Frank Lloyd Wright: An American Architect Essay, Research Paper

Frank Lloyd Wright was arguably one of the best architects of the 19th and 20th centuries. His works ranged from traditional buildings typical to the late 1800’s to ultramodern designs (Official Site 1). He had a great knowledge of the land and his buildings were practical in terms of their surroundings. Wright’s appreciation and love for nature was a key characteristic, and a strong influence in his architecture.

Frank Lloyd Wright was born in 1867 in Richland Center, Wisconsin (Hunt 180). He was brought up by his mother, Anna, and his aunts and uncles on farmland near Spring Green, Wisconsin. His father had abandoned the family in 1885 (Encarta 1). He studied engineering briefly at the University of Wisconsin, and he showed a good ability to draw. He then moved to Chicago in 1887 and worked as an assistant at the Chicago architectural firm of Adler and Sullivan. There he learned many of the trades of architecture and embarked on an independent path of his own in 1893 (Encarta 1).

Wright avoided anything that might be called a personal style (Encarta 1), but he defined his architecture as “organic,” which he saw as a principle of order, structure, and form relating in the process of nature (Burns 8). This meant that every building should relate harmoniously to it’s natural surroundings, and the building should not be a static boxlike enclosure but a dynamic structure with open flowing interior spaces. He once said, “No house should ever be on a hill or anything. It should be of the hill, belonging to it. Hill and house should live together each the happier for the other (Official Site 1).” He achieved this design using geometric shapes that would form a pattern. His first models were mostly squares and he later used diamonds, hexagons, circles, and other geometric units for which he would lay the floor plan (Encarta 1). Wright also used long projections, often balconies or rooftops that were supported at only one end to create

this effect. These geometric designs and jutting projections made Wright’s designs the opposite of the boxes with openings that he was trying to avoid.

Wright also had an extreme appreciation for nature. Throughout his life Wright spoke of the influence of nature on his work and attributed his love of nature to those early years spent in the rural Wisconsin countryside. During summers spent on his uncle’s farm he learned to look at the patterns and rhythms found in nature. He advised his apprentices: “study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you (Frank Lloyd 2).” He said once, “You spell it with a ‘G’ don’t you? I spell nature with an ‘N’…I put a capital ‘N’ on nature and call it my church (Williams Students 1).” One of the works that he is most recognized for is a house built for Edgar J. Kaufmann, called Fallingwater. Built in 1936, it is notable for it’s relationship with the environment and for bringing the outdoors inside. The structure appears to emerge from the rocks above, and the waterfall below (Encarta 3). Wright insisted that buildings grow naturally from their surroundings. The house dramatically hangs over a waterfall, and a staircase from the living room leads down to it – bringing the outdoors inside. For his own home, Taliesin, in Oak Park, Illinois, Wright made a home that would become famous for it’s relationship between the man, the structure, and the land (Wieshan 27). He recognized every aspect of the land, and worked around the natural surroundings. On most of his sketches for his buildings he would show gradient lines to show the incline of the site. In Fallingwater, a beam is made to go around a tree, for the purpose of leaving the tree stand rather than to cut it down. Wright preached the beauty of nature, and was also very respectful of it with the use of his materials. The materials that he used were natural, such as stone, brick, and wood. In Frank Lloyd Wright, by Benedikt Taschen, Taschen states:

“His work in these materials always adhered to what he perceived as most natural to them, letting the masses of stone become the feature of the building, or the rich earth-tones of the brick…rise in masses and the forms that glorified the brick. And wood he considered the most loved of all materials, saying ‘Wood is universally beautiful to man. Man loves his association with it; likes to feel it under his hand, sympathetic to his touch and to his eye’ (Taschen 24).”

Wright’s favoring of nature has also helped to maintain his structures through the things that they must endure, like weather and erosion.

Frank Lloyd Wright had no real definable style. He has said,

“There should be as many kinds of houses as there are kinds of people and as many differentiation’s as there are different individuals. A man who has individuality has a right to its expression in his own environment (Williams Students 1).”

Wright would often learn about the family for whom he was designing for before starting, to get a feel for their needs and preferences. Hillard Harper says in The Los Angeles Times that “Architect and client frequently found themselves pitted against each other during the design and construction phase, although the completed building usually healed any wounds (Harper 2). Besides designing buildings, he used his creativity to design the furniture, fabrics, art glass, lamps, dinnerware, silver, linen and graphic arts inside the creation as well (Frank Lloyd 2). He used the setting and environment to his advantage, and worked with it, rather than against it. “He glorified the sense of ‘shelter’ (Frank Lloyd 2).” He had different types of houses, such as the prairie houses and the Usonian houses, but none seemed to follow a common pattern. His architecture sought to create something fully expressive of the American spirit, free of imported convention and values (Burns 9).

Wright’s career was extravagant, spanning over more than 70 years. He led an extremely productive life, and aside from architecture he was an extravagant raconteur, wrote twenty books and countless articles, and lectured throughout the United States and Europe. His designs revolutionized the art of architecture. Historian William Cronan, to describe the legacy of Mr. Wright, said “…There is no American architect who has ever lived who has done as much to touch the world, who has done as much to realize his vision of what a perfect architecture might be… (PBS Online 1).” Wright died in 1959, and he left behind a great legacy. His works are still considered modern today, even thought it is almost 50 years after his death. So, as Simon and Garfunkel sing, “Architects may come, and architects may go…”, but there will never be another architect like Frank Lloyd Wright.

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