

Magical Conception (The Remarkable Architectural Genius of Frank Lloyd Wright)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

“Therefore, conceive the building in the imagination, not on paper but in the mind, thoroughly—before touching paper. Let it live there, gradually taking more definite form before committing it to the draughting board. When the thing lives for you—start to plan it with tools not before.”

~Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959)

On a recent trip to the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) with a friend, I came upon a stained glass panel on the 3rd Level’s Gallery of Modern Design which dated back to 1912. The clear and coloured glass heirloom with its playful party motif was designed by renowned American architect Frank Lloyd Wright who originally created the lead-latticed detail to invite light into a playhouse for an Illinois family who had once hired him to design their Prairie-style home. Wright, whose architectural career spanned over seventy years, designed many monumental buildings ranging from residential properties, to art museums, to places of worship and even industrial workplaces. The residential glass panel in the museum collection I had seen that very afternoon indicated the level of detail involved in these epic temples (of family life, art, worship or business), in which he often integrated his own complimentary set of furnishings, woodwork and even dining room place settings. In this essay on the great American architect, we will explore his earlier years of development, his genius and some of the patterns and methodology behind his remarkable works.

1. Earlier Years

Frank Lincoln Wright was born in 1867 and was believed by his Unitarian mother to be predestined to be a master builder (1). From a young age, his mother exposed him to a complex set of building blocks which taught him a play with various geometric shapes and integrate them into a greater whole. As he matured, Wright “spent the summers of his adolescence roaming the Wisconsin farmland owned by his mother’s family, fostering an appreciation for nature that would inspire his philosophy of organic architecture.” (2) After attending Wisconsin University where he learned drafting, he relocated to Chicago to try to start his architectural practice. In Chicago, he met architect Louis Sullivan, who was impressed by his drafting skills and promptly hired him in his prestigious firm. After assisting Sullivan in various designs in the Chicago area such as residential properties and larger commissions such as skyscrapers, Sullivan dismissed Wright when he discovered that his protégé was secretly designing homes for rich clients from his position in the firm. (1) After leaving his mentor’s firm, Wright carried with him some of Sullivan’s architectural wisdom, his influence of the arts and craft movement and his appreciation of Japanese art and culture. (1) Working for himself, Wright soon honed his skills in designing fancy Prairie-style houses noteworthy for their “organic design, simplicity, horizontality, the[ir] open plan, natural materials, and

integral furnishings.” (3) A few large-scale commissions such as the Larkin Building and Unity Temple accompanied the numerous residential contracts of this earlier period.

2. Genius

After a slow down period following the Great Depression, Wright would finally get a commission to build a luxurious mansion for the Kaufmann family in Pennsylvania, which he would draw up from his Wisconsin studio Taliesin. The creative process behind the property illustrates Wright’s keen spatial genius with the architect “deliberat[ing] a long time before putting pencil to paper” and “beg[inning] [the] drafting [of] his conceptual plan for Fallingwater just three hours before Mr. and Mrs. Kaufmann arrived at Taliesin for a review of his proposals.” (4) Fallingwater, one of the most famous modern homes in the world, “broke one of [Wright’s] steadfast rules” of “situating his residences to provide the occupants with the best possible view”. Instead, “his plan for Fallingwater [...] present[ed] a more spectacular view of the house and falls from downstream”. (4)

After mastering the distinctly American style of design known later as the Prairie School (2), Wright wanted to diversify the scale and style of his home designs when he created his first Usonian house. This model of home “was an efficient, comfortable, and attractive dwelling that Frank Lloyd Wright intended to match the needs and limited budget of the modern middle-american family.” (2) Wright would soon incorporate his ‘textile-block’ construction system inspired in part by Mayan architecture, which allowed him “to unite inside space with outside space” and to ‘break the box’ (3). This stage “marked the transition from the mature and complex geometric organization of the Prairie Houses to the freer yet more rational ordering of space in the Usonian Houses.” (3) When exploring Wright’s genius, “[o]ne cannot escape the feeling [...] that he was able to visualize forms and spaces to an uncanny degree –rotating and projecting, folding and unfolding, disassembling and reassembling, seeing outside and inside, all in his mind—so that what eventually emerged on paper is more in the nature of a recording or double-checking than what is normally thought of as a conceptual design sketch.” (3)

3. Methodology

The last two decades of Wright’s life were by far the most prolific with the World War II period being by far the busiest. When asked about his design output at this time, Wright replied that he “can’t get them out fast enough” (1). With a new winter home base and studio in Arizona called Taliesin West and his Fellowship with numerous apprentices in full swing, he would design hundreds of buildings at this time including large commissions such as a cultural centre and a civic centre. While it is quite difficult to dissect the patterns and methodology behind Wright’s ingenious and immaculate plans, a shift from centrifugal to centripetal spatial patterns is noted by experts comparing his private and public commissions. “The centrifugal houses [like the Prairie Houses], draw their users’ attention to nature, that is, the landscaped site, with a series

of views and perimeter extensions, while the great central spaces of his centripetal public buildings reinforce and inwardly focus the group consciousness of their users.” (3) Another noteworthy pattern are the two main plan forms that appear most commonly in Wright’s designs. “The first is the pinwheel, four volumes that spin around a solid center (unfolding space). The second is the cruciform, two volumes that interpenetrate to form a stable square at the center (projecting space).” (3) His most monumental commission, New York City’s Guggenheim Museum, deviated slightly from this spatial pattern with the use of a spiral framework in its ascending ramp and curvilinear structure.

While many architectural aficionados often overlook the beauty and complexity of Frank Lloyd Wright’s adjacent gardens as they organically extend and complement the plans of his intricate buildings, it is worth noting that Wright was also a master garden designer influenced heavily by the work of renowned landscape master Jens Jensen. Among the many notable landscape tips for Wright’s distinct styles of American gardens, the principle of ‘compression’ and ‘release’ is often used by landscape specialist for optimal dramatic visual effect. Wright suggests “Consider[ing] a vine-covered pergola leading from the house to a garden room or between two sunny garden spaces. This produces a leafy tunnel and a sense of compression, then release, when you emerge into the sunlight.” (4)

While Frank Lloyd Wright considered architecture to be a ‘master art form’ and was reputed to have had a special ‘spiritual connection’ to his buildings, he often criticized the ‘souless-ness’ of modern buildings, preferring to ‘handcraft’ his structures, designing every aspect of their interior and inner components in a cohesive and integral manner. Living a life often marred with controversy and even intense tragedy, Wright’s often luxurious and ornate creations designed for a privileged elite later were converted to more accessible historical landmarks with heritage and educational potential. Many publications on the renowned American master architect also include tips on how to tour his noteworthy public and private commissions throughout the United States and abroad. Wright often compared his works to elaborate musical compositions by composers like Johann Sebastian Bach. “Music is a unit system, and [...] fugues [from composers like Bach] were specific musical compositions that derived elaborate self-generating configurations from simple arithmetic progressions.” These were a great “source of inspiration” for the man as he strained himself and toiled to tailor his ingenious spatial designs to a challenging and evolving site.

Sources:

1. Frank Lloyd Wright (1998). Dir. Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. Florentine Films. USA. 146 min.
2. “Wright Sites-A Guide to Frank Lloyd Wright Public Spaces-4th Edition”. Princeton Architectural Press eBook. NY. 2017. p.339, p.143, p.261.

3. "On and By Frank Lloyd Wright-A Primer of Architectural Principles", Edited by Robert McCarter, Phaidon Press. NY. 2005. p.112, p.195, p.289, p.284-285, p.307, p.118.
4. "The Gardens of Frank Lloyd Wright", Derek Fell. Frances Lincoln Ltd. Publishers. London. 2009. p.87, p.152.