

Amerikaanse
dromen

*Frank Lloyd Wright
en Nederland*

Uitgeverij oio

Authenticity and the popular appeal of Frank Lloyd Wright

A revised history of America's most famous architect

The inside cover of the January 17, 1938 *Life* magazine featured a photograph of the recently completed Kaufmann weekend house, 'Fallingwater,' designed by America's best known architect, the then 70-year-old Frank Lloyd Wright. The house is shown emerging from thick woods, hovering above flowing water. The view is not from the approach to the house or from within, but from the outside, downstream, a vantage point that renders the conceptual idea of the house in its entirety: the magic of immense heaviness levitating; the Biblical metaphor of water from rock; an exclusive retreat alone in acres of wooded paradise.

This full-page exposé was in fact an advertisement. With it, *Life* promoted its subsidiary journal *Architectural Forum*, the January 1938 volume of which was designed by Wright and documented his recent work. *Life* proclaimed this issue of *Forum* 'the most important architectural document ever published in America,' describing it as the 'only record in print of what we have come to call the Modern Movement, from its inception to its present-day interpretation.'¹ It assured the reader that in *Forum's* many pages of photographs and drawings 'you will see architecture as thoroughly indigenous to America as the earth and rocks from which it springs.' The words of Frank Lloyd Wright himself underscored both image and proclamation:

SAYS WRIGHT OF ORGANIC ARCHITECTURE:

'This type of Architecture, suited to the modeling of the surrounding hills, bespeaks the materials and methods under which and by way of which the buildings themselves were born.'

OF AMERICA'S YOUNGER ARCHITECTS:

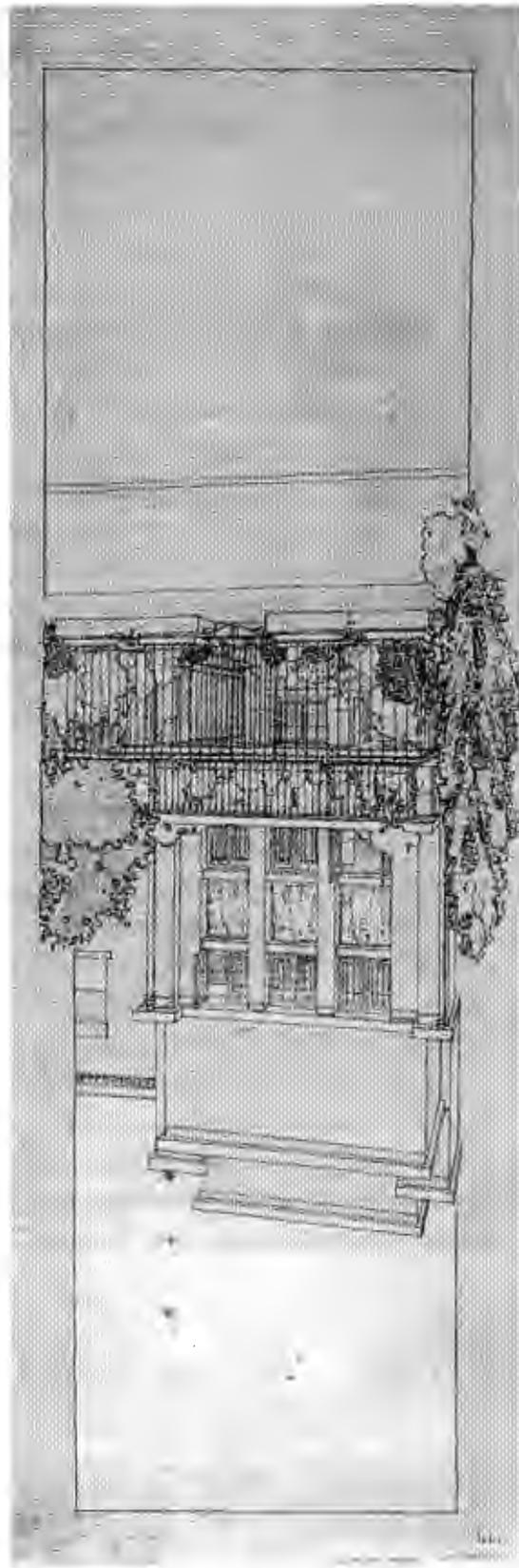
'We have technology and technologies to throw away, technicians to burn, but still we have no architecture. We need an architecture so rich in this life of today that just because of it life will be better worthwhile.'

OF THE SMALL HOUSE:

'To give the little American family the benefit of industrial advantages of the era in which they live, something else must be done for them

Frank Lloyd Wright, FLW House, project, perspective, Chicago, Illinois, 1911

¹ *Life*, January 17, 1938, inside front cover.



of one of his residential clients. This infamy continued for over two decades, suggesting that it was Wright's work – accepted the world over as that of an architectural genius – and not his sometimes-suspect personality that accounted for his renown. Wright's resurrection came in the late 30's at the height of the Great Depression, at a time when America needed a Frank Lloyd Wright, the fantasy of Fallingwater, the wonder of Johnson Wax, the magic of his desert retreat. Wright's outspoken, optimistic character served Depression-Era America in a manner similar to a performance by Shirley Temple or to the production of Busby Berkeley. Still, behind Wright's persuasive capabilities was a truly unique and often incredible architecture – unlike any built before it. In an age of advertising and image, Wright offered near magical building, fantastic, but at the same time, utterly authentic.

Wright described his buildings not as 'authentic,' however, but as 'organic' and 'natural' – terms that directly related their materials, methods, siting, and gestures to the natural environment. Wright's ideas of nature were derived largely from the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ideas little known by most Americans in the late 1930's and throughout the 1940's and 1950's.⁶ The relevancy of Wright's 'nature,' intriguing though it certainly was to his disciples and to scholars of his work, was lost to the public at large.

During the Depression, in America, authenticity was not a commodity to be sought but a fact of life to be reconciled. Deprivation and hardships were authentic – situations to be tolerated at best and avoided if possible. Wright's Fallingwater and Johnson Wax Building offered mental refuge, as did his optimistic personality and his desert enclave in Arizona.

With economic resurgence in the post-War years and the advent of new technologies and easier life, authenticity began to fade. The technological advances and mass-production mentality cultivated in America during the war were now directed toward peacetime pleasures. Electricity, artificial light, the telephone, the radio, the television, the automobile transformed American life after the war like never before. Novelty and 'the news' became necessity. Laborsaving devices were everywhere in evidence. Suburbia and suburban values grew at an unprecedented rate. Though few Americans were aware of it, mediation in the form of new technologies altered their perception of reality. America's geographic size and its lack of a firmly established social hierarchy rendered mediation 'normal.' Its technological prowess accommodated mediation and ultimately was fueled by it.

Yet certain minds, Wright's included, held in suspicion America's venture into hyper-reality. They sought instead a 'world within a world' free of the overtones of a machine-oriented society. Authenticity was appreciated only with its gradual disappearance. Authenticity offers a unique combination. It couples realness, genuineness, unquestionable credibility and originality with 'conformity to widespread or long-continued tradition.'⁷ That is to say, it unites the original with the traditional. Wright, who was born just three years after the Civil War ended (his given name was 'Frank Lincoln Wright'), was an icon of authenticity in both person and performance. His architecture, one might argue, was and still is popular precisely because it's authenticity so obviously remedied overt mediation. And though an authentic architecture could not guarantee an authentic life, Wright's authenticity promised to conserve a traditional quality in life, enhancing it with the technologies of modernity while offering the exclusivity of good taste that dignified those who dwelled in it.

By 1945, Wright had worked at building the authentic house for over half a century, but only in the post-War years did he find a mass clientele for this house. Clearly, most Americans lived in a way that differed drastically from the way Wright believed most Americans *should* live. In his many commissions for suburban houses between 1900 and 1909 Wright developed a sophisticated, modern architectural language of form and space – a language that insisted on the unity of interior and exterior. Yet Wright could control only the interior, not the exterior, environment. Occasionally, a wooded site of some size was offered him, but more often than not the Wrightian house of novel form opened to its nearby neighbors: traditional turn-of-the-century wood-frame ‘Victorians’, large but lacking architectural merit.

Wright houses were aliens in what seemed to him an inauthentic environment. They indicted rather than enhanced their surroundings. To retain its sense of authenticity, a house of Wrightian vocabulary and form had either to give up its extroversion in favor of an introverted *parti*, or it had to find a secluded, non-suburban site that would permit it to open to a ‘natural’ environment.

The history of Wright’s work can be understood as the history of a struggle for authenticity in an architecture of openness. This history necessarily differs from conventional histories of Wright, dividing his work into two essential parts: ‘finding a formal vocabulary’ and ‘exacting authenticity in architecture.’

Though he could not have known it at the time, this two-part division was initiated in 1909 when the 42-year-old Wright left his wife and six children in Oak Park to travel to Berlin with his mistress Mamah Borthwick Cheney, the wife of a former client. For the Berlin publisher Ernst Wasmuth, he produced a portrait of himself as an architect. Wright’s *Ausgeführte Bauten und Entwürfe* is a highly edited, highly abstracted portfolio of work from the Oak Park years. In both this 1910 hand-drawn, 100-sheet portfolio⁸ and in the 1911 ‘little Wasmuth’ book of photographic images of the work that followed,⁹ Wright portrayed himself as the designer of natural houses: houses that resisted symmetry, flowed effortlessly from the inside to the outside; houses situated in treed and cultured ‘nature.’ Even Wright’s most corralled suburban works, masterpieces like Unity Temple and Robie House, are photographed in an extensively treed environment, this despite their wholly man-made surrounds.

The Wasmuth publications are typically heralded as indication of a European appreciation of an exceptional architecture rejected in its country of origin, yet the very making of such a portrait must have alerted Wright himself to the fact that he was not the architect that he wanted to be. Careful imaging permitted Wright to present his buildings in seemingly natural environments, while in truth most were wholly subsumed in a suburban setting reprehensible to the architect.¹⁰ Clearly Wright’s buildings did not fit their ‘site,’ if site was understood to mean both a suburban and social context.

On his return to Oak Park, Wright was ostracized by proper suburban society. He removed himself to the farmland of his youth in central Wisconsin where he built a house for his mistress, his mother, and himself. Rejected by suburban society, Wright returned to the ancestral farmland to make manifest his belief in an authentic architecture, an architecture he described as ‘natural’ and ‘organic.’ The farm was remote, on rolling hills with sumptuous natural amenities including



Frank Lloyd Wright studying a model of Robie House, as published in *Frank Lloyd Wright American Architect*, 1940



BEAUTIFUL is devoting this entire issue to FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

'House Beautiful is devoting this entire issue to FLW', *House Beautiful*, november 1955, p. 233

5 F.L. Wright, *Ausgeführte Bauten und Entwürfe*, Berlin 1910.

9 F.L. Wright, *Ausgeführte Bauten*, Berlin 1911.

10 That Wright found suburbia reprehensible is evidenced in many of his writings, perhaps most clearly in his 1954 *The Natural House*.

'What was the matter with the typical American house? Well, just for an honest beginning, it lied about everything. It had no sense of unity at all nor any such sense of space as should belong to a free people. It was stuck up in thoughtless fashion [...] To take any of these so-called 'homes' away would have improved the landscape and helped to clear the atmosphere.' F.L. Wright, *The Natural House*, New York 1954, p. 14.

distant vistas and the broad flowing waters of the Wisconsin River. Into this world Wright wove his house, employing a rambling, country dialect of the formal vocabulary that he had cultivated for nearly twenty years in suburban domestic architecture. Less an object than a living extension of himself, the house in central Wisconsin was given the archaic Welsh name: 'Taliesin' – 'shining brow' – a name that describes the building's relationship with its site, simultaneously coating it with a distinct and exotic personality.

III

To appreciate the dilemma Wright resolved in the building of Taliesin, it is worthwhile to review the conditions of his work prior to 1911 in suburban Chicago and in the small towns that surround it.

While a young man in the Chicago office of Louis Sullivan, Wright built a house for himself and his family in Oak Park, a 'commuter rail suburb' noted for its greenery and church-going population. In 1893, the 26-year-old Wright established his own studio in rented office space in downtown Chicago. The urban location lent an air of credibility, and he used the office for meetings with clients and to draw on a pool of shared draftsmen. Most creative work, however, was done in his Oak Park home at all hours of night and day, uniting work and family life in a rather old-fashioned manner.

When his practice grew, Wright added a studio to his house; and by the end of the century, home and studio were of equal size. The difference in style between house and office is obvious, even as a common brick and dark-brown shingle cladding attempt to unify the two.

It was in this suburban studio, during the first decade of the 20th Century, that Wright established himself as America's foremost architect. He designed and executed over a hundred residences for Oak Park, for other Chicago suburbs, and occasionally for small towns in the Midwest. The houses were often lightweight: stucco or wood siding over a peculiarly American, balloon frame of concealed wood. This type of construction permitted Wright to treat walls as screens. Visually, he liberated the roof from the support of these screens. On the house exterior, continuous planes seemed to float in air; yet the house interior remained private, secure, and cave-like. Interiors were possessed by 'organic reality' and featured wood floors, wood paneling, and plaster ceilings lined with wood battens that seemed to follow and therefore define the roof structure.

Wright soon revised the American house. He lowered the exterior roofline, eliminated the attic, and enhanced the principle living spaces

with ceilings that followed the now-shallow pitched roof. That is to say, what formerly was attic space in a steeply pitched roof was initially compressed by Wright into a shallow-pitched roof and eventually opened to the flowing interior space below. What formerly was basement was pulled out of the ground to serve as podium for an elevated *piano nobile*. Though hierarchically this lower level was not the equal of the *piano nobile* above, it contained essential rooms: the entry, a staircase, perhaps a playroom for children, a utility room for service. The *piano nobile* was comprised of the living and dining rooms, rooms in which the ceiling often followed the roofline. If the lot size permitted, this level was extended to include a master bedroom or bedroom wing. If not, bedrooms would be located on an upper floor. No longer a discreet set of cubic rooms set one beside the other, the ensemble exuded 'continuous space'. In the best of Wright's houses, this continuous space was anchored by a massive, centralized fireplace while flowing outward to a treed, pastoral setting through the multiple frames of large, glazed surfaces and extensive porches. Such space was simultaneously centripetal and centrifugal.

The extension of interior space to exterior space – 'destroying the box' as Wright would later describe it – was essential to Wright's architecture, but presupposed a desirable surrounding environment. Wright's early masterpieces, the Willits and Coonley houses, were built on extensively wooded, highly desirable natural sites. In the years that followed, Wright designed for smaller and smaller suburban sites – sites littered with common and often unattractive houses. Though the small house fascinated Wright, its necessarily minimal suburban plot seemed to contradict the very essence of his architecture. Wright's initial resolution to this dilemma was to design plot and house together as an ensemble to be built in an ideal 'Prairie Town' setting.

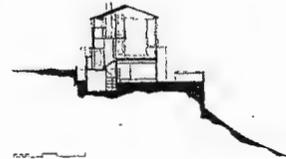
Not the first but perhaps the clearest manifestation of this 'plot and house together' scheme is Wright's 'Quadruple Block Plan,' a theoretical project published in the *Ladies' Home Journal* in February, 1901. It posits four, near identical, not-so-small houses on a Prairie-town lot in such a way as to maximize privacy while sharing a common, enclosed yard. The four detached, single-family houses open out both to the street and to a walled-in yard that corrals the natural environment. But Wright carefully calculated the surrounding suburb making neighboring buildings an integral part of the design and reinforcing the project's Prairie aesthetic. Of the Quadruple Block Plan and initially in reference to the standard suburban development, Wright wrote: 'It seems a waste of energy to plan a house haphazard, to hit or miss an already distorted condition, so this partial solution of a city man's country home on the



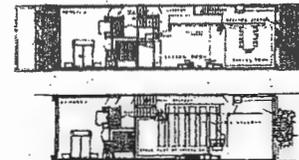
Frank Lloyd Wright, Unity Temple and Unity House, Oak Park, Chicago, Illinois, 1905-08



Frank Lloyd Wright, Coonley House, interior perspective of the living room, Riverside, Illinois, 1908



Frank Lloyd Wright, Thomas Hardy House, section, Racine, Wisconsin, 1905



Frank Lloyd Wright, FLW House, project, 2nd and 3rd floor plans, Chicago, Illinois, 1911



Frank Lloyd Wright, Frederick C. Bogk House, exterior, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1916-17

prairie begins at the beginning and assumes four houses to the block of four hundred feet square (...).’ To this he added, the ‘arrangement of the four houses (...) secures breadth and prospect to the community as a whole and absolute privacy both as regards each to the community, and each to each of the four.’²¹ The Quadruple Block was never built though Wright, as was his habit, proposed it to others time and again, most notably in 1903 to Charles E. Roberts who considered building a complex of twenty-four such houses in Oak Park.

If ‘designing the next larger thing’ was Wright’s first strategy for resolving the dilemma of suburbia, his second was designing a small house exclusive of site or client. Though this approach seems incredulous given Wright’s reputation for integrating site and building, in many respects it typifies Wright’s thinking about architecture – thinking far more theoretical than that often assigned him. Thus, in 1905, Wright designed a \$5000 fireproof house for publication in the February, 1906 issue of the popular press *Ladies’ Home Journal*. A two-storey, cubic block of concrete too economical to support the *piano-nobile-on-podium parti*, Wright’s design was attenuated by a long, low pergola laced with vines and a one-story entrance that permitted penetration to the far side of the center of the house. The design featured a flat roof and only a modest version of Wrightian interior space. Its uncompromising use of exposed concrete construction and its cubic appearance did not find favor with the American middle class and the house was never built as proposed. Its aesthetic idea was realized, however, first in 1907 in the Stephen M. B. Hunt House in La Grange, Illinois; and later in 1908 in the not-fireproof, balloon-frame, stucco-with-hip-roof Stockman residence in Mason City, Iowa. Wright’s ‘re-dress’ of the concrete cube to meet market expectations of small-town suburbanites can only call into question the sense of authenticity offered in the original.

There is a third strategy – introversion – that during Wright’s Oak Park years was not employed in the design of residential buildings, but that was used only when Wright designed larger institutional buildings sited in suburban or industrial locations. Most notably, it was employed in both the 1904 Larkin Building – a mail-order administration headquarters built in a highly polluted factory setting in Buffalo, New York – and the tightly-budgeted 1906 Unity Temple, built on a corner lot for Wright’s neighborhood Oak Park congregation. Different in purpose, both buildings adopt a similar 4-poster vocabulary, are uncompromising and direct in their use of materials, and are decidedly centripetal revolving around the void of vertical space lit majestically from above. Both employ an enter-from-the-center strategy that undermines any assignment of façade but permits Wright to distinguish as frontal the elevation that parallels the principle street. In Unity Temple especially, the front elevation is nearly identical to the other elevations of the primary block: an honest, modest, and apparently logical portrait of the building’s construct. With equivalent elevations and light from above, with a central void as skewer around which all usable space is displaced and towards which all attention is focused, both the Larkin Building and Unity Temple employ a strategy of introversion that Wright used time and again for his urban institutional buildings.

Though Taliesin is not the first instance of authenticity in Wright's work, it marks the beginning of an architecture in which the authentic is essential. With Taliesin, Wright departed radically from the temperament of the suburban architecture he had created in Oak Park and its surrounds. Professionally, however, his practice was based on his earlier suburban buildings and much of his work in the early Teens continued in the formal vocabulary of the Oak Park years. Occasionally, Wright deviated from this. In Chicago, for example, he designed a townhouse for himself in 1912 to be built on Goethe Street. It is the only known instance of an introverted residential design similar in many respects to strategies devised for the Larkin Building and Unity Temple. In Milwaukee and later in Los Angeles, Wright designed houses with highly restrained exterior massing. His established 'sliding plane' vocabulary gave way to cubic shapes reminiscent of Mayan blocks. Unlike Wright's Oak Park houses, the exteriors of these blockish buildings do not express interior movement, though both feature centripetal interior spaces and the centrifugal flow of interior space outward.

Wright had persistently promoted his architecture and that of the so-called Prairie School as *the* true American architecture. He believed it both original and appropriate to the American condition. These beliefs were questioned, however, in the mid-Teens when the 'school' began to stagnate. Its finer examples showed signs of aging badly. More importantly, a new *American* architecture was discovered in Williamsburg. Dubbed 'Early American,' its brick-box-with-gabled-roof *parti* was far simpler, more economical, more direct and less pretentious than Prairie School designs. It conveyed an ambience of age at a time when history was thought essential. It had the added advantage of being easily combined to form cohesive neighborhoods and harmonious villages.

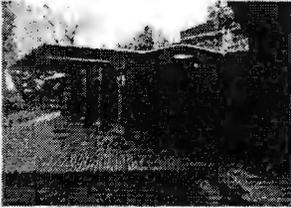
Wright had no direct response to the fashion for Early American designs. His own life had been altered dramatically when Taliesin was burned to the ground and during the fire his mistress and her children were brutally murdered. He rebuilt Taliesin, but left both this house and America to journey to Japan. On an urban block in Tokyo, he built the Imperial Hotel in carved lava stone, masonry and heavy concrete. Though its details, furnishings, and interior spaces were categorically 'Wright-organic', the Hotel's heavy, symmetrical *parti* was unmistakably Beaux Arts. The open extensiveness of Prairie School design was clearly at odds with the grid of the urban site.¹²

The Imperial Hotel took six years to design and build. It was Wright's largest commission to date. Critics seldom comment on the hotel's Neo-Classical form and its decidedly inorganic manner of addressing its urban site. Rather the hotel is renowned in Wright history for its structural design. In 1923, an earthquake destroyed much of Tokyo including many of the buildings that surrounded the Imperial Hotel. The Hotel remained undamaged – a fate that Wright attributes to his daring cantilever structural design. He promoted the Imperial Hotel as humanitarian, a heroic product of American genius and *savoir faire*, an example of the extent of his own insight into concrete frames and building technology.

Wright's return to America in the 1920's is often described in terms of his turbulent relationship with his second wife, Miriam Noel, and his subsequent affair with Olgivanna, a 'young



Frank Lloyd Wright, Malcolm Willey House, living room, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1934



Frank Lloyd Wright, Malcolm Willey House, exterior, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1934



Frank Lloyd Wright, Malcolm Willey House, living room, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1934

¹¹ F.L. Wright, 'Home in a Prairie Town,' *Ladies' Home Journal* (February, 1901), as quoted in B. Brooks Pfcisz, *Frank Lloyd Wright Monograph 1887-1901*, Tokyo 1986, p. 154.

¹² Perhaps the most successful combination of Prairie School aesthetic and urban grid was achieved at this time in Sioux City, Iowa where a local architect, William Steele, together with the Minneapolis firm of Purcell and Elmslie, executed the Woodbury County Courthouse in 1914-1918.

¹³ Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography*, second edition, New York 1943. The first edition was begun in 1926 and published in 1932.

woman less than half his age' who would ultimately become his third wife. He built little, but what he did build, and much of what he designed that was not built, involved extraordinary sites in Los Angeles and in the Arizona desert, far removed from the suburbs of Chicago. For Los Angeles and the desert, Wright devised a novel method of construction employing ornamental concrete block. This block was comprised of finished exterior and interior faces – faces separated by a hollow core that accommodated various wires and pipes. All was woven together with steel reinforcing run both vertically and horizontally and grouted into the integral channels of the block. Walls constructed of these blocks appeared monolithic, unlike typical American construction that employed layered walls comprised of various materials. With Wright's block construction, the inside wall *was* the outside wall, conveying refined directness and honesty of purpose. There were no applied finishes, but an ornamental pattern integral with the block itself prevented the brutality of concrete from overwhelming the design. Initially wood fenestration and beams were used, though ultimately glazed openings were made in the blocks themselves and blocks formed reinforced concrete beams woven into the fabric of the structure. Wright had changed the nature of residential construction making it more authentic (and incidentally fireproof) while simultaneously making it less weather-resistant, a liability not immediately recognized in the permissive Southern California climate.

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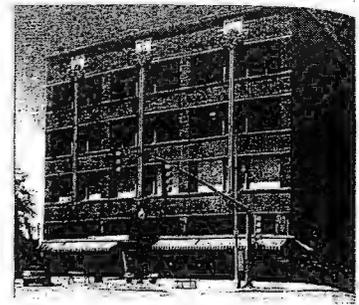
Wright returned to a deteriorated Taliesin in the late 1920's shortly before the American economy slipped into a Depression that would last over a decade. In 1932, with no architectural commissions and at the insistence of his new wife, Olgivanna, he completed *An Autobiography* and established the Taliesin Fellowship.¹³ The Fellowship was a school comprised of tuition-paying apprentices who came to Wright to learn architecture while serving as draftsmen in his studio and laborers on his farm. It was at this time that Wright designed Broadacre City, a decentralized 'urban' scheme that eschewed both the American suburb and the centralized city.

Perhaps because of the Depression, Wright again took an interest in the modest American house. In 1934, he built a residence for Malcolm Willey and his wife on a small suburban lot in Minneapolis. With a long wall that defined its north property line, Wright closed the house to the surrounding man-made neighborhood, opening it to the south, to the sun and a view of the wooded surrounds. The house is single

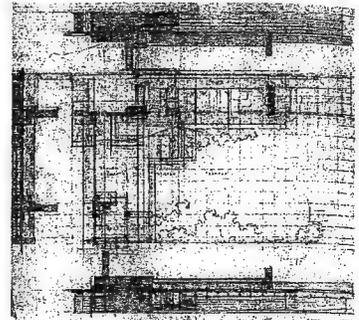
story, comprised of small continuous spaces, built on grade, and uses brick for both walls and floor. Economically constructed, it exudes Wrightian space, yet in many ways is unlike anything that Wright designed earlier. Despite its suburban location, it is secluded. Its 'front door' does not face the street but is found – only after one climbs a cascading stair, passes the length of a street-facing garage, and penetrates half of the site – on the side of house. As with many Wright houses, a large hearth dominates its principle living space. The combined effect of the enormous opening of this fireplace, the smallness of the house, its extensive use of brick, and the natural wood of its windows, furniture, and shelving, is reminiscent of an Early American house. It is primal and rustic, yet cottage-like and warm. Its flowing space is utterly modern and Wrightian, yet charming and comforting. It is direct and uncompromising; sophisticated not brutal. It is entirely original and simultaneously traditional.

Frank Lloyd Wright's best known house, Fallingwater, was designed in 1935 and completed in 1938 for Edgar Kaufmann, Sr., the father of one of Wright's apprentices. At the time, still photography dominated the American popular press both in nationally distributed illustrated journals and in locally operated newspapers. The architecture most often featured in that press was that which held the greatest interest to its readers -domestic. Picturesque, imminently photogenic qualities prevailed in the finished buildings of Wright, though he was not accustomed to designing his works from the outside in. The buildings had no 'facades' *per se* and by the 1930's eschewed even the frontality of his renowned Prairie School works. Instead, importance was placed on the harmony and integration of part to whole, of inside to outside, of building to surrounding environment. Most Wright buildings maintained a certain vantage point from which they could be understood in their conceptual entirety. On occasion, and usually at the request of a client, Wright drew a perspective of a proposed building. Often, the vantage point of this perspective later became the preferred point from which to view the building. Fallingwater is the best example of this.

That a rendered image of Fallingwater accompanied Frank Lloyd Wright on the January 1938 cover of *Time* magazine and that a remarkable photograph of the now-famous weekend house graced the inside cover of *Life* magazine the same month is not surprising. In the near hopelessness of the late Depression, Wright was resurrected and popularized, put forth as architect of the American Dream and of better times to come – a position he maintained for over twenty years, until well-beyond his death in April 1959.



Louis Sullivan, John D. Van Allen & Son Store, exterior, Clinton, Iowa, 1911-14



Frank Lloyd Wright, Lusk House project, Huron, South Dakota, 1935-36

Philip Johnson once labeled Wright the 'best architect of the nineteenth century,' and though obviously vindictive, there is an element of truth in his description. Twentieth-century architecture aligned itself with industrialization, mass-production, and the machine aesthetic – even to the point of itself becoming a colossal, inhabitable machine. Nineteenth-century architecture, by contrast, sought not to align itself with, but to distinguish itself from, engineering. Most nineteenth-century architects accomplished this distinction with revivals, donning contemporary structural skeletons in the dress of earlier ages. Though like most nineteenth-century architects, Wright understood engineering as subservient to architecture, he rejected revivals. In this he followed his *Lieber Meister*, Louis Sullivan. But often Sullivan's contemporary 'dress' was *applied to* rather than *integrated with* the engineered frame. Indeed, in a Sullivan building, when skeleton and dress approached unity, its form approached that of a highly utilitarian object: economical and tectonic, but lacking in architectural grace.

Unlike either the revivalists or Sullivan, Wright sought a contemporary *architectural* expression in which engineering prowess was readily evident, but evident only in daring architectural form. Wright's buildings were relieved of the obvious icons of engineering: exposed metal beams, domineering Cartesian grids, lightweight synthetic surfaces, the overwhelming sensation of prefabricated parts and the resultant sense of the building as a demountable assembly. Yet fundamental to Wright's architecture and to his manifestation of distinctly twentieth-century space was daring structural engineering. The cantilever is the most obvious example, and Fallingwater its most obvious instance. Wright had, of course, employed the cantilever extensively even in his Oak Park years. In those early years, he could, and often did, overdo it. Perhaps because both frame and masonry construction were known and inherently stable types, to destabilize their appearance with the cantilever seemed showy and unnecessary. This was not the case with the more modern idiom of reinforced concrete. Wright's most successful buildings in this idiom – Fallingwater, Johnson Wax, the Guggenheim Museum – seem not to contain cantilevered skeletal supports, but rather *become* those supports themselves.

When concealed structure is eliminated in favor of 'monolithic' structure as in Wright's concrete buildings and in the block houses of Southern California, the sense of mediation, however intuitive, is dissolved. Indeed, fundamental to Wright's way of thinking about architecture was his habit of eschewing mediation to privilege natural phenomena as palette for his organic compositions. Air-conditioning was dismissed in favor of overhangs, operable windows, and an orientation that opened to cooling breezes. Likewise, Wright seldom employed gutters and downspouts to lead rainwater away from the building. He preferred instead the cascade of water at extended eaves. In Wright's best works, rainwater veils the building in liquid light, wrapping it in nature and rendering it alive.

Similar was Wright's preference for a uniform and invisible radiant heat. In the mid-30's, he pioneered a system for heating buildings in which hot-water piping was embedded in concrete slabs poured directly on grade. The exposed slab serves as finished floor. It is colored and scored to reflect the module of the building. Hot water is run through the embedded pipes, silently heating the concrete floor and thereby warming the inhabitants directly. In each instance

Wright's method for tempering the natural is ancient, not new. No matter how passive, such preferences are not free or without fault. The alternative – the artificial sense and systematic application of conventional means – substantially diminished the authenticity of the building, offering not an architecture of life, but of life support.

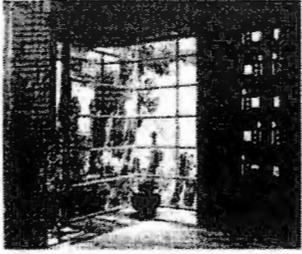
VII

Shortly after the Malcolm Willey House was built and Fallingwater designed, Wright designed the Lusk House in South Dakota, the first of a number of inexpensive, wholly modern 'Usonian' houses for small, suburban sites.¹⁴ When the Lusks could not build the house for \$10,000, Wright offered a slightly modified version of the design to Herbert and Katherine Jacobs who built it for \$5500 on a small 'double lot' in suburban Madison Wisconsin in 1936. In this first Usonian, and in all that followed, Wright dismissed the unwritten rules of established suburban protocol. In Wright's hands, a Usonian house was not contextual, rather it indicted all that surrounded it. Though taciturn and uncooperative, Usonian houses were nevertheless small and fairly unobtrusive, easily dissolved to background buildings when veiled in vegetation. Design strategies for these natural houses in unnatural settings included a wrap of trees or vines, high ribbon windows on the otherwise closed street side, and clerestory windows to insure privacy and to allow light to enter deep into the house. Often the house was sited with its closed side very near the street, dismissing the need for a front yard and therefore alignment with street facades of neighboring houses. Elsewhere, high walls defined property lines, insured privacy, and allowed a glass-walled living room to open onto a garden court.

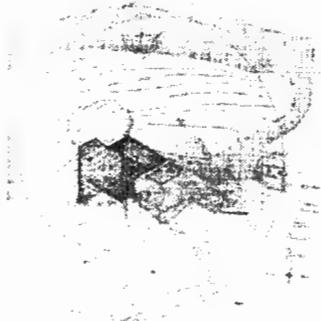
Such tactics for small houses on restricted sites were not Wright's alone. The German Mies van der Rohe and his followers employed similar strategies in their designs for suburban courtyard houses. Wright's small house differed from the 'Modernist' courtyard house in three ways: it emphasized sliding planes as opposed to discreet volumes; it preferred outward flow on *all* sides of the house; and it employed a natural palette. The latter was made manifest in a multiplicity of horizontal striations and an accumulation of highly sensual and utterly real materials, the coloration of which was mostly 'natural' even when powders and paints were employed to achieve natural tones. Wood was frequently stained, seldom painted. Brick and concrete block were left unfinished. All contributed to the authenticity of a Wright house.

In addition, Wright intensified his earlier compression of basements and attics by eliminating traditional floor, wall and ceiling cavities. Less space was given to hidden, seemingly unused plenums of building construction. Ostensibly this squeezing led to economy, and 'economical' was how Wright conveyed the concept of his small house to the American consumer. Clearly though, the 'no cavity notion' made manifest an aesthetic conviction that exuded authenticity. A cavity-less construction was direct and honest, and in the hands of a master builder like Wright, it was unique and original. The combination of directness and originality rendered it authentic.

Yet achieving this economy proved labor intensive. It demanded the work of skilled craftsmen who wove the necessary infrastructure of wires, pipes and ducts into the all-mass/no-cavity fabric of the building. Wright introduced this cavity-less concept during the Depression when skilled labor was in great supply. At that time, it achieved the desired economy. When the war



Frank Lloyd Wright, Freeman House, Los Angeles, 1924-25



Frank Lloyd Wright, Roland Reisley House, Pleasantville, New York, 1951

effort necessitated mass-production to fabricate war goods, however, the abundance of skilled labor available in pre-War era was lost forever to the factory. Wright's Usonian could not be constructed economically without such skill.

Though clearly it would be efficacious to gather these houses together in communal arrangement, Wright's demand for individualism, organic harmony, and the direct experience of nature resisted any notion of 'housing.'¹⁵ An exception, however, was his 1939 'Suntop Homes,' a quadruple scheme in a modern idiom built in Ardmore, Pennsylvania. The design is comprised of four clusters of four identical units each divided by a '+ shaped' wall. Each of the four units is vertical and culminates in a roof terrace. Each shares two party walls with other units and opens on the other two sides to a private enclosed yard. The party walls are masonry; the units themselves are wood. The units are rotated 45-degrees to surrounding suburban streets. It was Wright's intention to build four, four-unit buildings, but local protest ended construction after the first 4-unit building was finished.

Eight years later in 1947, for the satellite town of Pleasantville, New York 60 miles north of New York City, Wright designed a commuter suburb comprised of 50 circular lots on a hilly, heavily wooded site. The circular lot undermined tendencies toward a grid. Streets meander, undulating with the hills and eroding any sense of front or back. This unusual division of space into circular parcels, not right-angled lots, encouraged residential design that favored nature – terrain, vegetation, sky and solar movements – over man-made impositions. Wright himself designed three of the Pleasantville houses. His followers designed the remaining forty-seven.

VIII

Late in his life, Wright was fond of saying that a building should grace, not disgrace, its site. Extreme consideration was to be awarded to that which came before, assuming it to be natural. Despite his reputation, Wright seldom left a site unaltered; though often he left it 'more natural.' Though this seems contradictory, it is nevertheless important in understanding the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. 'Nature' was construed; so, too, was authenticity. This is not to suggest Wright deceitful or insincere. A physical entity, nature could be and always had been constructed. Authenticity is and always was more the making of man's mind than of his hand. Neither are absolutes.

Thus, if a building should grace and not disgrace its site, and if the architect believes the natural and authentic to be essential qualities for

¹⁴ In fact, the Hoult house design of 1935 for Wichita, Kansas is often designated the first Usonian. However, in Y. Futagawa, B. Brooks Pfeifer (eds), *Frank Lloyd Wright: Monographs Vol 5, 1924-1936*, Tokyo 1991, pp. 232-233, it is dated 1936, after the design for the Herbert Jacobs house. In the same book, the Lusk house design is dated 1936 (pp 243-44), again, after the design of the Jacobs house. Usonian scholars, however, date both the Hoult and the Lusk house designs earlier than the Jacobs house. See, for instance, John Sergeant, p. 23.

¹⁵ It is perhaps relevant to note that Marshall McLuhan regarded 'housing' as a 'medium'. See M. McLuhan, 'Housing: New Look and New Outlook,' in: *Understanding Media*, New York 1964, pp. 117-123.

any man-made construct, what happens when 'site' is very suburban in character, that is, when a site is in no way natural or graceful but itself disgraceful? This was Wright's challenge as the purveyor of an architecture that made manifest a lifestyle simultaneously modern and natural.

Wright had established his reputation in suburban Oak Park, building wondrous houses, remarkably modern in form and spatial sensibilities. These houses, however, were aliens on their suburban lots, more an indictment of, than a contribution to, all that surrounded them. Wright was aware of this when preparing images of his work for a European audience in *Frank Lloyd Wright Ausgeführte Bauten*, published in Berlin by Ernst Wasmuth in 1911. Drawings and photographs show buildings veiled in vegetation, divorced from their suburban sites by careful cropping. Interior images feature urns overflowing with flowers and ferns, scenes of nature applied to interior walls, the floral patterns of decorative architectural motifs, and the blouses of female Larkin Building employees embossed with peasant-like ornamental stitching.

All of this seemed to anticipate Wright's preferred solution thirty years later to the dilemma of the ugly, existing environment. But for three decades, Wright sought the authentic elsewhere: in Japan, in the alien and exotic landscapes of Southern California and Arizona, in his self-construed feudal domain at Taliesin. Ultimately, authenticity appears in the depth of the Depression, in buildings many consider Wright's most magnificent: Fallingwater, Johnson Wax, and Taliesin West. Certainly these environments – escapist, utterly photogenic, repeatedly represented, yet fabulous beyond belief – lived in the imagination of the American public. They restored Wright's reputation as genius architect, but it was his design for a 'small house for a man of modest means' that endeared the artist to a public he once described as 'the mob.'

In Minneapolis and Madison, and later across the country, Wright's genius was harnessed to designing a house of moderate cost and exceptional quality for 'the little American family.' And if his Usonian were Depression Era experiments impossible to sustain in a post-War economy, his willingness to build a modest American house persisted. In the 1940's and 1950's, the cost of building a Wright house escalated dramatically, yet Wright's domestic architecture was more popular than ever and his executed commissions grew accordingly. He, his architecture, and his views on domestic life in America were regularly featured in nationally prominent journals as well as in local newspapers across the country. Were a Wright house to be built in a remote region, the newspapers of nearby small towns would run elaborate accounts of the house and its owner in its Sunday supplement – news directed to the

16 For instance, when the Lowell Walter house, 'Cedar Rock,' was completed in July 1950 in Quasqueton in northeast Iowa, it was extensively portrayed in (sometimes color) photographs and reviewed in the *Des Moines Sunday Register*, *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, *Waterloo Daily Courier*. Smaller local papers featured shorter articles on the house, typically complemented with photographic images. Mr. Walter personally alerted the press when the house was complete and generously accommodated them. Often, photographs of him and Mrs. Walter were a part of the photo exposé. Regarding the escalating costs of a Wright house after World War II, in 1945 Walter asked Wright to design the Quasqueton house for him for around \$10,000. Ultimately Walter built a house featured in the June, 1945 *Ladies' Home Journal*. This design was conceived by Wright as a prototypical post-War Usonian house 'for town and country'. As completed for Walter more than five years later, the house of approximately 1700 sq. ft. (170 sq. meters) cost nearly \$150,000 including built-in furniture, an elaborate entrance gate, a small boathouse, a 'council fire,' and a hemi-spherical fountain-pool.

17 'The Personal Architectural Services of Frank Lloyd Wright,' a standard contractual agreement between an owner and the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation is reproduced in: J. Sergeant, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Houses: The Case for Organic Architecture*, New York 1976, p. 189. The concluding lines of the contract state: 'Dwelling-houses upon urban lots will not be accepted. Acreage is indispensable.' Wright knew, of course, that building on flat land was more economical than building on sloping land. Nevertheless, he encouraged owners who could afford it to purchase the latter with a guarantee of a more interesting living environment.

18 See especially B. Gill, *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright*, New York 1987.

housewife but of interest to all.¹⁶ Thus, to commission at this time the nationally renowned Wright elevated the owner to the status of celebrity.

Wright's final solution to the dilemma of building authentically in inauthentic suburbia did not differ extensively from that which he had practiced in earlier years. In the post-War years, however, Wright's new-found fame and the high demand for his services were coupled with the now longer reach of the automobile and with advanced mediation that made remote living seem communal. This combination allowed Wright to require of his clients what he could not have required earlier. Though he seldom selected exact sites himself, he specified in contractual form that any potential residential client must own at least one acre of land on which to build. Further, he recommended that clients find property as far removed as possible from urban centers, preferably property not of flat, undistinguished land, but replete with hills, trees, water, and vistas.¹⁷

Though inherently exclusive, such sites allowed the authentic to exist unencumbered. Though Wright's final resolution ('get a natural site far from the city') seemingly avoided the larger issue of suburban life, his proposal for 'Broadacre City' and his realization of Pleasantville's 'Usonia' addressed the issue on a larger scale and in a manner commensurate with his convictions. If an authentic life is valued, and if one's manner of dwelling contributes to that life, then for Wright, all of suburbia need be altered.

IX

Today, Wright is more popular than ever in America. His existing houses, even when modest and in need of extensive repair, command exceedingly high prices. Coffee-table books on his architecture abound, as do guides to his built works, calendars featuring reproductions of his renderings, and an assortment of documentary videos focusing more on Wright's life than on his work. The Taliesin Fellowship issues modified drawings of Wright-designed-but-yet-to-be-built houses to clients across America who desire to live in a version of the master's vision. This penchant for Wright extends to institutional buildings as well, most recently to Madison, Wisconsin's 'Dream Civic Center on Lake Monona,' completed in the 1990's, a cartoon of Wright's original schemes from the 1930's and 1950's. Wright's immense popularity can be gauged in such elaborate schemes, but to claim them as Wright buildings is like declaring a child's paint-by-number rendition of *Guernica* a Picasso original.

All of this is to say that the enthusiasm for Wright that prevails in America today is an enthusiasm more for the personality of Wright than for his architecture. The Wright personality that evokes such enthusiasm is a highly edited one, a mask made for mass distribution. Wright himself has been called a 'man of many masks;' some, therefore, find it fitting that the master's countenance should be construed to please the public at large.¹⁸ Still, and despite the fanfare and even adulation of the masses for Wright and vicariously for his architecture, one is left with the disturbing sense that an architecture of extreme greatness and vitality goes unappreciated, that the face of a unique individual of immense talent and temperament has been inextricably altered to suit the will of the people. Genuineness has been absorbed by its opposite. The popular and the authentic live separate lives.