesto for a post-modern architecture, Venturi most often cites as his inspiration work from pre-twentieth century sources, from Baroque architects Francesco Borromini and Nicholas Hawksmoor to Sullivan. In most instances, Wright’s work, along with that of Mies, is used as a negative comparison.

Charles Jencks, in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, similarly makes few distinctions among the work of Wright, Gropius, and Le Corbusier. Thus, ironically, by the 1960s Wright had become more associated with twentieth-century International Style Modernism, which he railed against, than with the work of Sullivan, his employer and mentor.

While Wright’s work was too “modern” for the Postmodernists, it was viewed as too traditional by those trying to develop and reenvision the avant-garde spirit of Modernism. In this country, much of those efforts centered around the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, led by such figures as Peter Eisenman and Kenneth Frampton. The Institute’s journal, *Oppositions*, published from 1973 through 1981, became a forum for scholarly and critical debate, frequently focusing on the history of twentieth-century architecture. Despite the journal’s admirable breadth and synthetic viewpoint, however, not one article on Wright was ever published in it.

Against this briefly sketched history, Denise Scott Brown’s question, “What revisionist stance will the Modern take?” becomes more meaningful. The first aspect that distinguishes *Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect* from previous representations of Wright and his work is the simple benefit of additional historical perspective. When MoMA staged its first retrospective of Wright’s work, when the architect was seventy-three years of age, no one could have known that he would live and work for another twenty years, producing such landmarks as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, in New York City (1943–59); the S. C. Johnson & Son Research Laboratory Tower (1943–50); the Price Tower in Bartlesville, Oklahoma (1952–56); and Beth Shalom Synagogue, in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania

(1953–59), among other buildings. Additionally, the hiatus in critical interest in Wright's work in the thirty-five years since his death has provided greater distance from his last projects and, perhaps as importantly, from the times in which he produced them—that is, during the post-war expansion of the 1950s. Now, for the first time, Wright's entire oeuvre can be surveyed from the perspectives of both architectural criticism and broader cultural analysis.

This perspective allows us to ascertain various relationships which were not always evident in the architect's own writings, through which he consciously and assiduously discouraged comparison between his work and that of his contemporaries and, other than Sullivan and the Japanese print, denied any influences. Wright was a firm believer in the romantic image of the genius as a solitary individual following a personal vision, and in his dealings with critics and historians he advocated this point of view. *Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect* places Wright within the context of his formation in the nineteenth century and the ways in which this subsequently influenced his life's work. Moreover, the exhibition confronts Wright's romantic self-image with a chronological account that describes how his genius both conformed with and ran counter to the efforts of his peers in Europe and America, including discussions of the sources that appear to have had the most influence on Wright, despite his assertions to the contrary. The exhibition also challenges the accepted histories as to the architect's working methods, the specific chronologies of his projects, and the circumstances under which they were built.

That there could be so much new information to be presented about an architect who died relatively recently should not be wholly surprising. While Wright was quite concerned with his own historical position, he was also, as Hitchcock notes, "very careless about dates,"⁹ and the information he provided historians was often wrong. (Ironically, Hitchcock's own estimation of the importance of the Yahara Boathouse is based on incorrect dates. Recent studies by Jack



Fallingwater, Edgar J. Kaufmann House, Mill Run, Pennsylvania. Exterior. 1934–37.
Photo: Paul Rocheleau.

Holzheuter show that it was designed after the Larkin Building and Unity Temple, for which Hitchcock believed the boathouse was an antecedent.¹⁰)

In addition to verifying, and in some cases changing the dates of the projects presented in *Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect*, research carried out in preparation for the exhibition provides new views of how certain architectural developments occurred. For example, Wright's much celebrated "desert masonry," the rubble wall construction at Taliesin West (1937–38, and later) and in other buildings in the

Southwest, has an unexpected and fascinating history. Research by Peter Reed, Assistant Curator, Department of Architecture and Design at The Museum of Modern Art, reveals that in 1927, Wright's close friend and client D. D. Martin urged the architect to visit Staten Island on an upcoming trip to New York City to see houses designed by Ernest Flagg. Built of low-cost, low-tech rubble and concrete, the economical system seemed ideal to Martin for a commission he obtained for Wright—the Rosenwald School for the Hampton Institute in Virginia, a school for African Americans. While the Rosenwald School was never built, several years later the simple system proved well suited to Wright's own Fellowship compound in the Arizona desert, where both stone and labor were abundant and cheap.

Given Wright's emphasis on the idea of individual genius, it is not surprising that most of his histories have focused almost exclusively on the architect himself. Yet the role played by the many talented apprentices and colleagues who passed through Wright's studios is an important one. While this history is obviously a secondary thread, any full understanding of Wright's work is dependent on it and many others. *Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect* is one of the first exhibitions to make a comprehensive attempt to identify the delineators of the drawings presented. Wright was firmly convinced of the importance of drawing above any other medium, whether it be model making, or, later, photography, in the practice of architecture. He himself was a superb draftsman and set high standards in the studio. Unsurprisingly, he

attracted a number of gifted apprentices, such as Marion Mahoney, the most senior of Wright's Oak Park assistants, William Drummond, Richard Neutra, Rudolph Schindler, Antonin Raymond, and John Howe, many of whom went on to successful professional careers of their own.

Other compelling reasons for staging a major revision of Wright's work are evident. His lifelong search for architectural expression that makes no reference to traditional styles is of great timeliness as public and professional interest in the historicist elements of Postmodernism has waned. His emphasis on architectonics—the materials and techniques of architecture and the logic that intertwines them—as opposed to historical architectural forms, has particular importance in an era nearly obsessed with simulation.

Wright's particular attitudes about architecture, the landscape, and the thrifty use of resources also speak to contemporary concerns about building and the environment. His use of passive solar heat, earthen berms for insulation, and building materials culled directly from the site just after the Depression and during World War II, when commodities were scarce, preceded by decades modern-day concerns about energy consumption and renewable resources.

Perhaps of greatest contemporary interest are Wright's theories about the design of communities. Especially in their equation of the automobile with personal freedom, these theories are as controversial now as they were in their own day. Even so, the architect was undeniably capable of expressing in architectural form the signal compass points of American culture: an exaltation of the individual and an equally intense, and often conflicting, sense of common destiny.



Beth Shalom Synagogue, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. Exterior. 1953–59. Photo © 1985 Pedro E. Guerrero.

Terence Riley, Chief Curator, Department of Architecture and Design, The Museum of Modern Art, organized Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect, with Peter S. Reed, Assistant Curator, Department of Architecture and Design,

in cooperation with The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Scottsdale, Arizona. Curatorial consultants are Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, Director, The Frank Lloyd Wright Archives, and Anthony Alofsin, Sid Richardson Centennial Fellow and Director of the Center for the Study of American Architecture and Design, The University of Texas, Austin.

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1. Denise Scott Brown, "Wright in the Rear-View Mirror," *The New York Times*, September 12, 1993, p. 56.

2. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Foreword to Grant Carpenter Manson, *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910: The First Golden Age* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Company, 1958), p. viii.

3. Anthony Alofsin, *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Lost Years, 1910–1922* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) chapters 1–3.

4. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, "Frank Lloyd Wright," in Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *Modern Architecture International Exhibition* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, February 10–March 23, 1932), p. 7.

5. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *In the Nature of Materials: The Buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright, 1887–1941* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1942), p. 85.

6. *ibid.*, p. 63.

7. Manson, p. 213.

8. *Talisin Drawings: Recent Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright Selected from his Drawings*. Comments by Edgar Kaufman, Jr. (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc. 1952).

9. Hitchcock, foreword to Manson, p. viii.

10. John O. Holzhueter, "Cudworth Beye, Frank Lloyd Wright, and the Yahara River Boathouse, 1905," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 72, Number 3, Spring 1989, p. 163–198.

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, New York.

Perspective (drawn by Peter Berndtson). 1943–59. Watercolor and ink on paper. 20 1/8" x 24 1/8". The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. © 1986 The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.

