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1993

## Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect of an Age

Alexander O. Boulton

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FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT;  
ARCHITECT OF AN AGE

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of American Studies  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by  
Alexander Ormond Boulton

1993

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts



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Alexander Ormond Boulton

Approved, November, 1993



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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a biography of Frank Lloyd Wright that stresses his role in the social context of his era. It focuses on the interrelationships between his personal history, his social and political philosophy, and his idea of an "organic architecture." Critical to each were his conflicting ideas of individual freedom and social democracy.

**FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT; ARCHITECT OF AN AGE**

## INTRODUCTION

Alexander Wolcott once wrote of Frank Lloyd Wright in The New Yorker, "If the editor of this journal were so to ration me that I were suffered to apply the word 'genius' to only one living American, I would have to save it up for Frank Lloyd Wright."<sup>1</sup>

Wolcott was one of the first to recognize Wright's place in American culture. When he wrote this statement in 1930, few people had even heard of Wright, much less imagined him in such illustrious terms. Since that time, however, Wolcott's evaluation of Frank Lloyd Wright has gradually gained acceptance among many of America's architectural and social critics. Wright probably was the most notable genius of his age.

As extravagant as Wolcott's claim might seem, however, it only begins to indicate the role which Wright played in the architecture of the times in which he lived. Wright was not an isolated genius, working alone, his achievements

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Wolcott, The New Yorker, July 6, 1930, p25. Cited in H. Allen Brooks, (editor), Writings on Wright, Selected Comment on Frnk Lloyd Wright, M.I.T. Press, 1981, p11.

extending only to the construction of a finite number of architectural monuments. Wright's life was so intertwined with the times in which he lived that the story of his life is virtually the story of America in the early twentieth century.

Frank Lloyd Wright was not just an innovator in the field of architecture. His buildings, as he frequently announced, were social comments. They offered an alternative vision of how Americans could structure their lives as well as shelter themselves from the climate. Ever since Wright began his professional practice at the end of the nineteenth century his buildings were widely copied by his contemporaries. Today it is not unreasonable to suggest that every working architect in the world has been profoundly influenced by Wright. More importantly, perhaps, the ideas that Wright espoused and that gave life to all of Wright's architecture have become so common place that we today scarcely recognize where they originally came from. Perhaps no one in America in the twentieth century has had as great an influence as Frank Lloyd Wright in constructing the society in which we live today. Frank Lloyd Wright, in almost every sense of the term, was indeed an "architect of an age."

This book is not, however, an uncritical celebration of an American hero. In his philosophy and in his life, there is much that one might find to criticize. Wright's



monumental faults, however, can not be separated from his enormous accomplishments. More importantly, his sins and virtues are ones that we share with him today. The paradoxes of his life are the paradoxes of America in the twentieth century. To understand Frank Lloyd Wright, then, is to understand ourselves.

Direct quotes are frequently used in this work. As much as possible, the goal in writing has been to be like a fly on the wall, immediately present during the important events in Frank Lloyd Wright's life. Nothing has been made up, however. If the descriptions of events are not exactly accurate, the fault lies with Wright, or his friends and family, whose words I have liberally appropriated. The responsibility for their interpretation, however, rests with the author -- and the reader.

## CHAPTER ONE: The Valley of the Joneses

Eleven-year-old Frank Lloyd Wright had just fallen asleep when he heard a sharp rapping on the stovepipe which ran up through the floor from the room below. He rubbed his eyes, and heard a voice call out, "Four o'clock, my boy, time to get up." He sat up in the bed in the low ceiling little room and stared out the single window that pierced one of the whitewashed sloping walls. It was still dark out. "All right, Uncle James -- coming," the boy called out. He shivered as he pulled on his shirt and blue-jean overalls. He went downstairs, splashed water on his face and stumbled out to the barn to begin his day's work.<sup>2</sup>

As a teenager Frank Lloyd Wright began most of his days in the summer in this way, working on his Uncle James' farm, learning as he said, "to add tired to tired and add it again -- and add it yet again." From April until he returned to school in September, Frank Wright milked cows, chopped and carried firewood, fed and watered horses, cows, pigs, sheep, and chickens, worked in the fields and ran errands about the

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright, An Autobiography, the edition used is Bruce Books Pfeiffer (editor), Frank Lloyd Wright, Collected Writings, Volume II, 1930-32 (forthcoming), Rizzoli, New York. p114-115. This is the major source for the events up to c1930.

farm. By 7:30 in the evening he went to bed, to be awakened, it seemed to him, only a few minutes later to start all over again.

Years later Frank Lloyd Wright would say that the valley near Spring Green, Wisconsin, where his uncles' farms lay, taught him everything, and that Uncle James was responsible for all that he later became.<sup>3</sup> But during those years when Frank was making that difficult transition from being a child to being an adult, he did not always appreciate the little valley as much as he would much later.

Twice he ran away, only to be found and coaxed home by Uncle James or another of his five uncles. In his mind he ran away even more often. His family thought he was becoming too dreamy, too sensitive, as they saw the far-away look in his face. Sometimes Uncle James would see it and call out "Come back Frank, come back."<sup>4</sup>

Many years later, Frank Lloyd Wright would run to the valley rather than away from it to escape from his daily life. It was, after all, a beautiful place. When Frank's grandparents, Richard and Mary Lloyd-Jones, came to the valley in 1844, they were struck by how much it resembled their native south Wales. Steep hills covered with wild flowers and berries framed the rolling landscape. Winding

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<sup>3</sup> in Maginel Wright Barney (Frank Lloyd Wright's sister), Valley of the God-Almighty Joneses, Appleton Century, New York, 1965, p13.

<sup>4</sup> Autobiography, p123

through the rich bottom land was a stream that slowly made its way to the Wisconsin river. In the early days, the trout in the stream were so tame they would nibble crumbs out of a person's hand. Passenger pigeons unfamiliar with humans would light in trees, and the boys in the family would knock them off the branches with sticks, and stuff them into bags to bring them home to roast. In those days Indians still wandered through the hills and valleys of Wisconsin. Occasionally in the middle of the night the family would wake to the sound of the doorlatch clicking open. Without a word, an Indian would come in and lie down before the fire. In the morning, before the family awoke, he would be gone without a trace. Days later a haunch of venison might be found on the doorstep -- a "thank you" for a warm night out of the cold.<sup>5</sup>

Soon the Indians no longer visited, the passenger pigeons disappeared, and the trout even learned to be more cautious, but the Lloyd-Joneses prospered. The valley supported the farms of Richard and Mary and their five sons and five daughters. For many years they were entirely self-sufficient, raising the food they ate; preserving fruits and vegetables; butchering pigs and cows, salting and smoking them to last the winter; weaving and dyeing the cloth for their clothes; making soap, building houses.

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<sup>5</sup> The best description of the Valley and its influence on Wright is found in Maginel Wright Barney, The Valley of the God-Almighty Joneses.

The family was exceptionally close knit. It had to be, for, as beautiful as their valley was, it could also be deadly. A common cold, a broken bone, the cut of an axe could be fatal. The little cemetery next to the chapel in the valley soon began to fill with loved family members.

Mary Lloyd-Jones, it was said, knew when one of her sons was hurt without having to be told. More than once she sat up in bed in the middle of the night and told her husband of some new ill that had befallen the family. One night she saw a bloody foot in her dreams, and the next day a neighbor brought her son Thomas to the farm in the back of his wagon. Tom had been clearing a trail in the thick woods, and had dropped his axe on his foot. He spent weeks recovering.

When her Jenkin Lloyd-Jones was with General Grant at the siege of Vicksburg, Mary awoke from a dream. "I see battle, and bullets flying! He's been hurt," she told her husband. And indeed he had been. Jenkin soon mended, however, and did not return to Spring Green until Richmond had been taken.

Mary, who had given her maiden name of Lloyd to the clan of Lloyd-Joneses, was mourned for years after her death in 1870. When she left Wales she had taken with her a handful of seeds of her favorite flowers. Now family members watched each spring to see where the flowers that grew from those seeds would blossom in the valley that year.

After her death, when her large family gathered for a photograph in 1883, an empty chair was set out next to her husband. She was still a presence in the family, even though her body had passed away.<sup>6</sup>

The family, for that matter, was always much larger than anyone could count. Richard and Mary, their sons and daughters, and their wives and husbands, and their sons and daughters, along with borders and workers, always made a family census difficult. Timothy, for example, the Welsh stone mason, was not related by blood, but was like another uncle to the many children. Timothy quarried the stone and built the foundations and chimneys for all the children's homes. Above each mantle he would carve their family emblem /!\, which signified the Welsh motto, "Truth against the world."<sup>7</sup>

Mr Sweet, a hired hand, had worked so long for the family that when he grew too old to work he was given a plot of ground of his own. He built a small house and planted a garden and family members sometimes brought him food and gifts.

When all the members of the Lloyd-Jones's extended family, and their friends and neighbors, got together, the

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<sup>6</sup> The 1883 photograph (with identification of those portrayed) is in Barney, Valley, between p62-63. Mary Lloyd-Jones died August 3, 1870, Barney, Valley, p120.

<sup>7</sup> On the significance of this motto see Autobiography, p106, 113ff & passim.

gathering of the clan was apt to be a spirited and noisy celebration. In the summer, picnics or house-raising were occasions for great feasts. Wagons were loaded down with roast pork, turkey and chicken, corn on the cob, tomatoes, cucumbers, wheat bread, corn bread, cheese, homemade preserves, cookies, gingerbread, cinnamon-covered Dutch rolls, sugared doughnuts, apple and pumpkin pies. If the children were still hungry they could wander off and pick fresh plums and berries from the hillsides.

On such occasions the youngest members of the family would commonly be called on to recite memorized pieces of poetry, or Uncle Jenkin would give a sermon which would bring tears to everyone's eyes. Tears seemed at times almost as common as laughter among the intense Lloyd-Joneses, but tears would always melt into music on these occasions as the family ended their festivities by singing old Welsh hymns.

Anyone who married into the Lloyd-Jones clan, especially if they were not Welsh, had a difficult time fitting in. Frank's father, William Russell Cary Wright when he first courted and then married Anna Lloyd-Jones, however, seemed ideally suited to the ways and temperament of the clan. He shared with the Lloyd-Joneses an enthusiasm for music, for education and for religion. He had studied medicine and law, but soon dedicated himself to the ministry. Like many Easterners in the nineteenth century he

had followed Horace Greeley's advice to "Go West, young man." He left his home and family in Hartford, Connecticut, and became an itinerant minister, sometimes supplementing his income by giving music lessons. He even composed several piano pieces that were published in his day. His son, Frank Lloyd Wright, would remember him composing at the piano or organ. William Wright would hold his old pen in his mouth as he struck the keys with his hands, then grab his pen and scribble the notes on his paper and put the pen back in his mouth. Soon he had drawn dozens of long black whiskers on his face with his pen.

Most of Frank's memories of his father, however, were not so comical. The young Wright sensed that his father never had much affection for him. He remembered his father teaching him to play the piano, punctuating each mistake with a sharp rap on the knuckles with a pencil.

Many years later Frank would remember his father playing Bach on a church organ while Frank in a dark chamber behind the instrument pumped the wooden handle of the hugh bellows. A tiny oil lamp shined on the gauge which indicated the air pressure necessary to keep the organ playing. As the piece his father was playing reached its most tumultuous fortissimo the boy worked for dear life to keep air in the bellows, knowing only too well what would happen to him if his strength should give out. He looked forward to the long, softer passages when he could rest. In



those moments he stopped, with tears running down his face, entranced by the beauty he had helped to create. Then just as suddenly he would again throw himself into his pumping as the music continued its triumphant progress.<sup>8</sup>

William Wright was perhaps blamed by his young son, as well as his wife and the Lloyd-Joneses in general, for many things beyond his control. There was perhaps an unbridgeable difference in their temperaments. William Wright at forty-seven when they married was seventeen years older than his wife, Anna Lloyd-Jones. It was his second marriage. In addition to the differences in their ages, William Wright was a Baptist and Anna and the Lloyd-Jones clan were Unitarian. Perhaps this is a subtle distinction to those who are neither Baptist nor Unitarian. But to Baptists who generally believe in the necessity of personal redemption to release oneself from the turbulence of a sinful world, and to Unitarians who presume an essential harmony between spiritual and earthly realms, the differences between their faiths could be stark indeed.

Ultimately, however, the cause of the problems which arose between William and Anna were very earthly. William Wright was unable to earn a living, indeed often seemed

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<sup>8</sup> Autobiography p110. Good discussions of Wright's childhood and the relative influence of his parents are found in: Robert C Twombly, Frank Lloyd Wright, His Life and His Architecture, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1979, p1-16; and, Brendan Gill, Many Masques, a Life of Frank Lloyd Wright, Balantine Books, New York, 1987, p40-55.

indifferent to the whole idea of making money. This was not a rare problem in the latter half of the nineteenth century, especially for the sons of old New England families who had been taught as children that earthly pleasures were the reward for moral virtues. As new commercial classes rose to the fore, and as industry expanded, those without specialized knowledge or skills often found that virtue alone would not feed their families nor pay the rent. William Wright, perhaps, was one of the many victims of America's march into the modern world. He and his family moved about from town to town. Appointed as minister to first one failing church and then another. He was unable to find, as the Lloyd-Joneses had, that perfect place where work and love both resided.

For a time he preached in Richland Center, Wisconsin, where his son Frank was born on June 8, 1867. In the next dozen years, however, William and Anna and Frank moved first to McGregor, Iowa; then to Pawtucket, Rhode Island; then to Weymouth, Massachusetts; and finally back to Wisconsin where The Lloyd-Jones's many connections could help the struggling minister and his family. By now Frank had two sisters, Jane and Maginel, but his parent's marriage was slowly disintegrating from the many strains that had been placed upon it.

William Wright had an enormous influence on his son's life. Frank Lloyd Wright's ability to translate between

emotions and physical forms perhaps had its earliest training in those sessions when he pumped the bellows while his father played the organ. The son's continuing love for music, which played an important role throughout his life, was part of his father's legacy to him. Perhaps some of his wanderlust, and his financial irresponsibility, can be attributed to his father as well.

It was his mother, Anna Wright, however, who, more than any other person, directed the course of his life. Frank believed that even before his birth his mother had decided that he should be an architect. While she was pregnant with him, she cut engravings of English cathedrals out of a magazine, framed them, and hung them about the room that was to be his.

While visiting the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1872 Anna Wright discovered the work of the German educational reformer Friedrich Froebel. Most famous today for having invented the concept of the kindergarten, Froebel taught that there was a basic unity underlying the various aspects of a child's basic education. Early tactile experiences, he taught, could help to foster abstract thinking. Froebel therefore, devised a system of wooden blocks, spheres, and triangles with colored paper of varying size and shapes which would turn child's play into a learning experience. Anna Wright bought the set of "Froebel Gifts," as they were called, and when the family lived in

Weymouth, Massachusetts, took trips into Boston to learn the new system of instruction. At home she would watch for hours as Frank played at a low mahogany table, its polished surface reflecting the bright colors and forms of the Froebel "toys." The fantastic forms and patterns he created then, he would later build on a much larger and more permanent scale.

Frank Lloyd Wright's education was not solely in the visual arts. Reading aloud the literature of the New England poets and Transcendentalists, was a common part of the family's entertainments in an era with out television. In the evening when all the chores were done, the words of James Russell Lowell (a relation of Frank's father), Longfellow, Emerson, and Thoreau, echoed through the rooms of the Wright's and Lloyd-Joneses' houses.

The emotional tensions between his mother and his father were perhaps never resolved by Frank Lloyd Wright. Relationships established as a child and imprinted on one's mind do not simply vanish. Months after William Wright left his wife and family for the last time Frank's sister Maginel was walking home from school and saw her father. He took her hand and brought her to a store in town where he bought her a new brightly colored hat and shoes, and then he sent her home. Anna Wright was not pleased by Maginel's new costume. She disliked hats, never wore one herself, thought they were foolish and extravagant. The shoes were too cheap

and gaudy. She took them from Maginel, opened the lid of the cast iron stove and placed them in the fire. Then she brought Maginel back downtown and bought her a new pair of French kid shoes. From such acts as these it would be a wonder if Frank, Jane and Maginel did not learn some interesting lessons about style as well as about personal attachments.<sup>9</sup>

Frank Lloyd Wright's life in many ways was not unlike that of most other children. He was sometimes obedient, sometimes mischievous. He was sometimes shy, sometimes out-going. He sometimes experienced the pain which adults often unwittingly inflict upon those they love. Importantly, however, his rich imagination, perhaps the birthright of all humans, was not fettered as it is in most of us. During the times when he was not on the farm the young Frank Lloyd Wright had a room in the attic of a house his mother rented in Madison, Wisconsin. The smells of printer's ink, oil paints, shellac and turpentine constantly drifted down the stairs, under and around the door which was marked with large capital letters, SANCTUM SANCTORUM. Behind that door with a few childhood friends, he constructed bows and arrows, bob sleds, fantastic kites, and invented catamarans, and ice boats, and water wheels.

In every exercise of his fantasy he was encouraged by his doting mother. She gave him the tools, physical and

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<sup>9</sup> The story is found in Barney, Valley, p66-69.

mental, which he needed to sort out the lessons in his life, to discover what was valuable to him, and what he could discard. Ultimately, he did not discard much. His imagination found ways to harness all the warring tensions around and inside of himself. His parent's conflicts, the hard work of the farm, his insecurities, and pains, the warmth of the large extended family he found in the valley, he was able to imagine as individual parts of his life, always changing, yet always a part of a larger pattern. Like the flowers his grandmother brought to the valley, which grew by uniting the elements of air and earth, rocks and water, in the valley of the Lloyd-Joneses a little seedling took root which later would become a mighty oak.

## CHAPTER TWO: Chicago

Frank Lloyd Wright arrived at the Wells Street Station in Chicago on a Spring night in 1887. He was running away again, or was he running to something? In the drizzling rain at the train station he saw electric lights for the first time in his life. He thought the dazzling, sputtering light was ugly. In his pocket he had seven dollars, the proceeds from pawning some of his father's books. He melted into the crowd at the station, and walked with it to the Wells street bridge over the Chicago River. As he crossed over, he heard a bell clang and saw the crowd run, then watched as the bridge with him on it swung out into the channel. A tug boat, puffing clouds of steam, slowly pulled a enormous grain barge through the gap as he stood transfixed.<sup>10</sup>

Chicago in the last years of the nineteenth century was perhaps the most auspicious place and time for a young architect to begin his career. Chicago was growing faster than almost any city in the world. Half a century before it had been a small trading post on the edge of a wilderness. By the time Frank Lloyd Wright arrived it was on its way to becoming the second most populous city in the nation. It

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<sup>10</sup> The major source of information, again, is Wright's Autobiography. On his first impressions of Chicago see p140.

had parlayed its unique geographical position between two great water systems of the continent into the nation's major transportation center. With the development of the railroad it became the final destination for the millions of head of cattle raised on Western cattle ranches. From Chicago refrigerated box cars quickly transported their meat to the growing cities of the East. Chicago was devastated by fire in 1871, but this only gave new incentive to build the city on vaster and more magnificent plans. At the same time as Chicago was rising from the Illinois prairie, new technological innovations allowed for the construction of taller and taller buildings. The elevator and steel-frame construction revolutionized the forms of city buildings.<sup>11</sup>

The phenomenal growth of Chicago did not occur without its unique pains. As people poured into the city from practically all over the world, they brought with them new demands on the city's systems of supply and distribution which frequently surpassed the new city's ability to meet them. Social tensions flared up in 1883 when a clash between police and demonstrators in Haymarket square left eight dead and almost one hundred wounded. A strike at the Pullman luxury sleeping car plant eleven years later only ended when President Grover Cleveland sent Federal troops to

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<sup>11</sup> The most useful source of information on the Chicago school is, perhaps, William H. Jordy, American Buildings and Their Architects; Volume Four, Progressive and Academic Ideals at the Turn of the Century, Oxford University Press, 1972 pp1-179.



Chicago to quell the uprising.<sup>12</sup>

The anguish of the growing nation often found the heart of its misery in Chicago and the Midwest, but it also found there a group of individuals with new ideas and new plans to address the many problems which the nation faced at the beginning of the twentieth century. Jane Addams, the social reformer, was one of these people. So too were John Dewey, the educator and philosopher, and Frederick Jackson Turner, the historian. They brought a new vision to the nation. In their work they celebrated a native American spirit, born on the frontier, emphatically practical, and individualistic, impatient with old rules and formulas and openly critical of the cities of the East, with their antiquated philosophies, their corruption, and their commercialism. William Jennings Bryan focused much of this Mid-Western outlook in his populist campaigns for the Presidency in 1896, 1900, and 1908 and in his continuing isolationist and anti-war activities throughout his political career. The spirit of the Midwest was probably best captured, however, in the poetry of Carl Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay who celebrated Chicago, the common people and their native prophet, Abraham Lincoln. This was more than simply a new philosophy, it was a way of life for many mid-westerners, and no one was more

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<sup>12</sup> There is of course a vast literature on these social conflicts. Especially helpful to me has been Nell Painter, Standing at Armageddon, The United States, 1877-1919, W.W. Norton, New York, 1987.

inspired by it, and would ultimately do more to spread its influence, than Frank Lloyd Wright.<sup>13</sup>

For four nights after he arrived in Chicago, Wright lived in a rooming house on Randolph street, and wandered through the city streets during the day, looking for a job. He was determined to be independent, and not to rely on his Uncle Jenkin who now lived in Chicago and was becoming a famous Unitarian minister. Wright's new shoes pinched his feet and gave him blisters. By the fourth day he was down to his last twenty cents. Finally, Wright visited the architectural offices of Joseph L. Silsbee and was hired as a tracer for eight dollars a week.

The young Wright was not totally inexperienced when he came to Chicago, nor was he able to make a complete break with his family ties. He had worked briefly while he attended the University of Wisconsin for the professor of

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<sup>13</sup> On the intellectual climate, especially good is Morton White, Social Thought in America, The Revolt against Formalism, (originally Viking, 1019) Oxford University Press, 1976. My interpretation of the Mid-west's anti-cosmopolitanism owes much to Richard Hofstadter's The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R., Random House, New York, 1955. A good brief overview of the historiography of the period can be found in Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, Progressivism, Harlan Davidson, Inc. Arlington Heights Illinois, 1983, p119-140. On Wright's connection to this milieu see: Gwendolyn Wright, "Architectural Practice and Social Vision in Wright's Early Designs," in Carol R. Bolon, Robert S. Nelson and Linda Seidel, The Nature of Frank Lloyd Wright, University of Chicago Press, 1988; and, Lionel March, "An Architect in Search of Democracy: Broadacre City," in H. Allen Brooks, Writings on Wright, Selected Commentary on Frank Lloyd Wright, M.I.T. Press, 1981, 195-206. See also Twombly, p228-229.

engineering, Allan D. Conover. While in Wisconsin he had begun to draw architectural sketches, and had even assisted in the interior design of the small three-room Chapel in the valley near Spring Green -- a project sponsored by his Uncle Jenkin and designed by Silsbee. Wright's fall from the nest was a gentle one. Uncle Jenkin when he heard his nephew was in Chicago found him a place to stay, and often invited him over for dinner. For two years Frank Lloyd Wright worked in Silsbee's office, spending part of his time working on plans for buildings for his Uncle Jenkins and other family members.<sup>14</sup>

One of Silsbee's projects was Jenkin Lloyd Jones' All Souls Unitarian Church. In many ways his church was like a part of the valley transplanted to the city. Jenkin Lloyd-Joneses tended not only to the spiritual needs of his congregation but also to their social and educational needs as well. The church had a library and a kindergarten. In the evenings the church hosted intellectual and literary meetings, and acted as an all-purpose community center. It was never closed. Jane Addams sometimes visited the church, and her own Hull-House, which originated the settlement house movement in the United States, shared much in common

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<sup>14</sup> Recent biographers have made much of Wright's inaccuracies (and deceptions) in the Autobiography concerning his early education. See: Autobiography p140 & passim; Thomas S. Hines, Jr. "Frank Lloyd Wright -- The Madison Years: Records Versus Recollections," Wisconsin Magazine of History, Volume 50, #2, Winter, 1967, 109-119; Twombly p16-20; and, Gill p54-56.

with Uncle Jenkins' All Souls Church.

It was at a dance at All Soul's church that Frank Lloyd Wright first bumped into Catherine Lee Tobin -- literally. They were both rushing across a crowded room, not looking where they were going, when they collided. Kitty, as she was called, fell to the floor, and the awkward Wright whirled around, seeing stars. He helped her up; she laughing; he apologizing; neither one realizing how fateful this small collision would be. He felt the bump on his forehead grow as he walked Kitty over to her parents and apologized again, and was surprised when they invited him over for dinner the next evening.

Kitty was sixteen at the time, three years younger than Frank, yet in many ways more mature, more practical. She was tall and pretty and had red hair, and as everyone knew she was shamelessly pampered by her loving family. Wright was attracted to her perhaps as much for her strong will as for her obvious physical charms. Over the course of the two-year courtship which followed, both Wright's mother and Kitty's parents could see the affections of the two youths grow, and feared that they were moving too quickly down a path which required some serious reflection. Kitty and Frank, however, were only more inspired by their parents' obvious misgivings and obstructions, and became more and more infatuated.

At the same time as Frank was beginning his new life in

Chicago, and his Uncle Jenkin was building his great new church, Wright's maiden aunts back in Spring Green were beginning their own new venture. In 1887, his aunts, Nell and Jane Lloyd-Jones, opened Hillside Home School on land which had been given to them in their father's will. Like all Lloyd-Jones projects, its purpose and method were closely tied together. The aunts combined a home, a school and a farm. Students, who came from all over the United States, learned by doing. They worked on the farm, and they studied history, mathematics, literature and languages in a warm family environment. All of the valley and the farms of the Lloyd-Joneses were a part of the school. The students learned about animals and plants, and geology and geography, by observing the panorama of nature at first hand. Students soon knew all of the horses and cows on the farms by name. They could identify birds by their calls, and plants by their seeds. On nice days they might go riding or on sleigh rides or on picnics. They practiced music and drama, and always had an attentive audience in the many Lloyd-Joneses who attended, and sometimes participated, in their activities. Many of the family, for that matter, were on the school's payroll. One of Frank's cousins taught mathematics, another was the gym teacher. His sister Jane taught singing and piano, and his mother for a time was a

dormitory matron.<sup>15</sup>

It was not surprising then, that Aunt Nell and Aunt Jane asked Frank to design a building for the school. Silsbee gave him time off to supervise its construction. It was Frank Lloyd Wright's first building. Although unremarkable by the standards of his later buildings, the Hillside Home school had a warmth and practicality uncommon for any architects's first endeavor.

Over the years Wright would design other buildings for his aunt's school and it would grow into something far vaster than anyone then imagined. But the school looked backward as well as forward. Its leaves and branches might look to the future, but it's roots were firmly planted in the history of the Lloyd-Jones clan. Over the fireplace Timothy the stonemason placed the maxim "Truth against the World," with the symbol /!\.<sup>16</sup>

After working for Silsbee for two years, Wright now joined the firm of Adler and Sullivan. This turned out to be one of the most important events in his career. Many years later Frank Lloyd Wright would still praise his great mentor Louis Sullivan as "the master for whose influence,

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<sup>15</sup> The best source on the Hillside Home School is Maginel Wright Barney, The Valley of the God-Almighty Joneses, p113-123. For Wright's later, contentious, relations with his aunts see Twombly, p177-179.

<sup>16</sup> Barney, Valley, p117. An authoritative catalogue of Wright's buildings, starting with the Hillside Home School, is found in William Allin Storrer, the Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, A Complete Catalogue, M.I.T. Press, 1982.

affection and comradeship, I have never ceased to feel gratitude." Wright forever called Sullivan his "Lieber Meister," and described himself as merely "a pencil in the hand of the master."<sup>17</sup>

The firm of Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan was one of the most successful architectural firms in Chicago during the years that Wright worked there. Along with William Le Baron Jenney, Burnham and Root, Holabird and Roche, they were among the major innovators of the Chicago School of architects that virtually invented the skyscraper during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Replacing thick masonry walls with steel-frame construction, and plenty of windows, they built the world's first efficient, as well as attractive, tall office buildings.

The skyscraper represented a social revolution as well as an architectural one. Advances in transportation coincided with the new building technologies. Streetcars, and later automobiles, brought workers from increasingly distant suburbs to travel by elevators to heights previously undreamed of. Old patterns of living and working close together were slowly replaced by a division of home and work that changed the nature both of the workplace and of the family. Old architectural philosophies of design and

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<sup>17</sup> On Sullivan and his influence on Wright see William H. Jordy, American Buildings, p83-179; and James F. O'Gorman, Three American Architects, Richardson, Sullivan and Wright, 1865-1915, University of Chicago Press, 1991.

construction, which had seemed adequate for thousands of years, in a stroke had become obsolete as buildings reached ever new heights. The purpose of a building could be best served by jettisoning the antiquated design philosophies of the past. The new architectural motto, first announced by Louis Sullivan was, "form follows function."

Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan formed an odd couple, a Jew and an Irishman, markedly different in style and background. Their differences, when added together, brought them successes neither could have achieved alone. Dankmar Adler was the astute engineer who could find the perfect solution to the most difficult structural problem. His art of bringing things harmoniously together included not just iron, steel, glass and masonry, but people. He was a congenial and tactful businessman who could deal persuasively with clients and workers. For a while he was even able to establish a harmonious working relationship with the egocentric and irascible, but brilliant, Louis Sullivan.

Frank Lloyd Wright was "Sullivan's new man." Late at night Wright would listen for hours to Sullivan as he expounded his metaphysical architectural philosophies. Sullivan would continue talking, seeming to have forgotten that Wright was still in the room, until finally Wright would excuse himself and take the last trolley home. Over the years the master would come to depend more and more on



his youthful pupil. Before Wright left he had been given his own office next to Sullivan's own -- larger even than Dankmar Adler's office.

Wright loved Sullivan and admired his genius, but even he could see his fellow draftsmen cringe with fear whenever Sullivan walked by. Professionally, Adler and Sullivan were able to bring their immense talents together to create buildings which determined the course of American architectural history, but their conflicting temperaments had a disastrous effect on the men who worked for them. Quiet, groveling and servile when they were under observation, the draftsmen who worked for Adler and Sullivan, when they were by themselves, were resentful and hostile, and their angers were often directed at unsuspecting targets.<sup>18</sup>

Wright's good relations with Sullivan, did not help his relations with his fellow co-workers in the drafting-room. One day he was challenged to a boxing match by some of his colleagues. Perhaps it began innocently enough. Half a dozen of the men in the office were in the habit of going to

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<sup>18</sup> Wright's Autobiography, p165-176, offers a revealing look at the relationship between Adler, Sullivan and their draftsmen and clients. It is the source for this and the following paragraphs. Central to the tensions in the office of Adler and Sullivan were religious prejudices. Wright's anti-semitism is clearly revealed in this section. After 1932 many of Wright's most important clients were Jewish, and Wright no longer expressed such blatant opinions. For the relationship of anti-semitism to the populist/progressive tradition see Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform, p77-82 & passim.

the back room during lunch. They would take off their coats, vests and collars, and spar a few rounds as relaxation. But for Frank Lloyd Wright few things were innocent and inconsequential. He accepted the challenge boldly. His work on the farm, along with boxing lessons in the city, had given him an enormous confidence.

He pulled on his gloves -- he would later remember being offended that they were soiled -- and before his opponent had gotten up his guard, Wright struck him in the face. The man now came after Wright, slugging away, without style or grace, and Wright let him slug. Standing up to him, and backing away, continually drawing him on. One of the men shouted "Time!" But Wright would not stop. He punched his rival again on the nose and now drew blood. The two boxers crashed back and forth, the onlookers racing out of the way, knocking over everything that could come loose. Now another man took the bleeding boxer's place, and Wright, incensed, rushed into him, pummeling him with punches. Finally, the crowd separated the fighters. Wright knew he had won the boxing match, no one would challenge him again, but he had also lost. He had gotten mad, lost his temper, and made enemies of all his fellow workers. Wright's fighting in the backroom at Adler and Sullivan was perhaps a minor incident, a youthful indiscretion, in a life filled with intellectual challenges and dazzlingly brilliant accomplishments. But the fighter in Frank Lloyd Wright

never died.

### CHAPTER THREE: Oak Park

The invention of the skyscraper created the modern city, and it also created the suburb. The skyscraper and the city housed people at work during the day. At night they commuted back to their homes in the suburbs. Ultimately the suburbs would have new architectural forms comparable to the new architecture that dominated the city. This would be one of Frank Lloyd Wright's major legacies.

Frank Lloyd Wright by this time had lived in the country and had lived in the city. His introduction to the suburb happened when his mother came to Chicago to join her son. Anna Wright moved to Oak Park, Illinois, where she worked as a house-keeper for a Universalist minister, and for a short time Wright lived with his mother and sister in the small community thirty minutes by rail from downtown Chicago.

Wright and Kitty by now were seriously thinking of marriage, but they knew he could not support a family on his draftsman's wages. Frank went to Sullivan and explained the problem. From his office Sullivan called down the hall to Adler. They conferred for a minute and then made an proposition. They would give Wright a five-year contract with the firm, at the highest salary of any draftsman in the city, and Sullivan would give Wright a five-thousand dollar loan to build a house. Wright could pay the money back out

of his monthly paycheck. It was a deal that made everyone happy. Wright quickly accepted, and Frank and Kitty shortly thereafter were married on a rainy Saturday in June, 1889. His Uncle Jenkin officiated at All Soul's church.<sup>19</sup>

The house that Wright built for himself and his wife on the corner of Forest and Chicago in the sleepy community of Oak Park was his first great on-going experiment in architecture. It was to Wright a plaything, like a set a Froebel building blocks, to be put together and taken apart and put back together again as many times as he liked. He was never finished constructing and reconstructing it. As the house now stands it has been marvelously restored by the National Trust and the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation to appear much as it did at the turn of the century when Frank and Kitty Wright raised six children within its walls. But a visitor should remember that, as accurate as the restoration is, it can never reproduce Wright's own feeling for the first home he owned. It now has an aura of permanence and stability that it probably never had for Wright.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> These events are related in the Autobiography, p172-173.

<sup>20</sup> The authoritative source for information on this is Ann Abernathy and John G. Thorpe, The Oak Park Home and Studio of Frank Lloyd Wright, The Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation, n.d. I would particularly like to thank Sandra Wilcoxson and Melanie Birk and the staff of the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation for their assistance and helpful suggestions.

During those years the Wrights' house and family were continually growing. In its earliest form the house looked like a seaside cottage, inspired by the shingle-style mansions designed by H.H. Richardson and others on the Atlantic coast. It had, however, a playful relationship to the classical forms that Wright would later criticize so harshly. A large triangular gable, apparently supported by two semi-octagonal bays, mimics the stark geometry of a Greek temple. In the gable a Palladian window, its proportions almost stretched beyond recognition, suggests Frank Lloyd Wright's tongue-in-cheek homage to classicism.

These were extraordinarily happy and productive years for Wright. Just as in the valley, Wright was again surrounded by a large and affectionate family. His mother and for a while his sisters lived next door. Down the street Kitty's parents moved in. His own family grew quickly. His first child, Lloyd, was born in 1890, and was soon followed by John (1892), Catharine (1894), David (1895), Frances (1898), and Robert (1903). Above the mantle Wright inscribed in an oak panel his new motto, "Truth is life." The old battle between Truth and the rest of the world seemed to have been resolved -- at least for a while.

Life in Oak Park was not without its problems. Frank Lloyd Wright battled all his life against the ideas that constrained other people's lives. Money was just one of those ideas which, as Wright saw it, impeded human progress.

When he wished to build an addition to the house or buy some art work with which to decorate it, he would not let a bank's trivial idea that he had no money in his account stop him. Even when checks were returned marked NSF accompanied by a stern note of warning, Wright would not be discouraged. "There'll be more, somewhere." He would cheerfully say.

The sheriff was a familiar figure in the house, upon occasion he stayed all night, waiting for payment on an outstanding debt. At least once, Wright woke up in the morning deeply in debt and harassed by creditors, he went out and sold a valuable work of art, paid off what he owed, and continued on a buying spree which ended up with him even deeper in debt, but much contented, at the end of the day.<sup>21</sup>

Despite its occasional difficulties, life in Oak Park seemed, at least to his children, as a long round of picnics and parties. A large addition was built onto the house for a playroom which was almost as big as all of the rest of the house. There was room for rough-housing, learning lessons, practicing music and giving amateur dramatic performances. There Kitty governed over neighborhood kindergarten classes, and the children held concerts, each playing their own

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<sup>21</sup> For events of these years see, in addition to Wright Autobiography, and Barney, Valley: John Lloyd Wright, My Father, Frank Lloyd Wright, Dover, New York, 1992 (originally, My Father Who is on Earth, G.P. Putnam, New York, 1946. For debt collection see, e.g., pp74-77; also Autobiography, p181-182.

instrument: Lloyd on the cello, John the violin, David the flute, Frances the piano, Robert the mandolin. Catherine and everyone else sang. On Sundays the family would worship together with Uncle Jenkin at All Soul's church.

Frank Lloyd Wright during this time had become virtually indispensable to Adler and Sullivan. Now in charge of a squad of thirty draftsmen he was involved in some of the firm's most important and influential projects, including the Auditorium building on Michigan avenue in Chicago, and the Transportation building at the Chicago World Exposition. The majority of the work handled by Adler and Sullivan were downtown commercial buildings -- theaters, warehouses, hotels and office buildings. Occasionally a client would ask them to design a residence, but this was only an inconvenience to the large firm. For special clients, however, exceptions were made, and Wright was assigned this work. Sullivan's friend James Charnley was one person who could not be put off. The house built for him in downtown Chicago shows the union of Sullivan's and Wright's architectural ideas. Its stark simplicity of massing and interior complexity gives an indication of Wright's early promise. The stairway, which hugs the wall with no apparent support, projecting into a central atrium, reminds the visitor today of one of Wright's last great architectural achievements over half a century later.

Word of Wright's talents soon spread throughout the



small but growing population of Chicago's suburban professionals. Soon Wright was designing houses on his own during the evenings, while working for Adler and Sullivan during the day. But this was a breach of contract, and soon the word reached even Sullivan's ears. Wright was expected to spend all his energies on the firm's contracts. Wright was at his drafting board in his office when Sullivan came in to confront his employee. Sullivan's withering scorn was now turned on Wright. Wright was ordered to stop work on these "bootleg houses." Wright, as inflexible as his mentor, refused. He threw his pencil down on the table and walked out.

Wright was once more on his own. He had abandoned the comfortable security of a steady income with one of Chicago's most prestigious architectural firms for the uncertainties of working for himself. As it happened, it marked an important turning point in Louis Sullivan's life as well as in Wright's.

Wright and Sullivan had shared much in common, most importantly, perhaps, a radical sense of the possibilities of a new American architecture. In both cases their vision of the future of architecture was coupled with an indomitable, even arrogant, faith in their own abilities to bring it to reality. But the courses of their careers took drastically different paths after Wright left Sullivan's office.

Sullivan's ideas for a new American architecture, perhaps reached their fulfillment in the Transportation Building he designed for the Chicago World Exposition in 1893 the same year Wright left his firm. The building with its gigantic polychromed arch, however, seemed markedly out of place at the fair. Sullivan alone had refused to comply with the decision that all of the fair's buildings should conform to a single architectural style. With Sullivan's stunning exception, the fair became a great exhibition of classical architecture, imported from Ancient Rome by way of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. Buildings, with sparkling, white plaster columns, domes and arches, in imitation of marble, stood erect like soldiers at attention on the parade ground. This was the death knell for the Chicago school of architects, although perhaps only Louis Sullivan heard it at the time. For the next half century American architecture would find its inspiration not on its own soil but in the ancient capitols of Europe.

As it happened, the partnership of Adler and Sullivan fell apart within two years of Wright's departure. Sullivan, without his right-hand man, alienated from his workers and abandoned by his partner, was soon deserted, as well, by his clients. During the economic depression which dogged the middle of the 1890s, few clients wanted to gamble with the erratic genius. In the final decades of his life he continued to build some extraordinary buildings, but with

much smaller budgets than he had been accustomed to and in out-of-the-way places. His continued fame today rests chiefly upon his writings, especially his Autobiography of an Idea, and upon the progress of his most famous student and admirer, Frank Lloyd Wright. Increasingly morose, unable to pay the rent in the cheap hotel which was his living quarters and his office, possibly alcoholic as well, Louis Sullivan died in 1924.

Frank Lloyd Wright's course over the next few years, after a shaky start, took a much more auspicious path. The first house Wright built on his own after leaving Sullivan was for Wright's friend, William Winslow. Some people thought it should have been his last. Its severe rectilinear geometry with its high low roof stretching out beyond the walls made it the butt of many jokes in the neighborhood. Some even said that Mr Winslow had to sneak down back alleys to his morning train in order to avoid being laughed at.<sup>22</sup> The characteristics of the house which made it unusual, perhaps even awkward-looking, however, are exactly the same features which Wright would refine and shape over the next few years to create the most dynamic and beautiful houses ever built in America.

Wright's architectural experiments, despite their critics, soon found a growing number of admirers. One evening, shortly after he left Adler and Sullivan, Frank and

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<sup>22</sup> Autobiography, p189.

Kitty were invited to a dinner party at a neighbor's house. One of the guests was Daniel Burnham, whose firm of Burnham and Root, was one of Adler and Sullivan's leading rivals. Burnham had been the architect responsible for the decision to use classical architecture at the Chicago Exposition. He was very enthusiastic about Wright's work, and had arranged this meeting specifically for the purpose of making him an offer. After dinner Wright, Burnham, and their host adjourned to the study, and Burnham made Wright a proposal few men could have resisted. Burnham would send Wright to Paris to study at the Ecole des Beaux Arts with all expenses paid. When Wright returned he would have a job with Burnham, perhaps a partnership. Wright, hearing this, sat down, embarrassed, not knowing what to say.

Burnham saw Wright hesitate.

"Another year, and it will be too late, Frank."

"It's too late now, I'm afraid." Wright finally replied. He had been too long with Sullivan, he said, too influenced by Sullivan's feelings toward classicism, to be able to accept.

It was a historic meeting between one of America's greatest exponents of classicism and one of its greatest critic. Burnham was astonished. How could anyone reject this certain ticket to success? He argued that Greek and Roman architecture was the purest, most beautiful in the world. Its classic lines and perfect proportions were the

basis of all good building. Wright, more embarrassed than argumentative, responded no, he didn't think so. Classicism and the Beaux Arts just seemed like a jail to him. Wright's friend and host interrupted, "Frank, don't you realize what this offer means to you? . . . Think of your future, think of your family." Still, Wright would not be dissuaded. The three men left the study. Wright helped Kitty on with her things and the couple went home. He did not mention to her what had happened until long afterward.<sup>23</sup>

Wright's self-confidence was soon rewarded. Over the next decade and a half Wright helped to create an architectural style which totally transformed the way most Americans lived. It became known as the Prairie style, and it was almost solely the invention of Frank Lloyd Wright. Only, he would not have called it a style. Styles of architecture, to Wright, were merely passing fads, the whims of theorists driven by commercial rather than artistic concerns. The architecture of the Prairie School was more than a style of architecture to Frank Lloyd Wright it was a philosophy of life.

Over the next few years Wright would design a series of houses in Oak Park and in neighboring communities that would revolutionize American architecture. In houses which Wright built for Ward Willets (1901), Frank Thomas (1901), Susan

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<sup>23</sup> This episode, which Wright may have embellished, is described in the Autobiography, 187-189.

Lawrence Dana (1902), Arthur Heurtley (1902), Edwin H. Cheney (1903), Frederick Robie (1906) and Avery Coonley (1907), and a dozen others, Wright developed his philosophy of organic architecture. Its central tenet was that a house should be truthful to its purpose, its site, and its materials. Wright sought in all of his buildings an ideal harmony between the natural environment, the materials of construction, the purpose of the structure and the personality of its occupants. The Prairie house was meant to look as though it had grown naturally out of the soil. Its horizontal lines and earth tones blending into its surroundings. In a time when houses generally were designed to pierce the sky with pointed gables and many chimneys, when wood was painted, and brick plastered, Wright's buildings were apt to startle their early viewers despite their seemingly unassuming intentions.<sup>24</sup>

Wright brought some of the new technology which had revolutionized city building into his suburban houses. Steel and glass allowed Wright to completely destroy the idea that a house was a only a box to live in. Realizing

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<sup>24</sup> On the Prairie house see: Wright, Autobiography, p199-209; Donald Hoffman, Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House: The Illustrated Story of an Architectural Masterpiece, Dover, 1984; H. Allen Brooks, The Prairie School: Frank Lloyd Wright and His Midwest Contemporaries, University of Toronto Press, 1972; Kathryn E. Ratcliff, "The Prairie Style and the Suburban Ethos: Domestic Architecture in Oak Park and River Forest, 1890-1914," paper delivered at Winterthur conference on the American Home, October 30, 1992; Alexander O. Boulton, "The Pride of the Prairie," American Heritage, Vol 42, #3, July/August, 1991.

that a roof was best supported not at its edges or its corners but closer to its center, Wright began his experiments in cantilevered construction. He always imagined that a house should be more like a tree growing out from its center, rather than merely being the sum of its exterior walls. This was a radically new conception of building, one in which the space within was more important than the containing forms without. This mental breakthrough allowed Wright to physically break through the material boundaries which separated the occupants of a building from the natural environment. Spaces became much more complex. They could no longer be imagined in the terms of plane geometry, bounded by lines and angles. Centers of activity flowed from area to area, from outside to inside.

The lack of rigid boundaries opened up a sense of extraordinary possibilities, a physical freedom which Wright never tired of comparing to America's political freedoms. The house on the prairie was an expression of an architecture of democracy. Of course, Wright's idea of democracy was perhaps not the same as everyone else's. As Wright described it, democracy was the highest form of aristocracy. Not everyone was ready for this democracy, only those who were willing to commit themselves to its ideals and to take the risks that that entailed were apt to

be members of Wright's democratic community.<sup>25</sup>

As much as Wright was opposed to formulas, certain features were common to almost all of his Prairie houses. The most important element was a massive central chimney. The hearth was the spiritual center of the house. Its heat and light were symbolic of the warmth and radiance of the family itself. The route to the hearth was a psychological as well as a physical passage. The visitor entered the house from the street through an unobtrusive doorway which was sometimes difficult to find. Wright rarely built a grand entrance way. Inside, the visitor often passed from dimly illuminated spaces to brilliantly lit areas, from low and narrow spaces to broad open areas. Progress through the house was not meant to follow the routes of logic. The spatial complexity mirrored the psychological complexity of its unique human inhabitants. Wright often praised the gothic architecture of medieval churches for many of the qualities which he celebrated in his own work. Both shared a celebration of spatial and emotional complexity, and a rejection of classical formalism. But Wright was never

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<sup>25</sup> Wright's ambivalent attitudes toward democracy are a central theme of all of his writings, See, e.g. Autobiography, pp211, 222, 344,. See also: Twombly, p331; Patrick J. Meehan (editor), Frank Lloyd Wright Remembered, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1991, p6.; and Nariso G. Menocal, "Frank Lloyd Wright's concept of Democracy: An American Architectural Jeremiad," in Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, and Gerald Nordland, Frank Lloyd Wright in the Realm of Ideas, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1988.



comfortable with the striving for great heights typical of gothic architecture. His Prairie houses were not meant to be castles in the air, or fingers pointing to heaven. They were completely of this earth. That was the whole point. They grew naturally from and never left the soil. They were a celebration of a perfect harmony of man's psyche and the natural world which he inhabited. The Prairie house, like most of his later architecture, emphasized its horizontality. The pitch of his roofs over time became lower and lower and ultimately became flat.

The houses ideally suited the new life-styles of suburbanites. Outside of the crowded cities, they had more land on which to spread out. The compact buildings of the city frequently contained several families on different levels and housed servants or tenants in their damp basements or hot attics. The Prairie house had no attic or basement. Only one social class lived in the suburb. Servants and other laborers generally came in to work on the streetcars in the morning and left at night. The middle class family was increasingly a refuge from the harsh realities of the larger world. Isolated, removed from the city, and from people they often could no longer understand, they could imagine a world of ideal harmony between themselves and Nature.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Of the many books recently published on the growth of the suburbs, the one that best places this development in its social context to my mind is Kenneth T. Jackson, Grabgrass

Many of these houses were designed in the studio which Wright now built adjacent to his house in Oak Park. At last Wright was able to join his home and his work in one, for the most part, unified whole. It was not always a harmonious union. His children soon found passageways to the balcony which overlooked the large space set aside for draftsmen, and would sometimes throw down scraps of paper and run off giggling as the draftsmen looked up to see where the rain of paper was coming from. Perhaps Wright's moving all his work into his home also put a strain on his relationship with Kitty. Increasingly his work subordinated all the areas of his life and home.

A large willow tree grew on the lot, and, as Wright enlarged the house to build his studio, instead of cutting it down, he designed a corridor between the house and studio around it. Visitors constantly remarked on how odd it was to have a tree growing out of a house. But Wright realized that the tree was an essential part of his home. Nature and his life must find a harmony. Perhaps, Wright looked at the tree, poking through the roof of his house and imagined that he too might escape out into the light and the open air above.

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Frontier, The Suburbanization of the United States, Oxford University Press, 1985.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Mamah Cheney

Frank Lloyd Wright had become very successful by inventing houses for new suburbanites but he himself was increasingly uncomfortable trying to pretend that he was one of them. As Wright later wrote, "I had almost reached my fortieth year: weary, I was losing grip on my work and even interest in it." He felt that he was "up against a dead wall. I could see no way out. Because I did not know what I wanted, I wanted to go away." And so he left.<sup>27</sup>

The occasion for his abandoning his home and business in Chicago in 1909 was an offer by the German publishing firm of Ernst Wasmuth to print an edition of plans, illustrations and photographs of his architecture. The edition would require Wright's constant attention as the plates were engraved and printed, and would necessitate a lengthy trip to Germany. That Wright decided to make the trip not with his wife but with the wife of a client, Mamah Borthwick Cheney, insured that the newspaper presses in America would be every bit as active as the presses in Germany.

Mamah (pronounced "May-mah") Cheney was what a later generation would call a "free spirit." Although she was described by some as "capricious and temperamental," she was also deeply interested in the arts and in literature. A

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<sup>27</sup> Autobiography, p219.

university graduate and a librarian before she married, she became interested in French and German literature, especially Goethe, and with Wright would publish translations of the works of the early Swedish feminist, Ellen Key. Wright and Mrs Cheney had gotten to know each other while he was designing a house for her and her husband in Oak Park. Before long their affair had become serious and they each asked their spouses for a divorce. When their requests were denied they simply took off together.

This event became one of the great scandals that interrupted the, to this point, seemingly even flow of Wright's career as an architect. The crisis broke when an enterprising reporter for the Chicago Tribune found out that Wright and Mrs. Cheney had signed into a Berlin hotel as "husband and wife." The Tribune then published a lengthy interview with the confused and dejected Catherine who insisted that Wright would yet come to his senses and return to her.

Newspaper reporters ultimately cornered Wright. In a series of interviews Wright defended his abandoning his family in the name of a "higher law." His actions were inspired by love and his regard for honesty. His actions were, he implied, the justifiable acts of a creative and divinely-inspired genius. In addition, he criticized traditional concepts of marriage as a form of property and

equated it with slavery.<sup>28</sup>

The newspapers jumped on these pronouncements, describing both Wright and Mrs Cheney as insane and immoral. The press in this the golden age of "yellow journalism" and muckraking were increasingly skilled in feeding a new reading public's hunger for sensationalism. In the process, they succeeded in turning the private, petty domestic problems of two couples into a cause célèbre. Wright during the course of his life would slowly learn how to turn the public's appetite for the dramatic to his own advantage, but this was still in the future.

The papers, for their part, despite their equivocal motives, had succeeded in uncovering, perhaps, in part, in manufacturing, one of the central themes of Frank Lloyd Wright's life. As much as Wright strived to accomplish a harmonious balance between his architecture and its natural environment, a harmonious unity of all its various parts: Wright, for most of his life, was unable to find a harmonious balance between his own creative individuality and the larger community he inhabited. This was not a unique problem with Wright. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, such overwhelming pride had been condemned as hubris, the fatal flaw which inevitably brought down the wrath of the Gods. From the Antinomian controversy of Anne

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<sup>28</sup> These events are recorded in the Autobiography, p219-220; Twombly, 119-141, esp. p138; and Gill, p198-208.

Hutchinson in colonial New England to the philosophy of Civil Disobedience as proposed by Henry David Thoreau, American history has been bedeviled by the question: should an individual follow his or her own truths or those of the society in which he or she belongs? The question is unlikely to be answered soon. But the truth for Frank Lloyd Wright, as for the many others who were confronted by it, was that, as you sow, so shall you reap, and Frank Lloyd Wright would harvest the effects, for good and for ill, of his decision for years to come.

Frank Lloyd Wright had once again ran away from a secure and comfortable world, to one full of uncertainties. In leaving Chicago and Oak Park he had entered upon a far larger stage. Over the years he would become the best-known and most influential architect in the world, and the publication of his work in Germany was the first step in that direction. European architects, whose work would both spread Wright's philosophy of architecture and compete with Wright's for popular acclaim got some of their first glimpses of the promise of modern architecture by studying the portfolios of Wright's work published by Ernst Wasmuth in 1910.

European architects were most impressed, however, not with Wright's domestic architecture, and its philosophy of organic architecture, but with two public buildings which Wright had designed during his Oak Park years. One of these

was the Larkin Building in Buffalo, New York -- Wright's first large-scale experiment, as he described it, in "breaking the box." Public buildings, even more than private homes, Wright realized, were apt to be merely boxes inside of boxes. The people who worked or lived in them had a tendency to be seen merely as the contents of their rigid containers. The modern office building thus had a powerful tendency to dehumanize its inhabitants, just as Wright believed modern commercial practices dehumanized the larger society. By simply moving the stair towers of the Larkin Building free of the central block, Wright was successful in creating a dramatic building mass reminiscent of the architecture of ancient Egypt. Inside a vast central court, secretaries worked on the ground floor, while the company's managers worked in open offices located on the balconies above. Wright liked to think that the effect of the open plan was to create a space for what he called a "great official family at work."<sup>29</sup>

The other major building which had a dramatic influence on young European architects was the church for the small community of Unitarians in Oak Park. Throughout his life Wright's best architecture was usually done whenever Wright had an unlimited budget -- or a severely limited budget. Few commissions tested Wright's abilities to design with a small budget more than Unity Church. The congregation of

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<sup>29</sup> Autobiography, p210.

about four hundred could only afford \$45,000 to build a structure to house both their religious services and social activities. Wright resolved the problem of constructing the most building for the least money by turning to concrete, one of the oldest, and, to that time, least appreciated, building materials in the history of architecture. Concrete -- essentially, sand, gravel, and lime -- was cheap enough, but the real building expenses were the wood frames needed to hold the concrete in place while it hardened. Wright's accomplishment was in designing a building which used a minimum number of wooden forms, which could be dismantled and reused in different parts of the building. The result was a building of simple but powerful massing which reflected a perfect unity between the nature of the material and the needs of the congregation.

When Wright and Mamah Cheney returned to the United States he began to build his second home. Wright sometimes told the story of the holy man who, yearning to see God, climbed up the highest mountain. When he reached the summit he heard a voice call to him, "Get down ... go back." The seeker was told to "go down into the valley below where his own people were -- there only could he look upon God's countenance."<sup>30</sup> This was the very advice he took now as he returned to Spring Green, Wisconsin, and began to build a house on the hillside where he had played as a boy.

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<sup>30</sup> Autobiography, p212.



He called the place, "Taliesin," after an ancient Welsh poet who celebrated the art and culture of Wales. In English the word means "shining brow," and Wright thought that was an appropriate image for the house which he built not on the hill, but as he said, "of the hill."<sup>31</sup> Like all of the homes Wright designed for himself it was a structure which would grow in fits and starts, mirroring the erratic course of his own life. Built of the local yellow sand-limestone, the low one-story house wrapping around the hillside appeared to be a natural outcropping. Its walls and pavements merged into the hillside so subtly that it was difficult to point to the spot where the hill ended and the house began. Nearby stood the farms and houses of his uncles, and his aunts' Hillside school. Overlooking all was the odd-looking windmill which Wright had designed to pull water out of underground springs to feed his aunt's school. Interlocking columns, one octagonal and one diamond-shaped in plan, gave the structure extraordinary stability, and led Wright to name the windmill Romeo and Juliet. It was the cause of great controversy among the Lloyd-Joneses when it was first built, and long after seemed to signify to Wright his new status as a leading member in the family.<sup>32</sup>

Wright's goal now was to build not just a new house for

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<sup>31</sup> Autobiography, 224.

<sup>32</sup> Wright's lengthy discussion of the Romeo and Juliet windmill is in the Autobiography, p192-197.

himself and Mamah Cheney, but also a new life. Taliesin was designed as the centerpiece of a self-sufficient estate. Wright imagined he could join his architectural practice with farming. He would raise cattle and sheep in the fields surrounding Taliesin and grow fruits and vegetables in its gardens. Wright's return to Nature, however, was not a rejection of modern civilization. His new role of architect\gentleman farmer, as he knew, was possible only because the automobile and the telephone had made such an arrangement possible.

Despite Wright's plans and accomplishments in this period he still was not satisfied, perhaps he never would be. He had felt, he said, uncomfortable in the role of a father, yet now on visits to Chicago he would sometimes drive out to Oak Park at night. Gazing out of his car window he saw the lights streaming from the open windows of his home. He heard the murmured voices of his children as they called to each other. He listened to the music coming from the piano and heard singing, and he would drive away. Over the years he would learn how to forget.<sup>33</sup>

The major project that Wright worked on in these years was the vast entertainment park named Midway Gardens which covered an entire city block in south Chicago. It was designed as a cultural center in which an elite clientele could hear a concert while others could drink, dine, and

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<sup>33</sup> Autobiography, p376-377.

dance in an outdoor garden setting. A forerunner, perhaps, of a Disneyland or Six Flags amusement park, it was constantly beset by financial problems and following the passage of prohibition in 1919 it quickly passed into bankruptcy. It survives now only in plans, illustrations and photographs which document its extraordinary, fantasy-like qualities. When it was razed in 1929, Wright took delight in the fact that it was so massive and so solidly built that the wrecking contractor was forced into bankruptcy.<sup>34</sup>

In 1914 Wright's life suddenly took a dramatic and tragic turn which no one could have foreseen. He was working at the small office he had constructed at Midway Gardens while it was under construction. While he was eating his lunch a stenographer from the Garden's front office walked in. "Mr. Wright, you're wanted on the telephone," she said.

He went out to take the call and then returned to the office. His face was white, everyone in the room turned silent. Wright clung to the table for support and groaned. "Taliesin is on fire." he finally announced.<sup>35</sup>

Wright soon learned the rest of the story. Mamah

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<sup>34</sup> Wright originally just said that the demolition contractor lost money, see Autobiography, p238. Over the years Wright apparently "remembered" the true extent of the contractor's financial problems, see Twombly p153.

<sup>35</sup> This description is taken from John Lloyd Wright, My Father Frank Lloyd Wright, p. 80.

Cheney and six others had died, at the hands of a crazed servant who had set the building afire and then killed the fleeing inhabitants with an axe as they passed through the doors. Something died in Wright at the same time. It was as though the flames which had taken his home and his love had also destroyed a part of Wright. His youth, his overpowering optimism, now lay behind him, as he was now forced to set out once again into an uncertain future.

## CHAPTER FIVE: A Long Winter

Frank Lloyd Wright is often said to have had two careers. The one which began in Chicago and Oak Park was now ended. His second career still lay several years in the future. For the next two decades Frank Lloyd Wright was in a virtual creative hibernation. The several houses he designed between 1914 and about 1930 were often brilliant experiments in materials and forms, but they almost all lacked the sense of harmony and repose that much of his earliest and latest work achieved. The great exception to this was Wright's stunning success in designing the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo.

Wright had long been fascinated by Japan and its unique sense of aesthetics. He had perhaps first seen an example of Japanese building at the Chicago Exposition in 1893. In 1905 he made his first visit to Japan with his wife, Catherine, where he began his collection of Japanese art works. Soon Wright had become one of the foremost American collectors of Oriental art. He was especially interested in Japanese woodblock prints, which seemed to him to distill the complexities of nature down to their most simple forms. By 1912 Wright wrote his first book, not on architecture, but on the art of the Japanese print. This interest in Japan and Japanese art by a foreigner soon brought Wright to the attention of highly-placed individuals in Japanese

business and government. The island nation was just beginning its entrance upon the world stage, and as European and American entrepreneurs flocked to its shores at the beginning of the century, it soon became apparent that these new visitors needed suitable accommodations on their visits.<sup>1</sup>

Traditional Japanese architecture evolved over the centuries unaffected by Western ideas of style and comfort. Buildings with red tile roofs were supported on lightweight wooden supports which allowed sliding screens (shoji) with paper panels to vary the room configurations to meet the changing needs of the household. Woven floor mats (tatami) created a standardized scale which determined the size and shapes of rooms and the placement of partitions. Interior garden-courts, large over-hanging eaves, and porches allowed a gradual transition from the outside environment into the interior of the house. In addition, the traditional Japanese house has no furniture. Individuals kneeled or crouched or sat on pillows. Beds were rolled up at night and stored away during the day. Wright, and many other visitors to Japan since him, marveled over the simplicity, the efficiency, the cleanliness, and the spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Wright frequently discounted the influence of Japanese architecture on his work (although he also admitted great admiration for it). It was only after his first visit to Japan in 1905, however, that Wright's work took on its characteristic elements, and those innovations that were integral to the Prairie house found expression.

significance inherent in the Japanese home. But such buildings required a transformation of habits, and ways of thought, that foreign businessmen were not always eager to make.

The Japanese Emperor himself agreed to share the costs with some of the country's leading industrialists for a new hotel in Tokyo to meet the needs of foreign visitors. They selected Wright to be its architect. It was Wright's job to create a marriage between Eastern and Western building practices and designs. Probably no one else in the world at that time was more capable of accomplishing such a task. Wright had already incorporated many Japanese ideas into his early work. The Prairie house itself, is virtually an American expression of the traditional Japanese home.

Wright spent eight years designing and overseeing the construction of the Imperial Hotel (1914-1922), living for much of that time in Japan. Not only did he have to find a harmony between Eastern and Western design concepts, he had to bridge the gulf between Eastern and Western social customs and business practices during construction. Laborers who lived with their families in the building while it was under construction, and who sometimes refused to work in the strange and often impractical ways they were directed, frequently disrupted work until accommodations were finally made between all the parties involved. Certainly Wright's unbending personality drove the work

forward in Japan, just as it often did in America. Here, however, everything had to be invented as if for the first time: furniture, doors, windows, plumbing, heating and electrical utilities. Wright even designed silverware, plates, cups, saucers, drinking glasses, carpets, murals, wastepaper baskets and cuspidors.

The greatest problem Wright faced in designing the Imperial Hotel, however, was the threat of an earthquake. Wright was working in his office in Tokyo one day just before noon when a quake struck. A gigantic jolt lifted the whole building, throwing all of Wright's draftsmen with their drawing boards sprawling to the floor. Draftsmen and workmen hurried from the site, throwing down their tools, running for their lives. Wright was knocked down by the rushing crowd, and as he lay on the ground he saw the land swell as the earth formed a wave and passed by. He heard the chimneys of nearby buildings collapse and the hideous crushing and grinding noises as buildings heaved and groaned.<sup>2</sup>

Wright recognized the nature of the problem and its solution. Instead of fighting an earthquake, his idea was to build a structure which, as he said, would "sympathize with it and out-wit it."<sup>3</sup> His building would float, like a

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<sup>2</sup> Wright's description of these events is found in the Autobiography, p258-267, See esp. p264.

<sup>3</sup> Autobiography, p260.



ship, on the unstable earth below.<sup>4</sup> He took borings in the earth and made tests at the site, and found that under an eight foot layer of surface soil lay a much deeper strata of mud from sixty to seventy feet deep. The foundations of the Imperial Hotel were built to ride upon this deposit of mud. The building was constructed in flexible sections to expand and contract with a passing tremor.

The Imperial hotel was a stunning achievement both technologically and visually. The building delighted its many visitors from its opening in 1922, until it was finally torn down in 1968. Its site in downtown Tokyo was ultimately too valuable to be used for the low, sprawling hotel which Wright designed. Two years after Wright completed his work, his experiment in earth-quake proof building was tested. He heard the news first in the papers. All of Tokyo, including the Imperial Hotel, they announced, had been destroyed in the most terrible earthquake in its history. Ten days later Wright received a more accurate report. A telegram from Tokyo reached him "HOTEL STANDS UNDAMAGED AS MONUMENT OF YOUR GENIUS HUNDREDS OF HOMELESS PROVIDED BY PERFECTLY MAINTAINED SERVICE CONGRATULATIONS."<sup>5</sup>

This was perhaps the single brightest light in Frank Lloyd Wright's professional life during the nineteen

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<sup>4</sup> "Like a ship," Edgar Tafel, Years with Frank Lloyd Wright, Apprentice to Genius, McGraw Hill, 1979, p102.

<sup>5</sup> Autobiography, p265.

twenties. Emotionally and personally, the decade of the twenties was marked by a long descent which Wright was only gradually able to reverse. Wright for much of this time was still healing his emotional wounds from the tragedy of 1914. After the fire and the death of Mamah Cheney, he received hundreds of letters of sympathy from friends and from strangers. One day in an effort to put the anguish behind him, he tied these letters up in a bundle, still unread, and set them on fire.<sup>6</sup>

One letter, however, he did not burn. It was from a woman who had herself known tragedy and who offered Wright some solace. After a short exchange of letters they met. Her name was Miriam Noel, a French woman driven from Paris during the first World War. She seemed to Wright brilliant and sophisticated and, shortly after Catherine finally granted Wright a divorce in 1922, Wright and Miriam Noel were married.

Wright would later describe his situation with an old aphorism: "drowning men clutch at straws."<sup>7</sup> It was an unhappy affair, apparently, from the start. The couple lived together only five months before disagreements and jealousies forced them to separate. His marriage to Miriam Noel lasted only four years (1923-1927), but they were among the most turbulent years in a lifetime of tumults and

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<sup>6</sup> Autobiography, p242. But see also p248.

<sup>7</sup> Autobiography, p248.

uproars.

He began now to rebuild Taliesin, but twice it caught fire, and he had to start over again. Miriam, emotionally unstable when she had met Wright, grew increasingly troubled. In 1924 Frank Lloyd Wright finally met the woman who would ultimately bring as much peace and serenity to Wright's life as he would ever know. But the immediate result was to throw Miriam Noel over the edge into the depths of outrage, jealousy and despair. She became a maelstrom of emotions which Wright, unlike the Imperial Hotel, was unable to simply float over.

The cause of Miriam's troubles and Wright's tranquility was Olga Ivanovna Milanoff Hinzenburg. They met in 1924 in Chicago at a matinee performance of a Russian ballet company. He was 57 she, 26. Despite the disparity in their ages, and the fact that both were married at the time, their relationship blossomed. Their strengths and weaknesses so complemented each other, that together they would grow and develop in ways which they could not have individually. Olgivanna, as she was called, would have such a strong influence on the course of the remainder of Wright's life that it is difficult to imagine that his later successes could have happened had they not met. Shortly after their meeting Olgivanna and her seven year-old daughter, Svetlana, were living with Wright at Taliesin, and before 1925 was over they had a daughter, whom they named Iovanna.

As happy as these events were, they were only a prologue to the turbulent drama which followed in 1926, one of the most tumultuous years of Wright's life. The events were set in motion by Miriam's refusal to grant Wright a divorce, and her pressing a legal action against Olgivanna for "alienation of affections." Wright's lawyer suggested that Wright and his new family disappear for a period of time, waiting, in effect, for things to "blow over." As well meaning as the advice was, Wright's disappearance created a flurry of speculation in the newspapers about the scandalous architect and his affairs. New charges were now pressed by Olgivanna's (ex-)husband, despite the fact that the couple had by this time been properly divorced. He charged Wright with abducting his daughter, Svetlana, sued him for a quarter million dollars for "alienation of affections" and offered a \$500 dollar reward for his arrest. The fact that Wright, Olgivanna, Svetlana, and Iovanna had crossed state lines in the course of their flight from justice, brought federal charges as well. Now even immigration officials took an interest charging that Olgivanna had broken the terms of her legal status as a "resident alien." Trouble mounted upon trouble as lawyers, newspapermen, and politicians saw their opportunities to make money, grab headlines, and gain notoriety, all at the

expense of Wright and Olgivanna.<sup>8</sup>

The culmination of these events occurred on October 20, 1926, when a horde of newspaper reporters, photographers, sheriffs, and lawyers, appeared at the cottage in Minnesota where the small family were in hiding. Wright was marched off as camera shutters clicked and as flash bulbs exploded. At the Minneapolis jail Wright was led to a small cell, and experienced the sensations common perhaps to every incarcerated individual. He heard the heavy metal doors opened and slammed shut as he entered, and he fought off the feeling of suffocation as he stared at the soiled mattress on one side of his six by six foot cell and at the dirty water closet nearby.

Wright was arraigned the following morning and returned to jail for a second night before his lawyers were finally able to arrange his release. Every citizen, guilty of a crime or not, Wright later argued, should, as a part of his education, spend two nights in such a jail, if they would truly understand the nature of the society to which they belonged.

Wright was barely out of jail, and the slow process of trying to clear his name had not yet begun, when financial problems were added to his legal problems. Wright's business had been in decline in the aftermath of his long

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<sup>8</sup> These confusing affairs are covered in the Autobiography p293-294, 306-322; Twombly, p173-192; and Gill p234-5, 290-301.

absence in Japan, and the continuing note of scandal that attached to his name scared off many lucrative commissions. In addition, the large expenses of rebuilding his fire-ravaged home were adding up. The bank which held Wright's mortgage on Taliesin, now foreclosed when Wright was unable to make payments.

Wright was forced to leave Taliesin, and the bank began to auction off his furniture, equipment, livestock, and his collection of art works. Wright was only saved from complete destitution when a group of his friends, family, and clients joined together to help Wright through his difficulties. They hired lawyers to clear Wright of the greatly exaggerated charges against him. In addition, they formed "Frank Lloyd Wright, Incorporated," gambling that Wright's future work would enable the architect to satisfy the calls of his creditors, and to repay their purchase of shares. It would be a long time, however, before their confidence was rewarded. In the meantime Wright's life and work was to be the legal property of others.

Wright was finally able to secure a divorce from Miriam in 1927, when her lawyers, witnessing her tailspin into irrationality, finally deserted her. The final coda to their relationship occurred when Miriam broke into the house Wright and Olgivanna were renting in La Jolla, California, while they tried to regain possession of Taliesin. Finding no one home, Miriam went on a rampage, smashing costly

furniture, and taking articles she did not destroy. A few years later Miriam Noel Wright died in a sanitarium after suffering from, as it was officially described, "exhaustion following delirium."<sup>9</sup>

On August 25, 1928, Wright and Olgivanna were finally married, and took their first steps on the long road out of the depths of their financial and legal problems.

Unfortunately their journey had just begun when the nation took a different path. On "Black Tuesday," October 29, 1929, the Wall Street stock market crash triggered a great depression which afflicted the country for over a decade. Bank closings, business failures, and unemployment became endemic throughout the country.

It is perhaps the mark of great people that they are able turn their lives from misfortune to triumph, to find strength in tragedy, and to create good out of evil. Frank Lloyd Wright had ample opportunity in his life to hone this skill. It was not a task, however, which even Wright could perform overnight. Throughout the period from the first fire at Taliesin until the nineteen thirties, Wright continued to experiment in new architectural forms. His construction of Hollyhock house for Aline Barnsdall in Los Angeles, and his experiments in concrete block construction, were radical departures from his older Prairie Style work and important influences upon his later architecture, but

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<sup>9</sup> Gill, p298.

these buildings were generally cold and impersonal, making up in drama what they often lacked in practicality.

The years to follow saw Wright complete fewer and fewer commissions. He turned his energies increasingly toward writing and lecturing. His Autobiography, which was begun while Wright and Olgivanna were in hiding, is a monument to his life and his philosophy of architecture, and would eventually have a dramatic influence upon a younger generation of architects. It is still the best source of information on Wright, even if it sometimes needs to be taken with a grain of salt. By the time it was finally published in 1932, however, most serious architectural critics recognized the aging Wright as a grand old man in American architecture, but one whose influence and accomplishments were all in the past.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Twombly, p205.



## CHAPTER SIX: Regeneration

Far from being ready to be put out to pasture, Frank Lloyd Wright was now just beginning the most creative phase of his life's work. Probably the most important step Wright took in rejuvenating his declining career as an architect was the establishment of the Taliesin Fellowship. In 1932 Wright sent a notice to a small group of his friends announcing that he would be accepting apprentices to reside and work with him at Taliesin.

It was a brilliant stroke. The tuitions of the proposed seventy apprentices at six hundred and fifty dollars a year would bring a much needed infusion of capital. The apprentices would work in the studio and in the fields, combining both architectural study and physical labor. Apprentices would study architecture literally from the ground up, active in phases of the business, in addition they would have the experience of working with one of the renowned masters of American architecture.

The idea for the Taliesin Fellowship was not a new one. In almost all of its features it reflected the philosophy of the Hillside Home school which was established by his aunts nearly forty years ago, and which was itself merely an application of ancient ideas brought to America by the Lloyd-Jones clan. Indeed, many people have commented that

the closest equivalent of the Taliesin fellowship was a medieval manorial estate.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the first lesson which the earliest apprentices at Taliesin learned was that nothing stayed the same for long. Despite the rigid rules which Wright and Olgivanna devised to run the establishment, everything revolved around the pragmatic realities of living on a farm during the depression, the pressures to design creative architecture, and the personal whims of Mr. Wright.

Edgar Tafel was one of Taliesin's first apprentices. In 1932 he was an architectural student at New York University when one morning his aunt handed him a clipping from the Herald Tribune announcing that Wright was starting his own school of architecture. Tafel had already become mesmerized by Wright's ideas after reading his Autobiography and a volume of Wright's lectures delivered at Princeton University. He sat down and wrote a letter to Wright explaining how much he would like to join the Fellowship but that he only had \$450. Two long weeks passed and Tafel received a telegram from Spring Green. "BELIEVE WE CAN MANAGE A FELLOWSHIP FOR YOU IF YOU PAY ALL YOU CAN NOW STOP YOU MAY COME NOW INTO TEMPORARY QUARTERS . . . FRANK LLOYD

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<sup>11</sup> Both Twombly (p211-220, & passim) and Gill (p326-334) are critical of the "feudal" and authoritarian nature of the Fellowship. Most of the discussion which follows is based upon the more positive (and I think, more balanced) account of Edgar Tafel, Years with Frank Lloyd Wright, Apprentice to Genius, McGraw Hill, New York, 1979.

WRIGHT."<sup>12</sup>

The native New Yorker took a train to Chicago, and a bus to the little town of Spring Green which then had a population of about four hundred people. At the bus station he found someone driving out to Taliesin and rode in the rumble seat of his car, and was soon deposited with his bags at the site of the old Hillside Home School. There was Wright in the gymnasium he had designed years before, standing by a piano and listening to a wind-up phonograph screeching out a Beethoven symphony. Tafel walked over, holding his breath, "Mr Wright, I'm Edgar Tafel. From New York."

Wright shook his hand and replied, "Young man, help me move this piano." Before the day was over Tafel was already busy at work at Taliesin. His first task after moving the piano was whitewashing bathrooms.<sup>13</sup>

The first apprentices at Taliesin helped prepare the quarters for those that followed. When the second wave appeared, they began building the studio they would work in. Continual building, renovating and rebuilding was a constant at Taliesin. Apprentices learned about building by digging foundations, excavating sand, burning lime for plaster, mortar and concrete, cutting timber, constructing the buildings, making cabinets, shelves, trim, doors, windows,

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<sup>12</sup> Tafel, p16.

<sup>13</sup> Tafel, p20.

and furniture. In addition, the fellows, especially in the early years, took turns in the fields and gardens. Those who already had farm experience sometimes had the extra jobs of milking the cows and cleaning the stables. During harvest everyone, including Wright and Olgivanna, worked harvesting and threshing grain or husking corn. The small farm was thus able to raise most of its own food and sometimes raised a surplus. When this happened Wright would fill his car with baskets of tomatoes and string beans and peas and drive to Madison to try to sell them. He rarely was able to get a good price, however, since many others during the middle of the depression were trying to do the same thing.

The depression created numerous hardships for the Wright's large extended family. Everyone at Taliesin became used to "making do or doing without." Wright, himself, became skilled at bargaining with merchants and local governmental agencies for tools, materials and even for food and clothing. Electricity at Taliesin was provided by a generator which ran only when necessary in order to conserve energy. Whenever the Fellowship was forced to hire an electrician or a plumber, an apprentice would closely follow him everywhere he went, quietly watching, and learning his trade. Soon the apprentices could do almost all the wiring and plumbing at Taliesin.

Wright during the Depression was even reduced upon occasion to calling up old friends and clients to beg for money. Eventually he could no longer even pay for the long-distance phone charges. Trips by automobile during this time were often on back roads, on worn out tires, for Wright could neither pay the fees for his license plates nor the costs for new tires. The bottom seemed to come when Wright decided that they would do away with lunch at the Fellowship. Olgivanna stepped in at this point, and suggested to her husband, "Well, Frank, why don't we just have bread and milk?" Soon other items were added to the noon menu as well.<sup>14</sup>

Wright seemed very little effected by these annoyances. In fact he seemed sometimes to revel in them, accepting them merely as challenges to be overcome. The creative life was not supposed to be a comfortable one. Life at Taliesin, even after prosperity returned, was never without its inconveniences, many of them created by Wright himself. The daily schedule was constantly being reorganized. Plans carefully plotted one evening would be swept away in the morning. An apprentice could wake up in Spring Green one day and, without any previous notice, find himself going to

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<sup>14</sup> On the hardships of the first years of the Fellowship see Tafel pp139-140, 143-146, 152-153, 160-162, & passim. On lunch at Taliesin (and general confirmation of the portrait of the early Fellowship drawn by Edgar Tafel) see the recollections of Taliesin Fellow John H. Howe in Patrick J. Meehan, Frank Lloyd Wright Remembered, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1991, p134.

bed at a job site a hundred miles away at the end of the day.

Life at Taliesin was a mirror of Wright's creative life itself. It was a continual chaos out of which Wright continually created order. When an apprentice watching him work brought to Wright's attention that he was designing outside the grid lines that Wright had plotted on a piece of paper, Wright shot back, "I'm not going to be a slave to the grid just because I invented it."<sup>15</sup>

Corrections were not just done on paper. Wright was never entirely satisfied, and he never considered one of his designs complete. Wright was constantly moving furniture around in client's houses, and even in houses he just happened to be visiting. Sometimes his adjustments were more extensive. One day Wright appeared unannounced at the home of one of his clients in California who was in the midst of entertaining some of his friends with a barbecue. Wright emerged from his car with several of his apprentices, and before he had even said hello to his host, he pointed his cane toward a wall he didn't like. "Rip it out," he commanded, and his apprentices immediately went to work tearing down the offensive structure. (Wright, in compensation, left four apprentices who boarded with the new homeowners for a month while they to built him a more

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<sup>15</sup> On the continual change at Taliesin see Tafel, p84-85, p88, p93, p165, & passim. On the grid, see p126.

appropriate wall.<sup>16</sup>

This was not just the idiosyncrasy of a creative genius. Wright's ability to imagine his life and his work in a constant state of becoming was one of the sources of strength that he brought to everything he did. His toleration of disorder was at the core of his creative philosophy.

Olgivanna Wright during these years acted as a keel to Wright's sometimes wandering vessel. She brought to the Fellowship some degree of the common sense that Wright sometimes lacked. Often as headstrong as Wright himself, she offered the apprentices another ear, and often brought their concerns to Wright, knowing just the right word and the right time to direct Wright's actions in a practical course. With the many talents she brought with her to Taliesin, she brought her experiences in group living and in creative expression from her stay with Georgi Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man in Paris. With her daughters, Svetlana and Iovanna, she directed the smooth operation of the immediate daily needs of the Fellowship, but few people failed to understand that she was a dynamic force in every activity undertaken by Wright.

Many of the apprentices at Taliesin, especially in its later years, chaffed at what they saw as Wright's

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<sup>16</sup> The story is told by Arch Obler (p80-82) Gordon O. Chadwick in Meehan p145-146

capriciousness, and Olgivanna's severity. Life in the close-knit community of Taliesin was not for everyone, but many people who came to Taliesin thrived and blossomed as individuals in ways it is unlikely they would have if not for their experience there. Edgar Tafel, who came to Taliesin thinking he would stay only for a year or two, stayed for nine years. His career at Taliesin began with moving a piano and ended with him designing buildings on his own and splitting the profits with the Foundation. William Wesley Peters, who like Tafel, arrived at Taliesin the first year of the Fellowship, married Olgivanna's daughter, Svetlana, and worked with Wright and later with the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation until Peters died in 1992. John Howe, who also came to Taliesin in 1932, after earning his first year's tuition of \$300 by setting up pins at a Chicago bowling alley, oversaw activities in the drafting room at Taliesin for over thirty years. Eugene Masselink, Wright's personal secretary, became the chief director of the publications program at Taliesin. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer who joined the Fellowship relatively late in 1949, still serves as Foundation Archivist. Many others came to Taliesin and, whether they stayed a short time or a long time, gained a new awareness of their creative potential. Wright would probably have agreed with Gurdjieff that some of his best pupils were those who rejected his teachings.

For many of Wright's apprentices their stay at Taliesin



was marked by the warmth of a large and caring, if often chaotic and sometimes restricting, community. They remembered the home-cooked meals, the bread and cakes hot out of the oven. They remembered the Sunday picnics, which Wright, like his Uncle Jenkin years ago, would close with a few words of wisdom -- which, unlike his uncle's, were usually about organic architecture rather than about religion. They remembered the dramatic performances and the movies in the theater at Taliesin, or the music performed by the Fellowship String Quartet or the Fellowship choir. Everyone was encouraged to participate, not just in the studio, but in all aspects of life at Taliesin.

Wright's experiences during the years of the Great Depression led him to an enlarged social vision, one, perhaps, he would not have understood during his prosperous and thriving years in Oak Park and Chicago. He began to see architecture more and more in terms of its larger social context. A just and humane society was not just the result of abstract political philosophies it was something which had to be constructed out of the daily lives of a people. Architecture had an important, maybe the most important, role in helping to form such a society.

Wright believed, that the evils of modern society, which had brought on the Great Depression, were all associated with the modern city. In his book The Disappearing City (1932), Wright first outlined his vision

of the modern city as "a parasite of the spirit."<sup>17</sup> Cities, Wright argued, were the source of everything that had gone wrong in America. The concentrations of humanity on a limited amount of land allowed greedy landlords and bankers to extract the maximum amount of profit out of the lives of unfortunate city dwellers. The credit system, so removed from its roots in a natural, organic economy, led inevitably to commercial and industrial overexpansion, unemployment, and military adventurism. The 1929 crash and the clouds of war, which Wright and others could see forming on the distant horizon throughout the 1930s, seemed to Wright to be the proof of his critique of the city.

Many of these ideas were not unique to Wright. They formed a major theme of intellectual and political discussion in the thirties. It was an especially strong sentiment in the American heartland, which still saw World War I as an unnecessary and futile conflict. Wright's friends, Robert La Follete, and Phil La Follete (who was the secretary of Frank Lloyd Wright Incorporated), worked vigorously as Governor and Senator from Wisconsin to advance these populist and progressive ideals. When "Fighting Bob" La Follete broke from the Republican party and ran as the Progressive party's candidate for president he polled the largest popular vote of a third party candidate in American

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<sup>17</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright, The Disappearing City, New York, 1932.

history to that time.<sup>18</sup>

To Wright the solution to the problems which confronted America lay in a radically new relationship between people and their environment. The city, Wright believed, was dying. It was being made obsolete everyday by the new communications and transportation system which allowed a greater dispersion of the population. True democracy, Wright believed, required the elimination of cities and the artificial boundaries of states and towns. In 1935, Wright set his apprentices to the task of building a model of such an ideal community.

The model of Broadacre City, as he called it, was a twelve by twelve foot representation of a four square mile section of a decentralized and restructured nation. It was not a city, village or town, but was a part of a continuum, as if an arbitrary section had been cut from a larger geographical context. Perhaps the basic archetype of Broadacre city was found by Wright, not in political and architectural theories, but in the rock gardens that Wright saw during his travels in Japan. The emotional significance of these gardens lay not in the placement and configurations of the rocks but in the spaces they defined. Wright never tired of quoting Lao Tze that "the reality of a vessel was

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<sup>18</sup> A good discussion of these matters can be found in Lionel March, "An Architect in Search Of Democracy: Broadacre City," in H. Allen Brooks, p195-206.

the void within it."<sup>19</sup> This was the philosophy that lay behind every building which Wright designed, and behind the ideal social community he envisioned. Broadacre had no major monument, perhaps its primary feature was the arterial roadway which lay at the periphery of the model. Here was clustered separate highways for cars and trucks, a high-speed monorail, and continuous warehousing. Nearby were businesses, markets, pollution-free industries, and hotels. Dispersed around this area were parks, farms, vineyards, schools, and homes. Each home was designed so that it could be partly built out of pre-fabricated materials by the family itself, and each house had a minimum of an acre of ground, which would allow space for a family vegetable garden.<sup>20</sup>

In 1935 Wright's Broadacre City model was exhibited in the most incongruous place imaginable -- Rockefeller Center in the heart of metropolitan Manhattan. Many critics, then and since, have snickered at Wright's idealistic utopia. For centuries visionaries have imagined shining cities with spectacular buildings reaching toward the heavens, or they have dreamed of "back to the earth," agrarian communities. But Wright's ideal was not a city, was not the country, and was not a suburb. It was a piece of a larger fabric, a

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<sup>19</sup> Tafel, p46.

<sup>20</sup> Good discussions of Broadacre city can be found in Lionel March, and Twombly p220-232.

decentralized, network of homes, businesses, industries, farms, and roads. As far-fetched as Wright's ideas sounded in the 1930s, and for many years thereafter, America today, with its interstate highways, its suburban shopping malls, and its commercial strips, looks a lot like the Broadacre city Wright designed in 1935.

Wright's designs for an ideal community were not limited to the drawing board. Some architectural historians have argued that everything Wright built was a part of Broadacre city, and that through his influence on others he, more than anyone else, transformed the fabric of the American landscape. Perhaps the most influential, but certainly not the best known, building Wright ever designed, was the house he built for the newspaper reporter Herbert Jacobs and his wife Katherine.<sup>21</sup>

The Jacobs had been looking for a house they could afford on a reporter's salary near Madison, Wisconsin. They were thinking of something in the Dutch Colonial style with white painted bricks. As it happened Katherine Jacobs's cousin was an artist who had spent a summer at Taliesin. She suggested that they ask to Wright to design a house. The Jacobs thought that Wright only designed houses for millionaires, but nevertheless they drove to Spring Green,

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<sup>21</sup> The Jacob's story is told in Herbert Jacobs, Building with Frank Lloyd Wright, Chronicle Books, New York, 1978; Herber Jacobs, "Our Wright Houses," Historic Preservation, XXVIII, 1976, pp9-13. On Usonian houses see also the recollections of Loren B. Pope in Meehan, Frank Lloyd Wright Remembered, p65-75.

and nervously announced to the architect, "What this country needs is a decent five-thousand dollar house. Can you design one for us?" To their surprise Wright agreed.

The result was Wright's first "Usonian" house. The name was a play on "U.S.A.," it was to be a home for a new America. It looked nothing like a Dutch colonial house, but many of the innovations first introduced in the Jacobs' Usonian house would become standard features in houses throughout the country. The house was built on a concrete slab which contained the houses heating system -- wrought-iron steam pipes (later copper tubing would be used for hot water). This radiant or "gravity" heating allowed an even heat rising from the floor, eliminating unsightly radiators, as well as drafts. As an unforeseen advantage it kept dogs and cats off the furniture -- they preferred curling up on the floor. Since the Jacobs had no servants, the kitchen was not pushed out to a wing of the house, but was located in the center of the home, where Mrs Jacobs could prepare dinner while she watched her children or conversed with guests. In the Jacobs house Wright was successful in adapting some of the features of the Prairie house, such as flat roofs, carports, open plans, and access to the out of doors, while still maintaining the family's privacy, for a house with a modest price. The Jacobs house ultimately cost well over the budgeted five thousand dollars, but they were able to make up some of the difference by charging fifty-

cents admission to curious visitors.

The Usonian house was studied by thousands of architects either in person or through the articles about it which appeared in Life magazine and Architectural Forum in 1938. One person who studied the Usonian houses was Alfred Levitt, who left his job for six months in 1937, to observe the construction of a Usonian house in Great Neck New York. He incorporated many of its features in the Cape and Ranch style houses his firm built in Levittown, Long Island; creating, what many believed was a monumental eyesore, but at the same time initiating a revolution in residential home construction. The Wright designs, reinterpreted by the Levitt construction company, are the basis for nearly every post-World War two housing development in the country. Almost all of us now live in a Frank Lloyd Wright house.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Alfred Levitt observed the construction of the Ben Rebhuhn house in Greet Neck Estates, New York. See A.O. Boulton article on Levittown, Long Island, American Heritage (forthcoming). For an excellent discussion of the suburban movement and its social and political context and significance see Kenneth T. Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: Second Flowering

Hitler's rise to power in Germany during the 1930s would have an impact on Frank Lloyd Wright and American architecture, almost as dramatic as its impact on every other aspect of American life. A generation of young German architects were scattered throughout the world fleeing from the repressions of Nazi Germany. Many of them were first introduced to America through the exhibition of their work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1932. The exhibit of "International architects," (which also included the works of Wright) was one of those critical events which defined the course of American architecture history. Individual architects who participated in the 1932 exhibition such as Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier over the course of nearly half a century would virtually reshape the American city. The architects of the "International style," as they became known, had much in common with Wright. Most of them had been profoundly influenced by Wright's work which they had become familiar with in Germany through the Wasmuth portfolios of 1911. Indeed Wright's fame had spread throughout Europe while he was still relatively unknown in the United States. The younger generation of European architects had been



especially inspired by Wright's rebelliousness, his anti-classicism, his attempts to design in harmony with the new technologies of steel, glass and concrete; and his (and Sullivan's) emphasis on the harmony of form and function. Much of Wright's growing fame and prestige during the final decades of his life was due to this migration of European talent to American universities where they introduced Wright's work and philosophy to a new generation of American architects and architectural critics.<sup>23</sup>

Despite all of this there were some striking contrasts between Wright and his foreign admirers. They took, for example, Sullivan's dictum that "form follows function" much more seriously and literally than did Wright. The new architects made a virtual religion out of functionalism, often losing sight of the responsibilities of architecture to reflect the intangible needs of its occupants. As Le Corbusier expressed it, houses were simply "machines for living."

To Wright the machine-inspired aesthetic of the Internationalists simply led back to an old, and anti-humanistic, rationalism, which he had long criticized in its

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<sup>23</sup> On The International Style see William H. Jordy, American Buildings and Their Architects, Volume 5, The Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century, Oxford University Press; Charles Jencks, Modern Movements in Architecture, Penguin, 1973; Kenneth Frampton, Modern Architecture, A Critical History, Thames and Hudson, London, 1980; Peter Blake, The Master Builders; Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright, W.W. Norton, New York, 1960; Tom Wolfe, From Bauhaus to Our House, Washington Square Press, New York, 1981.

ancient costume of classicism. The new architects seemed to Wright to be committing the same sins that Wright had criticized in the generation which preceded them. They were again creating an architecture of boxes. Some of the boxes, especially those glass boxes of Mies van Der Rohe, were admittedly beautiful, abstract designs. But the Internationalists were guilty, as Wright described it, of designing from the outside in, rather than organically from the inside to the outside.

The Internationalists believed that they were designing a democratic, people's architecture. Some of their earliest designs were for worker's housing in pre-War Germany, and many of them, especially Walter Gropius, believed that architecture should be the result of a collaborative process, rather than the invention of a single creative individual. Such thinking was anathema to Wright. These philosophies to him seemed to lead to a bland conformity and reeked of the totalitarianism which the architects of the International Style themselves were fleeing. Wright's idea of the relationship of the individual to the larger society was fundamentally different. Democracy did not mean, to Wright, a levelling of everything to a lowest common denominator. It was characterized instead by the progress of individuals to the realization of their fullest potentialities.

Relations between Wright and the architects of the

International style were often strained. Public groups often brought the architects together as representatives of the new modern style of architecture, and at such forums relations were generally polite and cordial. Wright constantly insisted, however, both publicly and privately, that whatever was good in the work of the Internationalists was the result of his influence. Maybe he was right.

Of all the architects working in the International style, Wright probably had the closest relationship with Mies van der Rohe who taught at the Illinois Institute of Technology and whose work so dramatically altered the Chicago skyline. When Mies first came to Chicago some of his friends called Wright (Mies van der Rohe could still not speak English) and asked if they could drop by for a visit. Wright agreed and Mies and two companions arrived at Taliesin the same day for lunch. His companions returned to Chicago that afternoon. Not until four days later, however, would Mies finally be returned to Chicago, after a visit in Wright's studio and a grand tour of local projects designed by Wright which were then in progress. Mies was still wearing the same shirt in which he had arrived. By that time, as Olgivanna noticed, it was crumpled and grey.

Edgar Tafel, who acted as chauffeur during the visit, described the differences between Wright and van der Rohe, "Mies dedicated his entire life to the search for one style, refining and purifying. . . . Wright kept evolving, growing

and developing new styles." For Wright, "what we did yesterday, we won't do today. And what we don't do tomorrow will not be what we'll be doing the day after." Mies van der Rohe's philosophy was just the opposite. "You don't start a new style each Monday," he argued.<sup>24</sup>

Wright never waited for Monday, he didn't have the time. In 1936, Wright entered his seventieth year. In that year he designed the most modest, and the most impressive, houses of his career -- the Usonian house for Herbert and Jacobs, and Fallingwater for Edgar Kaufmann. The same year, Wright designed the corporate headquarters for the Johnson Wax Company. Wright's period of creative hibernation was ending. The long years, marked by tragedy, scandal, impoverishment, and professional inactivity, had helped to create in Wright a new social vision and a new burst of imaginative energy which would not abate with age. Now, finally, he began to gain the commercial success, and the recognition which had long eluded him.

The breakthrough which launched Wright's "second career" was the Johnson Wax Company Administration building. In many ways the Johnson building continued themes and innovations first conceived in Wright's earliest architecture. Like the Larkin building, the Johnson Wax building contained a large open room for office workers

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<sup>24</sup> Tafel's discussion of Mies and his visit to Taliesin can be found in Edgar Tafel, Years With Frank Lloyd Wright; Apprentice to Genius, McGraw-Hill, 1979, p68-80, the quote is found on p70.

ringed by a balcony. Wright, in addition, continued the experiments in reinforced concrete which he had begun at Unity Temple in Oak Park. He brought to the new structure, however, some of dramatic innovations which once again proved his mastery of space and technology. Perhaps most remarkable is the large, open-plan office space (128' x 208'), with its twenty foot high ceiling supported by dendriform columns which flare out into large circles to support pyrex glass tubing which allows daylight to pour down into the work space below. The effect on the observer has been described as like swimming in a large pool with waterlily pads floating above.

"The most famous modern house in the world," Fallingwater, was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the wealthy department-store magnate, Edgar J. Kaufmann.<sup>25</sup> "E.J." as Wright called him, had learned of Wright's work when his son, Edgar Kaufmann jr. came to Taliesin in 1934 as an apprentice. Before the year was out Wright was involved in a number of important works for Kaufmann. E.J. Kaufmann was not an ordinary client, however. Over the years Wright and the elder Kaufmann would become close friends. Their work together on Fallingwater was almost as much a collaboration as an independent commission. Kaufmann's role was more like a patron of the arts, a Renaissance merchant

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<sup>25</sup> Wayne Andrews, Architecture, Ambition and Americans, A Social History of American Architecture, Revised edition, Free Press, New York, 1979 (originally 1947), p236.

prince, directing as well as employing the talents of his craftsman. Kaufmann's greatest genius, however, lay in recognizing and giving virtual free-reign to Wright's own genius.<sup>26</sup>

The Kaufmann family had long vacationed in their rustic retreat along the Bear Run in Western Pennsylvania. Edgar and his wife, Liliane, particularly enjoyed swimming in the pools and sunbathing on the boulders which surrounded a waterfall which cascaded through the forest of rhododendrons, mountain laurels, pine trees, and oaks. Now they asked Wright to design a house which would take advantage of the unique qualities of the site.

Wright visited Bear Run late in 1934 and asked Kaufmann to have a topographic map of the area sent to him. For nine months Wright worked on the designs for the house, but put nothing on paper. One morning he received a call from Kaufmann. He was just leaving Milwaukee for Taliesin to look at the plans. Wright went to his studio, sat down at his drawing board while two of his assistants, Edgar Tafel and Bob Mosher, frantically sharpened colored pencils, which were used up as fast as they were sharpened. Mesmerized, they watched Wright, talking to himself, lay out the plans for the house. "Liliane and E.J. will have tea on the

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<sup>26</sup> The major sources on Fallingwater are: Donald Hoffman, Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater: The House and its History, Dover, 1978; and, Edgar Kauffman, Jr., Fallingwater: A Frank Lloyd Wright Country House, 1986.

balcony . . . they'll cross the bridge to walk into the woods. . . . The rock on which E.J. sits will be the hearth, coming right out of the floor, the fire burning just behind it . . ." His pencil would break and Tafel or Mosher would hand him another.<sup>27</sup>

When Kaufmann arrived around lunch time, the plans looked as though they had been completed for weeks. He looked at them surprised. He had expected a house with a view of the falls. Wright had designed a house on the falls. The house as it was finally built was almost exactly as Wright had laid it out that morning. Dynamic cantilevered, reinforced-concrete terraces jutted out over the falls. The boulder, E.J.'s favorite place to sun himself, was built into the house, becoming the hearthstone of the central fireplace. Steps from the living room led down to a plunge pool for quick dips.

It is a superb technological achievement. Scores of engineers inspected the house and the site at every stage of its construction and predicted that the cantilevers would fail, the waters would destroy the foundation, the falls themselves would recede and the building would collapse. Fallingwater has withstood storms, snowfalls, and floods for over half a century now and with minor repairs and renovations remains as stable as when it was built. The

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<sup>27</sup> This description of the designing of Fallingwater is taken from Tafel, pp3-7.

house has become one of the most photographed structures in the world. Many photos reproduce the dramatic beauty of the design. But photographs all fail to suggest the fundamental character of the house. It is as much a feeling as a monument. It expresses a search for a harmony between man and nature, which began when mankind first started down the path toward civilized society, and which perhaps comes as near its end as possible at Fallingwater.



## CHAPTER EIGHT: Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect of an Age

As early as 1927 Wright and Olgivanna began an annual winter expedition from Taliesin in Wisconsin to Arizona. He was first called there to help a former apprentice, Albert C. MacArthur, with designs for the new Arizona Biltmore. The following year Wright, Olgivanna, and their two daughters, travelled with a small staff to work on another projected hotel near Phoenix. This second hotel was never built. It was one of a number of projects which Wright was working on when the Crash occurred in 1929, and which were never completed. The trip became an unexpected success, however, as a result of one of Wright's erratic attempts at frugality. To save money, Wright decided that the small contingent would camp in the desert rather than rent rooms in a nearby hotel. The desert camp site, named Ocatillo, became an experimental laboratory for concepts and technologies which Wright would apply in constructions throughout the rest of his career. With only the most basic materials -- desert stone, redwood, and canvas -- Wright was able to create a small community of buildings which seemed a natural expression of the starkly beautiful landscape.

In 1938, with the profits of his recent professional achievements, Wright purchased eight hundred acres of public land in Scottsdale, near Phoenix. Taliesin West, as Wright

called his newest home, was his final great adventure in living in an organic architecture. Like all of his homes it was never completed. It was always in a state of evolution. The constant building and rebuilding had begun with his home in Oak Park, continued in Spring Green, and now resumed at Scottsdale. Taliesin West, throughout Wright's life, and even today, has much of the impermanent character of the desert camp established in 1928. Wright and the Taliesin apprentices replaced the canvas with translucent glass, and built massive foundations out of desert stone and concrete. Gradually Wright gave in to the pleas of Olgivanna and his apprentices to close in much of the original open structure with windows and doors. The entire site comes as close as it is possible, perhaps, to seeing Wright's thoughts stopped in time as if the sun itself, in its traverse across the desert sky, had suddenly stopped in a frozen timeless moment.<sup>28</sup>

During the final years of Wright's life he worked at a pace and with an intensity as if he were making up for the long years of enforced idleness. He completed the designs and, with his apprentices, oversaw the construction of dozens of new commissions each year -- houses, churches, theaters, stores. Each design was seemingly more brilliant

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<sup>28</sup> I am especially grateful for the hospitality offered me while I was doing research at Taliesin West by Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, Oscar Munoz, Margo Stipe, Penny Fowler, and Dr. Joseph Rorke.

and startling than the last. In addition to the structures he completed, Wright left hundreds of designs which were never built. They only give us a glimpse of the incredible possibilities which might have found expression had funds been more available, clients been more daring, his own life been longer.

Among Wright's unbuilt designs were the plans for a mile high building. It is one of Wright's most quixotic projects. In an era in which many noted architects had become famous for building skyscrapers, Wright was a constant critique of these buildings which allowed unscrupulous landlords to extract exorbitant rents from hapless city-dwellers. Wright pleaded incessantly for an architecture in harmony with its natural environment. He had become famous for houses whose horizontal lines expressed his organic philosophy of building. How could he propose a mile-high office building?

It was all, perhaps, to prove a point. Every obstacle to Wright was merely a challenge. He would admit that nothing was beyond his reach. A mile-high building, Wright argued, would allow for the densest possible concentration of people and would consequently yield a vast amount of space around it which could be utilized for more dispersed and horizontal structures. It was perhaps not an entirely convincing argument, but the major importance of the plan perhaps lay in the conception of its execution. It would

essentially be like an enormous plant with a huge tap root anchoring the building firmly in the earth. The 528 floors of the building would be cantilevered out from the central stalk like the branches of a tree. This old idea of building would be united with the newest technology (circa 1956). Cars could be parked in underground parking lots, helicopters would land on terraces on the building, and individuals would be transported from floor to floor in atomic-powered elevators. It was not an entirely preposterous idea. In principle it could, perhaps, be accomplished. Wright, himself, had used the basic construction ideas in a tower he built as an addition to the Johnson Wax building in 1944, and in the original plans for the Price Company tower in Bartlesville, Oklahoma (constructed 1952). To Wright, the mile-high office building was an expression of the same organic philosophy which was the basis behind all of Wright's designs.<sup>29</sup>

Wright's last great design, however, was not for a skyscraper but for a museum in the heart of Manhattan. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum had been on Wright's drawing boards for years before construction began, and was opened to the public shortly after Wright's death in 1959. Solomon Guggenheim's sole stipulation, when he awarded the commission to Wright, was that he wanted a building for his

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<sup>29</sup> For Wright's thoughts on tall buildings, see, e.g., Autobiography, p 337-50, and The Disappearing City, New York, 1932.

collection of non-objective art that was like no other museum in the world. The Guggenheim museum is certainly that.

Essentially it is an inverted cone, like a gigantic squat ice cream cone. Visitors take an elevator to the top and amble down a gentle spiraling ramp viewing artworks in the process. Starkly modern when it was completed in 1959, many of its characteristic features -- its use of poured concrete, its open atrium, its dramatic walkway -- can be seen in his earliest work in Unity Temple, the Larkin Building and in the Charnley house. These ideas were coupled now with the circular theme which dominated much of Wright's latest work.

The Guggenheim museum has never lacked its chorus of critics. Architectural pundits have described the building as a beehive with gun slits, and have criticized the lighting and the angled wall plane, which they argue is unsuited for the display of paintings. Wright and his defenders have argued each of the critics' points. The natural light and the angled walls, they argue, recreate the conditions in an artist studio where paintings are supported on angled easels. Even if the critics were correct in each of their specific points, however, the fact remains that the building has done more to bring viewers to study and appreciate modern art than could have been hoped for with any other structure. When the building first opened its

doors thousands of people lined up for blocks to enter, and crowds of people have continued to come ever since to appreciate both the art hanging on its walls and the great piece of art which houses them.<sup>30</sup>

Wright never saw the finished building. Six months before the Guggenheim opened, Frank Lloyd Wright, aged ninety one years, died on April 9, 1959. He had complained of stomach pains a few days earlier and had been transported from Taliesin West to Saint Joseph's hospital in Phoenix. An operation for an intestinal blockage was successful, but accompanying hemorrhaging weakened the patient beyond his ability to recover. His body was transported to Spring Green where a service was held and two hundred mourners followed as the body was carried in a horse-drawn farm wagon to the Chapel that Wright had helped design many years earlier. There his body was laid to rest with those of his many Lloyd-Jones ancestors. In 1985 his remains were disinterred, cremated and reburied with those of Olgivanna's at Taliesin West.

Wright's personality and his philosophy, however, have still not yet come to rest. Journalists and critics still sift through the bones of his life, like ancient soothsayers trying to detect patterns and meanings. One overwhelming

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<sup>30</sup> The Guggenheim is back in the news due to the recent construction of an addition. For a recent commentary and discussion of the history of the Guggenheim see John Richardson, "Go Go Guggenheim," New York Review of Books, Volume XXXIX, #13, July 16, 1992, pp18-22.

characteristic of his life is always mentioned. Frank Lloyd Wright was one of the most arrogant individuals in American cultural history. Once when he testified at a legal proceeding, he was told to identify himself.

"I'm Frank Lloyd Wright, the greatest architect of all time." He is reported to have responded. Later, when someone told him he should be more modest, he replied, "but I was under oath."<sup>31</sup>

It is often suggested that to Wright his creative genius was more important than his clients' wishes or comfort. When a client telegraphed Wright that the roof over his desk was leaking water on his head, Wright quickly wired back, "Move your chair."<sup>32</sup> Wright's beautifully designed furniture, similarly, was a testament to Wright's genius, but were not very functional. Wright's three-legged chairs at the Johnson Wax building were constantly throwing secretaries to the floor. Wright himself admitted that he had been black and blue for much of his life from too intimate contact with his furniture.<sup>33</sup> These stories have grown with the telling and retelling, and perhaps illustrate Wright's sense of humor as much as his arrogance. To a

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<sup>31</sup> This story is recounted, among other places, in Maginel Wright Barney, Valley of the God-Almighty Joneses, p149.

<sup>32</sup> This frequently repeated story loses some of its impact, when it is considered that the "client" was his son Richard Lloyd Jones. See Barney p101.

<sup>33</sup> Autobiography, p204.

large degree such monumental egotism was itself a pose, part of the job responsibilities that went along with being America's most-renown architect. Wright's clients have nearly universally praised his ability to listen to their wishes and to incorporate their ideas into the final designs. Wright was a genius of, if nothing else, pleasing his clients. Still Wright realized very early in life that, as he put it, an honest arrogance was preferable to a hypocritical humility.<sup>34</sup> Truth was always the most important virtue to Wright.

Wright's larger role in American cultural history is similarly the cause of controversy. During his life Wright was continually the iconoclast and a relentless social critic. The United States, he argued, "was the only nation to pass "from barbarism to degeneracy never having known a civilization."<sup>35</sup> He castigated both the architecture and the social life of American cities. He excoriated America's inequal distribution of wealth, and criticized "private ownership and the profit system." Before World War Two he had been an ardent isolationist, convinced that accommodations could be made between America and Germany and Japan. After the war he continued to preach for understanding of America's enemies, now represented by the Soviet Union. He defended the trip to Russia which he made

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<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Barney, p148, Meehan p138.

<sup>35</sup> Tafel, p23.



in 1937, and praised the leadership of Joseph Stalin. During the cold war he advocated unilateral nuclear disarmament and supported pacifism. All of this activity did not go unnoticed. The House Un-American Activities Committee placed Wright on one of its famous lists of Americans affiliated with "Communist front organizations." Not surprisingly, Wright never received a government contract during his lifetime of creative work. Wright, however, was not a communist nor a socialist. He would not belong to any group, as he said, with an "ist" or "ism" after its name. Politically as well as architecturally, Wright was essentially a radical advocating a complete restructuring of the status quo. Probably no political system would have pleased him. But that was not the point. For Wright the goal was not a finished system of government, nor the finished structure of a building. It was the process that was of first interest and importance to Wright. The goal was continual improvement, unending progress, this could not be accomplished by complacency or apathy. The role of the architecture in this process was of paramount importance, even more significant than the role of the politician. As Wright himself said, "I don't build a house without predicting the end of the present social order."<sup>36</sup>

If Wright was un-American, however, so was Thomas

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<sup>36</sup> Twombly has the best discussion of Wright's politics during the last years of his life, pp291-298, pp368-380. The quote is from p261.

Jefferson with whom he had so much in common and whom he frequently quoted. The similarities between their architecture and their ideas of society is striking. The third president is the only American architect of equivalent stature to Frank Lloyd Wright. Jefferson's Monticello and Wright's Fallingwater are the two greatest monuments of American residential architecture. Not incidentally both Jefferson and Wright rejected the monumental, picture-book quality of the buildings of their contemporaries. Both individuals built geometrically complex buildings with subtle spatial organization, hugging the ground and in harmony with their natural surroundings.

Jefferson and Wright similarly shared a vision of the role of architecture in reforming American society. Both emphasized the necessity for radical change and imagined both architecture and social reformation as a process rather as a quest for some static absolute ideal. Both ultimately were successful in creating a new architecture for an emerging non-urban American middle class. Significantly, Jefferson and Wright shared a similar conception of American democracy. They were aristocratic and populist. They envisioned a world not of social equality, but of equal opportunity, in which individuals could rise to their greatest potentiality.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Wright frequently praised Jefferson. See, e.g. Autobiography, p46, 210, 222. Twombly comments on the relationship of Frank Lloyd Wright to Jefferson, p331, 412. For a discussion of

Wright's significance in American history is not confined to the buildings he designed. Wright was an architect not just of buildings. He was an architect of an age. He did as much to create the cultural as well as the physical environment of twentieth-century America as any other person. His message to us is not always an easy one to understand, let alone to agree with. As Wright's son, John, wrote after his father's death, "My impression of my whole life with him is one of comedy, tragedy, the sublime, the ridiculous, and I never knew where one of them left off and the other began."<sup>38</sup> Despite the paradoxes of Wright's life, perhaps no one summed up Wright's accomplishments better than Mies van der Rohe who said of Wright shortly after his death, that "in his undiminished power he resembles a giant tree in a wide landscape which year after year attains a more noble crown."<sup>39</sup> The tree still grows in the valley.

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Jefferson's design ethic, and its relationship to his political philosophy, see A.O. Boulton, "Monticello and the Romantic Tradition," paper delivered at the Winterthur conference on the American Home, Winterthur Delaware, October 30, 1992; and A.O. Boulton, "The Architecture of Slavery," Ph.D., College of William and Mary, 1991.

<sup>38</sup> John Lloyd Wright, My Father, Frank Lloyd Wright, p115.

<sup>39</sup> Architectural Forum, 110, May, 1959, cited in Twombly, p391.

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