

SAVE WRIGHT

IN THIS ISSUE

Preserving Wright

Guest Editor:
Edith Payne



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With Wright, and most of his original apprentices' firsthand experiences of learning from him, now passed into history, the ideas found in Wright's written work can be misunderstood when viewed through our current cultural lens.

A Path Back to Beauty: Preserving the Meaning of Wright's Words

BY KENNETH C. DAHLIN, AIA

In this preservation issue, in the context of many noble and skilled efforts to preserve Frank Lloyd Wright's physical structures from loss and deterioration, I want to consider another kind of loss, the loss of *understanding* of Wright's *living* architecture.

As early as 1988, Vincent Scully wrote in "The Nature of Frank Lloyd Wright" that "Wright's work is close to us and far away. History's gulf has opened between us. Wright has become a historical figure, separated from us by history itself." Another 30 years have passed since then, and we are now separated from Wright by nearly 60 years of history. Furthermore, most of his original apprentices and their firsthand experiences of working with and learning from Wright have also passed into history. While Wright's buildings continue to inspire both the architecturally initiated and uninitiated, I wonder whether our own cultural lens in 2018 keeps us from understanding the ideas to be found in the large body of written work Wright left for us. This is a question I have been pondering as an architect practicing organic architecture for more than 25 years who is now writing a dissertation on Wright's theory.

Because of our cultural lens, we tend to read into Wright's words the memes and values of our time rather than the original context and intention of his words. Understandably, we are trying to make Wright relevant for our day. For example, 'sustainability' is a cultural buzzword in architecture today. We may see in Wright's architecture the precursor of

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kenneth C. Dahlin is a Racine-based national-award-winning architect specializing in Wright-inspired architecture. As both an adjunct professor and currently a doctoral student at UW Milwaukee's School of Architecture, he is writing his dissertation on Wright's theory of organic architecture.

sustainability. However, I doubt that Wright approached sustainability in the way we think of it today. In fact, most of his buildings were anything but sustainable, as we measure sustainability in metrics such as Leadership in energy and Environmental Design (LEED) today. What he did apply was a tremendous love of nature and the idea that buildings should grow out of and be sympathetic to—and be harmonious with—nature. Sustainability is a subset of this mindset. Or to put it in logical terms, sustainability may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for organic architecture.

Since Wright's time, we have become much better at the expanding technological circumference of the particulars of knowledge related to architecture. So much so that one might be tempted to think that if we just had enough knowledge of these particular areas (technology, sustainability, parametric modeling, 3-D printing, behavioral research, etc.) that then the design of our buildings would be objectively determined rather than by subjective whims. And it is as if buildings thus created are acceptable finished works of architecture for our society. This bottom-up approach parallels the form-follows-function modernism of 100 years ago. Implied in this is the idea that as our science and technology advances, the space for individual artistry diminishes until one arrives at an ideal design derived from the functional inputs of the problem at hand and all extraneous stylistic input is culled off as so much kitsch. Consequently, today's modern architecture, while exuding an aura of authenticity, may yet lack a greater harmony of the whole both within its larger setting in its environment, or in the character of its composition. The layperson simply sees it as ugly architecture (but what do they know?).

In regard to understanding Wright's original context, we do have some clues as to how he would respond to today's architecture in the way he responded to the modernism of his day. This is especially ironic in that we have come full circle from our postmodernism fetish in the 1980s back to a neo-modernist wave in architecture, as the recent popularity of midcentury modernism would indicate. In a 1950s interview, Hugh Downs asked Wright if there was any difference between his use of the word 'organic' and Downs' use of the word 'modernist' to describe architecture. Wright replied that they are "very different," and that organic architecture is an architecture "from within

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outward" where "entity" is the ideal, "intrinsic in the philosophic sense and not something hanging in a butcher shop" (*The Future of Architecture*, 1953). He also said in *The Future of Architecture* that the phrase "form follows function," which the modernists popularized, was the password for sterility; rather, in organic architecture, form, while predicated by function, transcends it, and this is done through "poetic imagination." Writing specifically to the "young man in architecture," he left this thought for our time: "... the circumference of architecture is changing with astonishing rapidity but its center remains unchanged. The center of architecture remains unchanged because... beauty is no less the true purpose of rational modern architectural endeavor than ever, just as beauty remains the essential characteristic of architecture itself." Other significant quotes from Wright include: "This is what it means to be an artist—to seize this essence brooding everywhere in everything, just behind aspect" (Robert McCarter, *On and By Frank Lloyd Wright: A Primer of Architectural Principles*). And again, "Art is a species of valor" (Wright, *The Future of Architecture*). What exactly did Wright mean when he wrote about an "essence" brooding just behind "aspect," or the "valor" behind art?

Do we even talk like this today? Are these just romantic fill words placed for rhetorical effect? Or perhaps such words have been lost to our collective vocabulary today? And so, my research into Wright has led me to the question of what has been forgotten and what has been lost to our generation. Perhaps because I was born after Wright's death, I have no direct connection to Wright, and so I must rely on the built works and his words themselves.

In my study, I have found that a certain forensic of his architecture, a material culture approach, can provide fascinating clues to understanding his organic architecture. But here in this short essay, my focus

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is on the words, what has been lost, and what can be restored both in our time and for the future as a continuing contribution to architecture. Perhaps with our advances over the last 60 years, we might imagine Wright's approving nod to where we have arrived today. However, I think that wouldn't be the case, and that perhaps we have forgotten how nonconformist he could be. While I am sure he would be fascinated by the new technologies, he would be appalled by what we have done with them.

Would his words today be much different than what he said in *Architectural Record* in 1952:

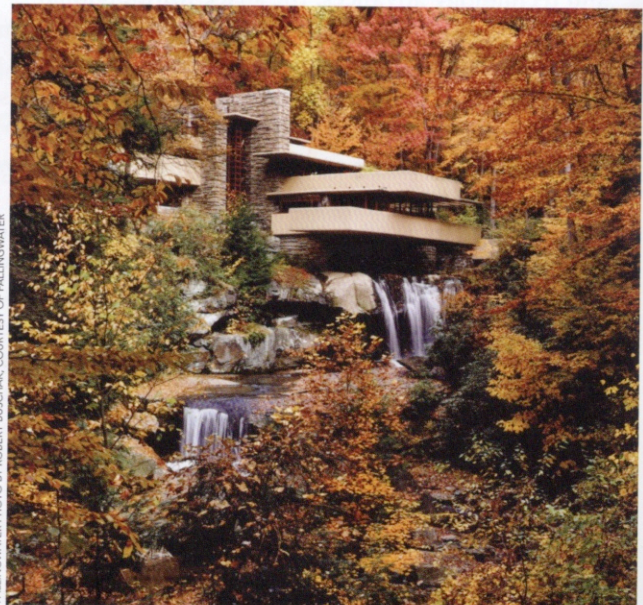
"[...] This mixture of negation with negation is, as of today, what is called 'Modern-architecture.... The Box now, sometimes of glass, say but always a post-and-beam affair even if not rattling its bones, became more and more evident.... "Less is more" unless less, already little, becomes less than nothing at all and 'much ado about nothing.'...the original affirmative negation made by Organic-architecture seems too soon in danger of losing, under the name of Modern-architecture, its humane characteristics and original poetry.... Regardless, the old box comes back. The crate now consecrate."

(Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, *Frank Lloyd Wright: Collected Writings Vol. 5*)

He would find missing in our architecture the same things we have bracketed out of his theory today:

- The loss of poetic imagination in our architecture
- The loss of a soul in our architecture (or ourselves)
- The value of individual creativity in a democratic society
- The loss of the architect as an artist and architecture as a "fine art"
- That the means have been substituted as ends in architecture
- That there is something called "beauty" and that it is worth striving for in our environments and lives

One might object that this list is too subjective and vague, and it certainly sounds anachronistic to our 21st-century ears. Historically speaking, however, we can be fairly certain this was so central to Wright's beliefs about organic architecture that we cannot reasonably claim to understand his theory without it. This list and quotes are not a how-to prescription for organic or beautiful architecture, but rather represent a metaphysical or philosophical stance he took. Yet, with all that is ugly, disjointed, and dissonant in architecture and our environment today, perhaps we would do well to rediscover what Wright called the "essential characteristic of architecture itself"—beauty. And perhaps Wright's best continuing contribution to architecture now and for the future is in providing a path back to beauty. ■



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To Wright, organic architecture was less about "sustainability" as we think of the word today and more about the idea that buildings should be harmonious with nature.