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Interpreting Midway Barn: Understanding Frank Lloyd Wright's Agrarian Vision

Abstract

At first glance, Midway Barn in Spring Green, Wisconsin presents itself as another example of Frank Lloyd Wright's distinctive, if evolving style, its horizontal massing, tilted roof planes, and natural materials echoing the hilly landscape of the farm and its environs. Analysis of the documentary record and a range of sources on Wright's life and thought, however, points to a richer story. Part of Wright's larger campaign to reclaim his hometown landscape after his return to the Jones Valley, Midway Barn reflects his desire to reenact the agrarian lessons learned in his youth through the Taliesin Fellowship. Viewed in this way, Midway Barn offers insight not only into the architect's biography but also into his complicated and sometimes contradictory relationship to "rural" values, materials, and ways of life. It also allows us to compare the barn's striking visual innovations to its more conventional program and use, both of which were quite at home in the agricultural landscape of early 20th-century Wisconsin. Taking a cue from Freeman Tilden's observation that the key goal of interpretation is "not instruction, but provocation," this thesis challenges the perception of Midway Barn as a straightforward example of Wright's modernist interpretation of a traditional American barn. Instead, this study treats the complex as a window to interpret Wright's ideas about the role of agriculture and rural lifeways in regional and national society.

Keywords

Frank Lloyd Wright, heritage interpretation, farming, agriculture, Wisconsin farms

Disciplines

Historic Preservation and Conservation

INTERPRETING MIDWAY BARN: UNDERSTANDING FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S
AGRARIAN VISION

Ha Leem Ro

A THESIS

in

Historic Preservation

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in
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Advisor
Aaron Wunsch
Associate Professor

Program Chair
Frank G. Matero
Professor

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Soli Deo Gloria.

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Introduction

This thesis came about as an offshoot of my internship at Midway Barn within the Taliesin estate, in Spring Green, Wisconsin in the summer of 2020. My job was to record the existing physical structures of the farming complex designed and continuously expanded by Frank Lloyd Wright beginning in the mid-1920s until his death in 1959, only to be left in a state of contained ruin. Post-Wright restoration efforts commenced in early 1980s.

During the fieldwork on site, I noticed Taliesin tour shuttles making only brief stops at the Barn complex. This came as a something of a surprise: these buildings, after all, constitute Wright's only fully realized scheme for an agricultural project for his own use.¹ My interest in heritage interpretation led me to ponder how this site was being presented to the public. By the end of the summer research trip, it became apparent that there was an absence of established guidelines for the interpretation of Midway Barn. Analysis of the barn as a work of architecture and of its place in Wright's oeuvre and thought seemed to be minimal. With the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation (FLWF)'s plan to prioritize rehabilitation of Midway Barn over the next few years, the opportunity to participate in the interpretation of a less prominent, yet significant, aspect of Wright's work became all the more compelling. The question of how the design, use and meanings of Frank Lloyd Wright's Midway Barn at Taliesin could be translated into an interpretive program for the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation led to this thesis.

At first glance, Midway Barn presents itself as another example of Wright's distinctive, if evolving style, its horizontal massing, tilted roof planes, and natural materials echoing the

¹ Other known rural structure designed by Wright include the Auldbrass Plantation in Beaufort County, South Carolina. Commissioned by C. Leigh Stevens, Wright designed the main house, guest house, cabins, caretaker's residence, staff cabins, barn stables. The project, however, is categorized as a residential project rather than agricultural on the Frank Lloyd Wright Website. For more details on the Auldbrass Plantation see David G. De Long, *Auldbrass: Frank Lloyd Wright's Southern Plantation*, 2nd ed (New York: Rizzoli, 2011).



Figure 1: Looking west to Midway Barn with the Romeo & Juliet Windmill in the background in the left of the image. Image by Author, 2020.

hilly landscape of the farm and its environs. Analysis of the documentary record and a range of sources on Wright's life and thought, however, points to a richer story (Fig. 1).² Part of Wright's larger campaign to reclaim his hometown landscape after his return to the Jones Valley, Midway Barn reflects his desire to reenact the agrarian lessons learned in his youth through the Taliesin Fellowship. Viewed in this way, the barn offers insight not only into Wright's biography but also into his complicated and sometimes contradictory relationship to "rural" values, materials, and ways of life. It also allows us to compare the barn's striking

² While the HSR is the most extensive study – a notable length of 200 pages – documenting the physical development and conditions of Midway Barn, it avoids any discussion of the social and cultural contexts of agrarian reform in America before and during the period Wright was developing the Taliesin estate. Naturally the primary argument for its significance is based on the Wrightian forms and aesthetics. The document is quite outdated at this point in its conditions assessment which were to be addressed in the summer research.

visual innovations to its more conventional program and use, both of which were quite at home in the agricultural landscape of early 20th-century Wisconsin.

Taking a cue from Freeman Tilden's observation that the key goal of interpretation is "not instruction, but provocation," this thesis challenges the perception of Midway Barn as a straightforward example of Wright's modernist interpretation of a traditional American barn.³ Instead, I treat the site as a window on Wright's ideas about the role of agriculture and rural lifeways in regional and national society. This perspective would allow the FLWF to broaden complex's relevance not only to the history of farming and agricultural life but also to Wright's career, his ideas, and the special role of Taliesin in both.

* * *

Before analyzing Midway Barn's form and design, it is important to identify key principles of heritage interpretation since both my understanding of the building and recommendations for its presentation draw upon these tenets. The ensuing discussion is not, however, intended to provide a comprehensive historiographical overview of interpretation theory. For the purposes of this project, the key ideas identified here served as guidelines for setting the direction of scholarship and boundaries for interpreting Wright's ideas reflected in Midway Barn.

Although published almost seven decades ago, Freeman Tilden's book *Interpreting Our Heritage* still holds its landmark status in the field of heritage interpretation. Tilden pioneered what is now commonly referred to as the Six Principles of Interpretation, essentially a call to "relate, reveal and provoke," which has undoubtedly become so integral to the interpretation field as to guide its basic assumptions.⁴ As indicated, this thesis also takes its cue from Tilden's

³ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.; Tilden's Six Principles of Interpretation are as follows: 1) Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile; 2) Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes

interpretive mantra to strive for “provocation” rather than “instruction” in proposing interpretive schemes for Midway Barn. Admittedly, Tilden’s teachings have shortcomings, particularly when it comes to the question of authority. He naturally presumes that specialists – researchers, interpreters, preservationists – have ultimate authority over what stories will be told at historic sites. It is necessary to point out then that in having taken Tilden’s text as a theoretical platform to base the scholarship for interpreting Midway Barn, this thesis does not claim the proposed schemes to be the only solutions for its interpretation.

Rather, these recommendations heed to Tilden’s rarely quoted but nonetheless significant warning: “[...] It is natural for us to draw upon impressions that are gained at first sight.”⁵ The temptation to resort to pieces of history that are easiest to convey and are most palatable become quite real in heritage management planning, even more so when a site is associated with well-known events or prominent figures like that of Frank Lloyd Wright. To simply put it, some historical facts regarding its physical attributes are just too apparent not to tell to attract the public. For Midway Barn, this may be putting its attribution of being one of the only Wright-built farms or his architectural aesthetics at the center of its interpretation.

Such historical facts should not be dismissed altogether but consider another piece of Tilden’s advice: “Interpretation is a growth whose effectiveness depends on a regular nourishment by well-directed and discriminating research.”⁶ Recognizing that the effectiveness of interpretive planning can be enhanced through research, this thesis is an attempt to assist the FLWF in pushing back against the natural tendency to cherry-pick histories through

information; 3) Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable; 4) The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation; 5) Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase; and 6) Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.

⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶ Ibid., 5.

offering other perspectives to view Frank Lloyd Wright's Midway Barn. It is hoped and recommended that this study becomes a point of departure for continuing research on Midway Barn, thus broadening the spectrum for its interpretation and ultimately extending the list of reasons that justify its preservation.

Midway Barn and Frank Lloyd Wright's Agrarian Ideals

Midway Barn is situated "midway" between Wright's Taliesin residence and the Hillside School in Spring Green, Wisconsin – hence the name (Fig. 2). The Barn is essentially an aggregation of various farming structures, mostly built in mid-1920s⁷ and reworked over a span of almost 4 decades (Fig. 3).⁸ Tracking the history of physical changes to these structures is a complex task, partially because of the flexible nature of agricultural uses and needs but more because of the lack of relevant documentary. Even the most in-depth study, a 1994 historic structures report, gives short shrift to the early evolution of the complex.⁹ There is certainly room for improvement in this area. Detailed recording and analysis of the barn's physical fabric offers the most promising path for future study and interpretation.

Rather than undertaking that close-up approach, I have sought to understand this cluster of buildings in the context of Wright's biography, his ideas about rural life, and the place of those ideas in the American tradition of agricultural "reform." In this view, Midway Barn emerges not only as an embodiment of Wright's aspirations to break the divisions

⁷ Keiran Murphy's document dives deeper into the historical deed records and maps to argue that some parts of the Midway Barn already were in existence correcting the HSR's description of the Midway to have been found in 1932.

⁸ To facilitate the readers' understanding of the structures, a visual glossary of the structures and floor plans of Midway Barn have been provided in Appendix.

⁹ Keiran Murphy, "A brief history of Midway Barns". Sept. 7-14, 2007. Provided by Taliesin Preservation Inc. (TPI). The author served as a historic researcher for TPI during the time of writing this document. The authors correct the error by tracing its origin to 1920s using deed records and historic photos.

between the city and the country life but also as a product of dialectical relationships Wright sustained between his belief in the power of architectural ingenuity and local farm building traditions.



Figure 2: Map of showing structures part of the Taliesin Estate. Courtesy of Taliesin Preservation Website. <https://www.taliesinpreservation.org/map-and-trails/>

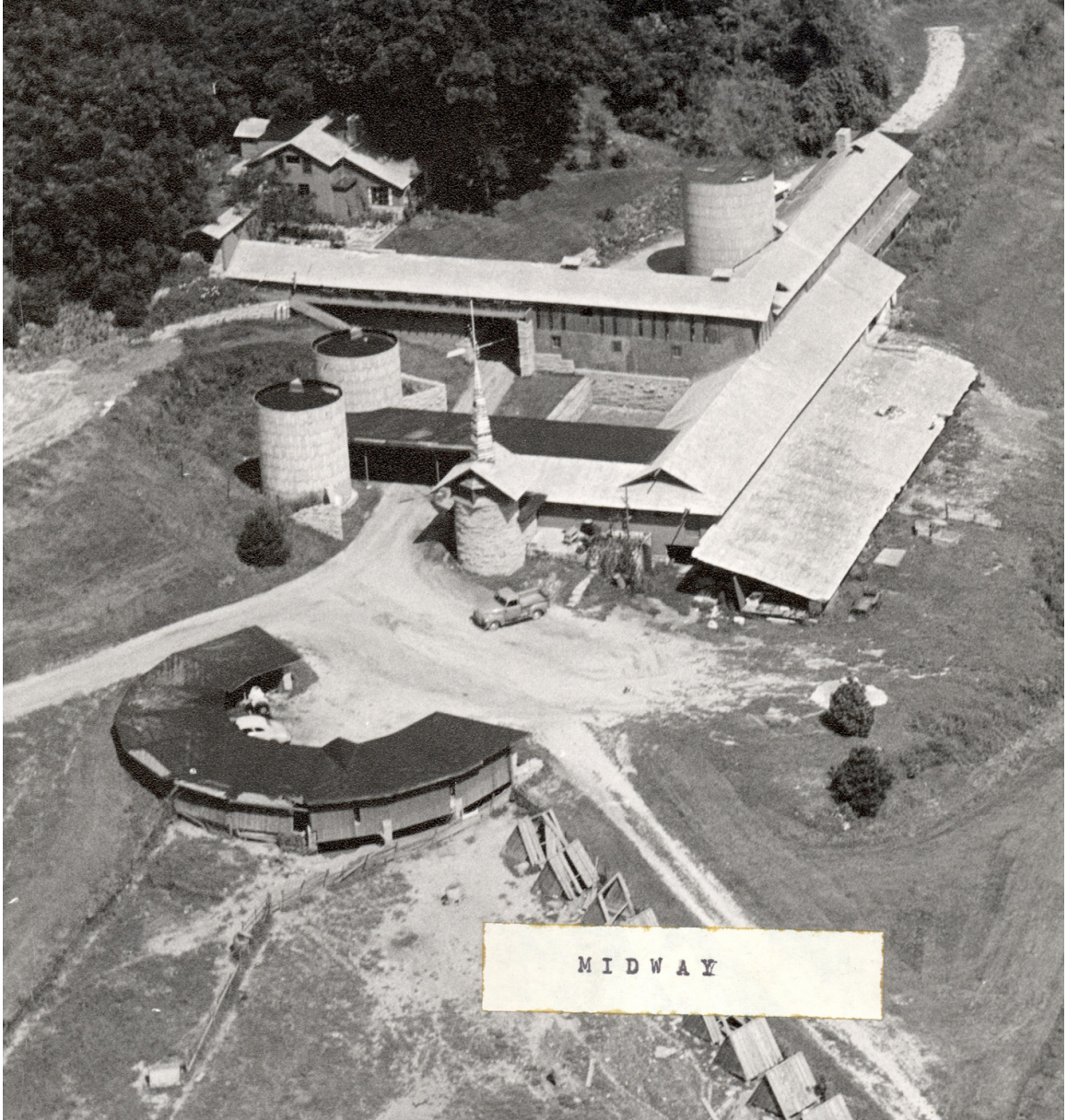


Figure 3: Aerial photograph of Midway Barn with all its structures, 1960. The roof of the steer shed, piggeries and the Machine Shed is no longer present. Courtesy of Taliesin Preservation Inc.

Wright's Agrarian Ideals in the American Tradition of Agrarian Reform

"To look at the cross-section of any plan of a big city is to look at something like the section of a fibrous tumor."

– Frank Lloyd Wright, The Disappearing City, 1932.

The idea of agrarian reform has long been present in American intellectual history discussed in various forms by figures representing major tendencies in American politics, literature, social work, architecture and urban planning. American discourse on the subject has been characterized by anti-urbanist rhetoric that looks to "rural" solutions to ills ascribed to city life. The rural and urban spheres have therefore been seen as incompatible entities; a dichotomy some scholars believe to be still present in contemporary American culture.¹⁰

Frank Lloyd Wright's views have naturally been according to this schema. Literary critics and architectural historians trace the roots of his thoughts on the American landscape to Emersonian romanticism and the nostalgic memories as a Wisconsin farm boy whose "inclination to demolish the city [which] was stronger than his desire to build it in anything like its present form."¹¹ This argument has obvious merit. If American anti-urbanists could be arrayed on a spectrum, Thomas Jefferson would represent the more lenient end in his hesitant acceptance of cities out of economic interest of colonial America while Frank Lloyd Wright would represent the very opposite end – if not go completely off the charts – in his passionate distaste for the city.¹² Summers spent on his family farm in the Jones Valley convinced Wright that family unity, economic independence, and contact with the land would constitute an antidote to the superfluous capitalistic operations of urban strictures that have "destroy[ed]

¹⁰ Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual versus the City, from Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright*, Publications of the Joint Center for Urban Studies (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹² Refer to the quote from the *Disappearing City* as provided above.

the fruit of every democratic instinct [Americans] have developed.”¹³ In subscribing to agrarianism as a safeguard of individual freedom, Wright falls squarely into the tradition of American thought that perceives rural and agrarian lifeways as the “most innocent, useful, and honourable of arts” that formed the moral and economic basis of the American republic.¹⁴

Wright’s proud emphasis on his country roots as well as his solace-seeking, prodigal son-like attitude towards the Jones Valley also typify the conventional intellectual perception of and relationship with rural landscapes.¹⁵ Every time the architect found himself emotionally and/or financially troubled (e.g., isolated from Chicago social circles as a result of his scandalous affair with his client, Mamah Borthwick; falling into a state of involuntary retirement in the aftermath of the Stock Market Crash of 1929), he always took refuge in his country residence. As he recounts in his autobiography: “I turned to this hill in the Valley as my grandfather before me had turned to America – as a hope and haven.”¹⁶ These words echo the long-standing American belief in the countryside as an ameliorating influence, “softening [one’s] heart and engendering new feelings of benevolence.”¹⁷ Even the financially motivated move to his “beloved Valley” after an unsuccessful venture with his L.A. office in late 1920s is characteristic of a long-established trend in the American elite circles. As Tamara Plakins Thornton points out in her study of the Boston elites who had turned to country seats after the Revolution, “rural retirement in response to business failure was nothing new” – practiced because it was “relatively cheap but still respectable, even genteel.”¹⁸ Wright’s move to Taliesin appears to have been driven by a similar economic logic while also taking advantage of the

¹³ Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Living City* (New York: Horizon Press, 1958), 37.

¹⁴ Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Cultivating Gentlemen: The Meaning of Country Life among the Boston Elite, 1785-1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 26.

¹⁵ This is best represented in Frank Lloyd Wright’s autobiography which begins with a nostalgic account of his family farm; see Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (New York: Horizon Press, 1977).

¹⁶ Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (New York: Horizon Press, 1977), 151.

¹⁷ Thornton, *Cultivating Gentlemen*, 46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

association of country living with gentility to avoid being labelled as isolating himself into the country out of defeatism.

Rural and agrarian endeavors were also “morally charged freighted with symbolic significance” in the American intellectual tradition.¹⁹ Thornton notes that rural pursuits of Bostonian elites (i.e. gentleman and experimental farming, retreat to countryside estates, participation in agricultural societies) were “powerful means of self-characterization” infused with the “rhetoric of unselfish patriotism and benevolence.”²⁰ Adhering to agrarian principles was an act of moral cleansing; the elites who were “mercantile in outlook” could be forgiven of their associations with destructive urban forces by representing themselves as a farmer, “the uniquely ideal republican type”, standing for Puritan work ethic, frugality and disinterestedness, hence the legitimacy of their ruling status.²¹

Albeit in different social contexts, Wright was nonetheless part of this continuing image-making tradition.²² Kenneth Frampton points us to Wright’s autobiography in which the “idealized account of his bucolic boyhood in Spring Green, Wisconsin – the Usonian agrarian idyll of the “God Almighty Lloyd-Jones’s” to whom Wright was the prodigal son” was Wright’s retrospective “view of himself as predestined genius.”²³ Robert Fishman agrees: the idealization of his rural upbringing in his “autobiography was his attempt to banish the destructive image that had imposed on him (at the turn of the 20th century), to regain his own identity and establish the ideas he lived by.”²⁴ Wright’s ruralism was not only an effort “to redefine his relationship to his fellow citizens” but also one in which he could portray himself as the “essential interpreter of humanity – the creative architect”, who, as a native of the

¹⁹ Ibid., 2.

²⁰ Ibid., 21 & 26.

²¹ Ibid., 4.

²² One side note: Wright’s father, William Russell Cary Wright, was born of two distinguished Boston families, which makes FLW’s partake in the agrarian thought of Boston elites quite interesting!

²³ Kenneth Frampton, *Wright’s Writings: Reflections on Culture and Politics 1894-1959* (New York, NY: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2017), 40.

²⁴ Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century*, 121.

countryside, was endowed with the authority to solve the problem of the American city by helping to dismantle it.²⁵

Wright's Urban Rusticity

Considering Wright's agrarian ideals as deeply rooted in the long-established anti-urban thinking, some understand Midway Barn as an expression of the "back-to-the-land" idea rejecting urban lifestyles and celebrating rural-relocation as act of revitalizing the American spirit.²⁶ While true to a certain extent, this would be only a partial representation of the barn given its spatial configuration and programmatic elements that derive from urban concepts.

In *Three Cultural Ecologies* (2018), David Leatherbarrow and Richard Wesley argue that the coexistence of dual open spaces – a residential courtyard and a farmyard – at Taliesin acts as evidence for Wright "straddling the cultural polarities of town and country."²⁷ Taliesin is perceived as a *villa* of the renaissance tradition in the interdependence of rustic (dairy barn, vegetable gardens, orchards, pastures) and urban elements (entrance courts, architects' studio). The authors ultimately argue that the residence is essentially an embodiment of his "urban rusticity", a term that is very much applicable to Midway Barn as further explored in the following paragraphs (Fig. 4).²⁸

It is important to note here that Wright's farming began in his Wisconsin residence built in 1911. Envisioning Taliesin as "a garden and farm behind a real workshop and a good home", half of the residence operated as a working dairy farm containing a cow barn, a horse

²⁵ Ibid., 121; Frank Lloyd Wright, *When Democracy Builds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), 51.

²⁶ Juliet Kinchin, "Little Farms Unit: Nature, Ecology, and Community," in *Frank Lloyd Wright: Unpacking the Archive* (New York, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2017).

²⁷ David Leatherbarrow and Richard Wesley, "*Rustica and Urbana*," in *Three Cultural Ecologies*, 37-68. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 50.

²⁸ Ibid., 65.

stable, a milk room and a hayloft.²⁹ It would only be after the founding of the Taliesin Fellowship in 1932 that the agricultural functions would be moved over to Midway Hill to accommodate production needs that were outgrowing Taliesin’s capacity. What began as a relatively small farm – primarily being used for pasture for cattle with smaller orchards and crop fields as suggested in the 1920 Plot plan – would ultimately become a farm-themed “architect’s workshop transplanted from an urban culture.” (Fig. 5).³⁰

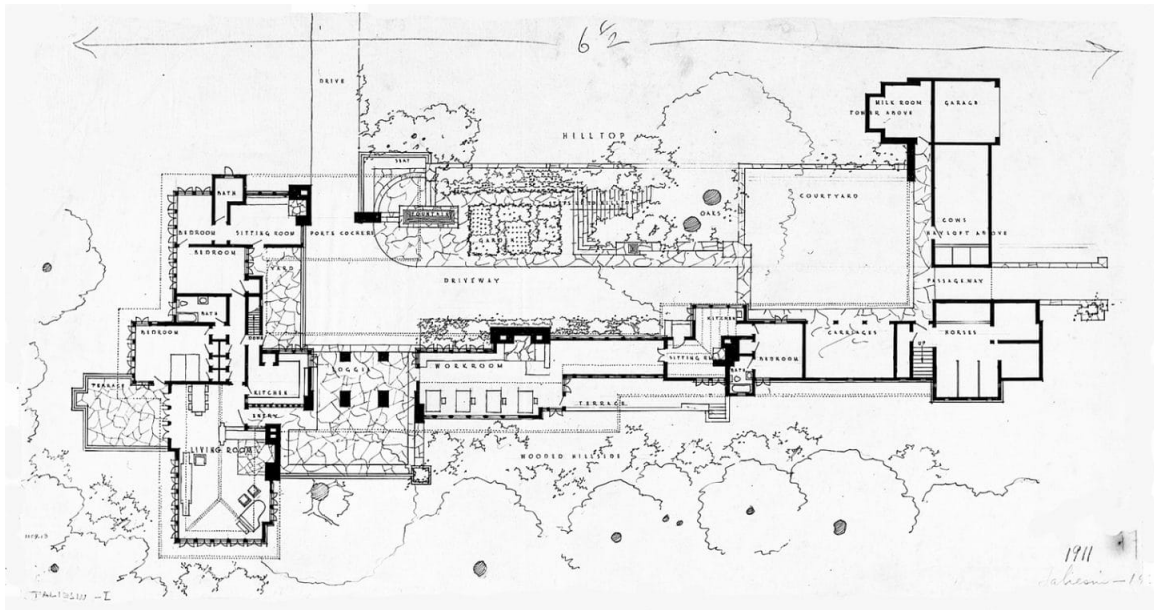


Figure 4: Taliesin, Spring Green, Wisconsin, 1911, Drawing by Frank Lloyd Wright. Floor plan, c. 1941. Courtesy of Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Website.

The most productive phase of Midway Barn began with the advent of the Taliesin Fellowship, an arrangement that permitted Wright to realize his intention to make Taliesin a “self-sustaining, if not self-sufficient” institution.³¹ With Midway Barn at the heart of Taliesin’s farming operations, its capacity grew from 181 acres in 1932 to 1500 acres in 1945.³² The

²⁹ Wright, *An Autobiography*, 194.

³⁰ Leatherbarrow and Wesley. “*Rustica and Urbana*”, 47.

³¹ Wright, *An Autobiography*, 195.

³² Barbara Wyatt, “Taliesin Historic Landscape Report (THLR)”, prepared for Taliesin Preservation Commission, 1999, 183; the acreage encompasses the entire Taliesin estate as noted in the THLR.

extent of the apprentices' catalytic influence on the farming operations is readily visible in the 1934 planting plan showing a much intensified and diversified production pattern compared to the 1920 plot plan (Fig. 5 & Fig. 6). The foundation of Taliesin West in 1935 would have also contributed to the spike in Midway Barn's agricultural production as Wright and the apprentices began making annual cross-country trips to Arizona on caravans of cars and trucks loaded with produce and preserves from the barn.³³

³³ Cornelia Brierly, one of the first apprentices to join the Fellowship at 22, noted that "It was very serious work but we were in the sun (in Arizona), we were young and we were having a wonderful time, despite the fact that our food supply from Wisconsin had dwindled and we were living much of the time on peanut butter, salt pork and sauerkraut." From the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Website (<https://franklloydwright.org/revisiting-frank-lloyd-wrights-vision-broadacre-city/>).



Figure 5: Taliesin farmlands, Spring Green Wisconsin. Plot plan, 1920 from *Three Cultural Ecologies* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 57. Courtesy of The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives (The Museum of Modern Art | Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York).

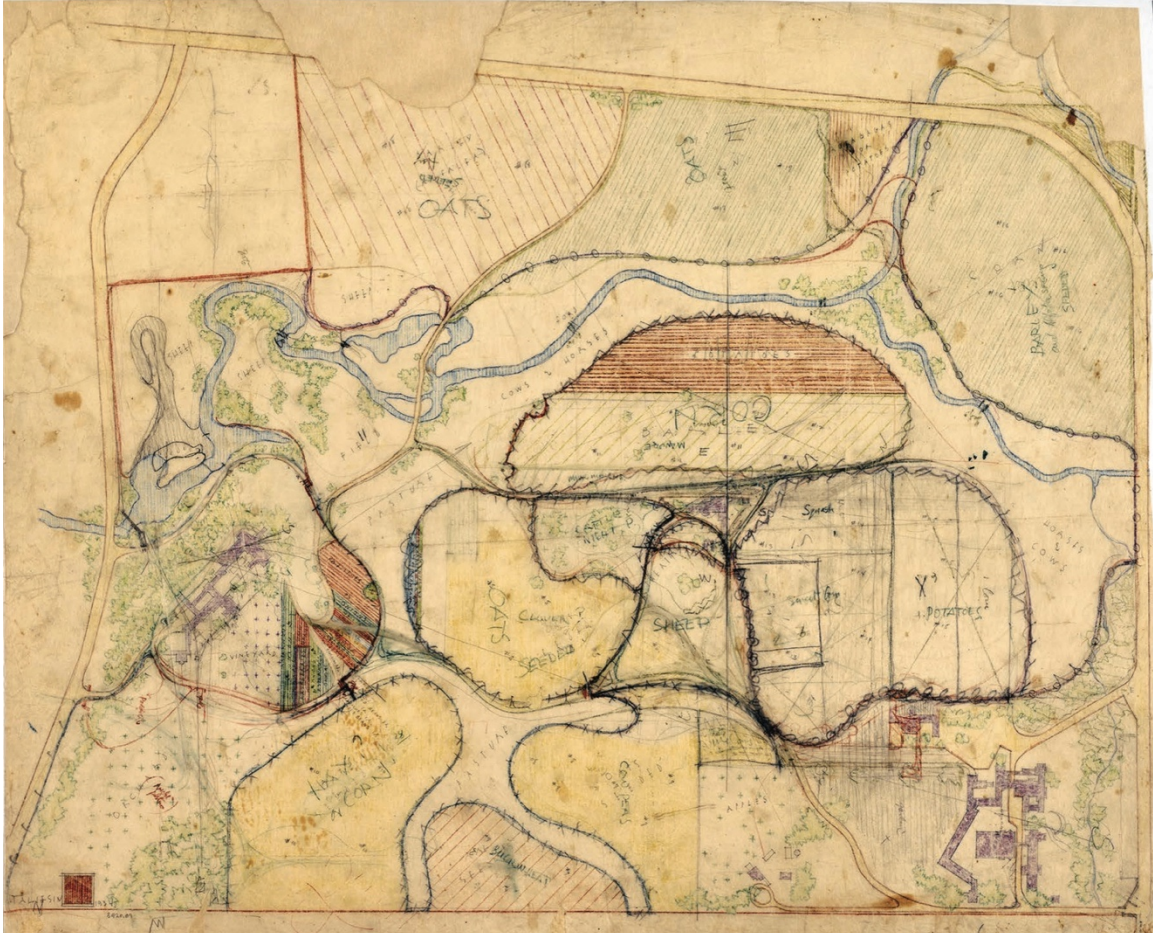


Figure 6: Taliesin farmlands, Spring Green, Wisconsin. Planting plan, 1934 from *Three Cultural Ecologies*, 58. Courtesy of The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives.

With a growing body of apprentices (their numbers peaked at 65 in 1946)³⁴, the barn complex continued to expand as well. The initial conglomeration of structures – Wright’s uncle’s relocated barn and cottage³⁵, a chicken coop, a cow barn, a calf pen and a wooden silo

³⁴ Wyatt, “THLR”, 191; the author quotes Meryle Secret that “By the autumn of 1946, the Fellowship numbered sixty-five, the largest group ever, plus assorted wives and children. [...] almost half were from abroad [...] many of the American students used the G.I. bill to attend Taliesin.”

³⁵ Adaptation of his uncle’s barn is notable for being possibly one of FLW’s preservation feats. Yet, there are inconsistencies in the oral histories of the Taliesin fellows in who exactly owned the cottage and the mill. Uncle Thomas and Enos Lloyd-Jones are two potential candidates according to the fellows (Murphy, Keiran. “A brief history of Midway Barns”); Leatherbarrow and Wesley stated it to have been owned by Uncle John (Leatherbarrow and Wesley, “Rustica and Urbana,” 54); and Anne Spirn has referred to it as Uncle James’s barn (Spirn, “Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect of Landscape,” in *Frank Lloyd Wright: Designs for an American Landscape, 1922-1952*, 1996, 135-150).

(Fig. 7) – came to include a steer and tractor shed, a milk tower with the iconic spire and weathervane to mark the southern end. The barn’s longest structure ran horizontally on a north-south axis embedded in the hill (Fig. 1 & Fig. 3). The primary east-west axis, known as the “Train”, containing the stable on the lower level and the hayloft on the upper level was formed as the chicken coop was extended as a bridge connecting the Upper Cottage to the main barn. The incorporation of the Machine Shed (1949), the twin silos (1952) and a row of triangular piggeries – called “Pork Avenue” (1952) – suggests that the barn complex was actively shaped even until a few years prior to Wright’s death in 1959 (Fig. 8 & 9).



Figure 7: Looking southwest to Midway Barn in its earliest stage in 1920s. The tall structure with the louvers is known to have been Wright’s uncle’s horse barn. Photograph by George Cronin, c. 1929–33. Courtesy of Taliesin Preservation Inc.



Figure 8: The Machine Shed in the background and the apprentices, working on the triangular piggeries in the foreground, 1948. Photograph by Lois Davidson Gottlieb. Courtesy of Taliesin Preservation Inc.



Figure 9: The “twin” concrete stave silos near the southern end of the barn. Image by Author, 2020.

Unlike a traditional farm, many parts of Wright’s barn were created and also adapted for residential purposes. A glass-walled bedroom was built for the farm manager in the milk tower (Fig. 10). The chicken coop, for instance, was adapted as dormitories for the apprentices (Fig. 11); and the Upper Cottage and the upper-level of the original bank barn became apartments for apprentices (Fig. 12 & Fig. 13). Much like the original 1911 Taliesin residence, Midway Barn evolved to contain both a residential courtyard³⁶ on the west and the farmyards to the east and south of Midway Hill, again, signifying his urban rusticity (see plans in Appendix).

³⁶ Wyatt references the area between the barn and the cottage as the residential courtyard in the THLR, 85.



Figure 10: The upper part of the milk tower with the glass-walled bedroom and the spire with the weathervane. Image by Author, 2020.



Figure 11: The “Train” showing remnants of the chicken coop, date unknown (top), which was adapted into dormitories for the apprentices (left). Courtesy of Taliesin Preservation Inc. (top); Image by Author, 2020 (left).



Figure 12: Looking up towards the Upper Cottage, known to have been used by the Nemtins who were Taliesin Fellows. Image by Author, 2020.



Figure 13: Balcony addition to the apartment above the calf pen under construction, c 1940-50. Photography by Loid Davidson Gottlieb. Courtesy of Taliesin Preservation Inc.

Midway Barn also became an active learning site for the Taliesin Fellowship where apprentices would learn to be a “part-time farmer, part-time mechanic and a part-time intellectual.”³⁷ Work at Taliesin entailed more than learning how to be architectural draftsmen as Kevin Lynch described his experience at Taliesin in 1937:

“The new apprentice, must learn how to handle a tall bundle of cornstalks, or how to cut a green oak plank, or how to translate a drawing for a building, or how to lay plaster, or even the most efficient method of scraping oatmeal from a pot [...] It is the attempt to grasp the new ideal of hard work, of creative activity, of ‘learning by doing’ of enthusiastic cooperation in solving common problems, that makes the life of the new apprentice so full and so fascinating here” (Fig. 14).³⁸



Figure 14: Apprentices working at Midway Barn near the original silo, date unknown. Image from Madison Essentials Website, <https://madisonessentials.com/Article/2020-05/Foundation-Taliesin>. Courtesy of The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives.

Lynch’s statement echoes the educational principle Wright had laid out in his Broadacre City proposal. Seeing the integration of the handwork and brainwork as essential to all education, Wright wrote in *When Democracy Builds* in 1945:

³⁷ Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century*, 128.

³⁸ Kevin Lynch, “At Taliesin” column printed in the *Madison Capital Times*, Fall 1937 quoted in Anne Spirn, “Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect of Landscape,” 149.

Perfect correlation of the faculties, active and potential, of the human being – this it would be that constituted the most important aim of all *Broadacre City* education. Eye and hand, body and what we call Mind thus becoming more and more sensitive to Nature [...] Spiritually and physically the *Broadacre* boys and girls would become the coefficients of a naturally Creative humanity (emphasis added).³⁹

One could exchange ‘Broadacre City’ and ‘Broadacre’ in the excerpt with ‘Taliesin’ and easily find them synonymous. By integrating residential, agricultural and educational functions, the principle of uniting physical and mental labor, work and life – an aspect of Wright’s urbanism – became an immediate reality at Midway Barn.

Admittedly, Wright’s urban rusticity is better seen when considering the Taliesin estate in its entirety. The reasons for it are twofold: first, it is easier to categorize the main Taliesin residence and the Hillside School as the *pars urbana* and Midway Barn as the *pars rustica*; and secondly, the three structures were not conceived as standalones but as comprising a “complete living unit.” Taliesin was meant to be a total learning environment for the apprentices as Wright himself had described the purpose:

[to create not only] a better livelihood but to recreate the framework of our modern life that our leisure, our culture, and our work will be our own and as nearly as possible One. Men must desire to qualify to go forward to their inheritance – The Good Ground – so that each man may again be a whole man in himself living a full life. [...] there is no longer excuse for him to be the kind of parasite that machine centralization has been making of him.⁴⁰

As an embodiment of Frank Lloyd Wright’s urban rusticity, the story of Midway Barn within the Taliesin estate is one of unity, in which the “merging of town and country, physical and mental labor, work and leisure,” as Fishman explains, “were all part of Wright’s attempts to eliminate the fragmentation of modern life.”⁴¹

³⁹ Frank Lloyd Wright, *When Democracy Builds* (Chicago, 1945), 67 quoted in Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century*, 137.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴¹ Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century*, 128.

Frank Lloyd Wright, the Wisconsin Farmer

“The New in art is always formed out of the Old.”

– In Frank Lloyd Wright’s Letter to Lewis Mumford, 1929.

Wright’s emphasis on unity was comported with his larger philosophical and methodological commitment to combining disparate elements of buildings and their settings in a harmonious whole. Midway Barn is an important part of the architect’s “organic” oeuvre. Much like the main Taliesin residence, the Barn is ‘of’ the hill rather than ‘on top of’ it with its overlapping roof planes and their slopes matching its setting on Midway Hill. As Anne Spirn has acutely noted, “it is often impossible to say where building ends and landscape begins” the “glory of Taliesin as it ultimately evolved [being] in the whole landscape of hills and valleys, buildings and roads, fields, gardens and groves, the disparate elements unified in a sweeping composition” (Fig. 15).⁴²

Although we are trained to see the physical forms of Wright’s works as pure reflections of his architectural ideologies, many parts of Midway Barn challenges us to see otherwise. There is a certain ‘ordinariness’ to the barn, that is, in its resonance with traditional Wisconsin farms. As indicators for Wright’s awareness of local farming and barn building traditions, Midway Barn offers a new window to see Frank Lloyd Wright in connection to the larger cultural context of Midwestern agricultural history.

⁴² Anne Spirn, “Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect of Landscape”, 137 & 158.

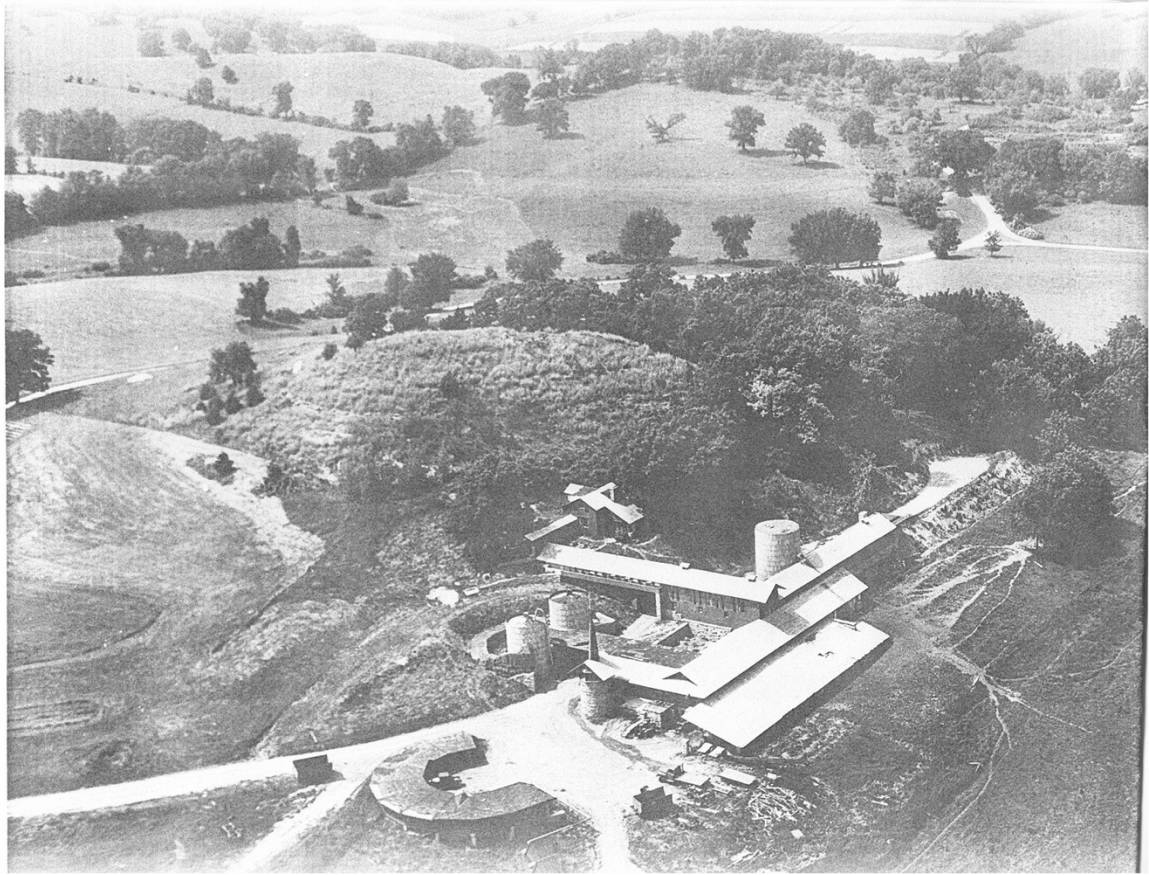


Figure 15: Aerial photograph looking northwest to Midway Barn and the surrounding landscape, 1949-59. Photograph by John Howe. Courtesy of Taliesin Preservation Inc.

It is striking that even what we consider as one of prime indicators of Wright’s organic architecture at Midway Barn – embedding the barn structure into the hill – was common practice in Wisconsin barns, a style known as a “bank barn”.⁴³ The bank barn is a two-story structure where the lower level, traditionally constructed of fieldstone or quarried rock with the wooded frame sitting on the walls, is built against the side hill or bank creating multiple points of access on the ground level as well as the upper level. In a typical bank barn, the first floor would be used to house cattle and/or as a stable, usually facing south or east, with the second floor being used for hay storage. Midway Barns fits the description for a traditional

⁴³ Jerold W. Apps, *Barns of Wisconsin*, 3rd ed (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2010), 33.

bank barn; its long, horizontal axis – containing the calf pen and the original cow barn – is built parallel to the hill with the stable and the hayloft placed perpendicularly to face the south (Fig. 7; see Appendix for plans).

Many other aspects of Midway Barn express Wright’s awareness of and receptiveness to the local farming conventions of the period. Cedar shingles (used in the initial structures), extended eaves and gable ends, simple cupolas, pentroofs and hayfork tracks at the end of the barn were all elements commonly used by Wisconsin farmers (Fig. 16).⁴⁴ Yet “Wright was much master of his domain to seek design advice”; the significance of Midway Barn’s design lies in the fact that he was not only responding to the local conventions of his time and place but exploiting them and turning them into fresh architectural expressions.⁴⁵

Like a traditional bank barn built into a slope, Midway Barn had two primary levels of access for two different levels of the structure. Whereas in a traditional bank the access would be simple and direct, Wright formulated entry sequences for accessing the two different levels of Midway Barn. Access to the lower level involved passing through a series of covered spaces under the shed roofs on stone piers and access to the upper ground elevation was provided through a farm courtyard.⁴⁶ The steer shed roofs that extended out to the field were also Wright’s play with the traditional pentroofs (both meant to protect livestock from the weather), not to mention the actual incorporation of it on the calf pen (Fig. 16). The weathervane with spherical ornaments on the iconic spire also appears as an abstracted version of a conventional type which incorporated multicolored glass bulbs (Fig. 10).⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid., 24-25; Apps notes these as European, particularly Scandinavian, influences that the settlers have brought over to Wisconsin.

⁴⁵ Wyatt, “THLR”, 191.

⁴⁶ Leatherbarrow and Wesley, “*Rustica and Urbana*”, 54.

⁴⁷ Apps, *Barns of Wisconsin*, 12.



Figure 16: The north end of Midway Barn with a pentroof over the calf pen on the lower level (top) and a Swiss barn with a pentroof in Green County, Highway 62 and Old Highway 62 north of New Glarus, Wisconsin, date unknown from *Barns of Wisconsin* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2010), 36 (Bottom). Image by Author, 2020 (top) and courtesy of Steve Apps (bottom).

Leatherbarrow and Wesley's observation seems compelling: "deviations from the vernacular tradition indicate Wright's desire to transform a utilitarian building type into an architectural work: aggregate and hybridized, yet composed."⁴⁸ Considering his architectural impulse as the dominant force in shaping Midway Barn, however, would only be to understand half its story. Wright was a proud farmer – having said "I saw it all, and planted it all and laid the foundation of the heard, flocks, stable and fowls" – who indeed operated a productive farm. Its physical structures evolved in likeness with the more 'vernacular' barns of the region absorbing the technological developments that resulted from the late 19th century agricultural reform movements in Wisconsin.⁴⁹

By 1860s, each state was able to receive an allotment of federal land to sell and raise funds to establish colleges dedicated to agriculture and mechanical studies through the 'land-grant' system. Wisconsin was quick to be involved; it initiated the Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Station (WAES) in 1883, even before having established its land-grant university, Wisconsin College of Agriculture (now known as University of Wisconsin-Madison) in 1889.⁵⁰ Although the extent of Wright's direct involvement with the Experiment Station is unclear, there are existing records of correspondence indicating Wright's relationship with Franz Aust, a professor of landscape architecture at UW-Madison.⁵¹ Through his association with Aust, Wright may have become aware of and subsequently opted to use the Wisconsin or King silo

⁴⁸ Leatherbarrow and Wesley, "*Rustica and Urbana*", 56.

⁴⁹ Wright, *An Autobiography*, 153.

⁵⁰ "History," College of Agricultural and Life Sciences University of Wisconsin-Madison, accessed April 8, 2021, <https://cals.wisc.edu/about-cals/history/>.

⁵¹ Wyatt, "THLR", 125-126: the author notes that the "relationship between Wright, Aust, Jenson, and other landscape architects should be studied to clarify their influence on Wright, or vice-versa."; Spirn quotes Cornelia Brierly's account of seeing UW-Madison professors visiting Taliesin with their students in "Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect of Landscape", 146.

type (a double-walled cylindrical construction) developed in 1891 and named after its inventor Franklin Hiram King, a professor at the WAES (Fig. 17).



Figure 17: The original silo taken from above the hill near the Upper Cottage (left) and bird-eye view looking down at the silo (top). The interior wooden in-lining is collapsed. Image by Author, 2020 (left); courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Center for Architectural Conservation, 2020 (top).

During this time, cement was accepted as a key building material for farmsteads leading to the rise of concrete silos as a central component in farming practices. This historical moment is well reflected in the promotional statements made by the Universal Portland Cement Company in 1914: “A silo on a farm is a mark of progress... [it is] an asset: if built of permanent materials – it is a permanent asset. [...] The twentieth century silo, par excellence, is undoubtedly the reinforced monolithic concrete silo.”⁵² Wright’s decision to incorporate concrete twin silos as well as to change the wooden staves to concrete staves for the original silo is consistent with this agricultural trend.

Technical publications providing practical advice on agricultural activities were also widely circulated during this time including federally commissioned soil surveys, which Wright would have had access to by the virtue of them being distributed by the government without having to receive consent from the farmers.⁵³ Wright’s decision to incorporate the concrete-stave twin silos on the southern end of the barn was certainly in keeping with some of the technical information provided in *Concrete Silos: A Booklet of Practical Information for the Farmer and the Rural Contractor*: “In parts of the country where winters are very severe, there is an advantage in placing the silo on the south side of the barn, where it will be protected from the north winds.”⁵⁴

The silos are not the only example that were in keeping with technical recommendations listed in agricultural publications during this period; rationale for placing the longer structure on a north-south axis and incorporating wooden in-cuts on cow barn floors – as seen in the new cowbarn at Midway (Fig. 18) – can be found in the Experiment Station’s 1916 publication (Fig. 19):

⁵² Universal Portland Cement Company, *Concrete Silos: A Booklet of Practical Information for the Farmer and the Rural Contractor*, 7th ed. (Chicago, Pittsburgh [etc.]: Universal Portland Cement Co., 1914), 7 & 10.

⁵³ This statement is attributed to Robert Koch, the government documents librarian at the University of Wisconsin Steenbock Agricultural Library, quoted in Wyatt, “THLR”, 186.

⁵⁴ Wyatt, “THLR”, 38.

The barn should be placed with long dimensions north and south if a bridge or bank is to be built to the second floor. A barn standing north and south is generally cooler in the summer times as the prevailing winds from the south and the southwest create a draft through the barn.⁵⁵

A concrete (stall) floor, to be satisfactory, must be finished with a wooden trowel which will leave the surface rough enough to prevent the cows from slipping and also to make it possible to keep bedding on the floor.⁵⁶



Figure 18: Wood overlay and wooden block insets in the floor of the flat-roof cow barn. Image by Author, 2020.

⁵⁵ Frank M. White and Clyde I. Griffith, "Barns for Wisconsin Dairy Farms," Wisconsin Bulletin (Madison, WI: Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Wisconsin, April 1916), 8

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

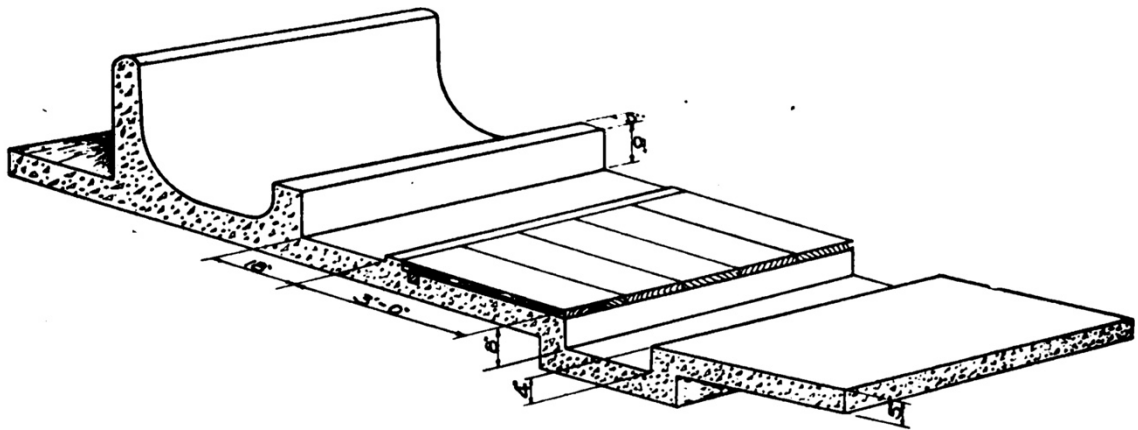
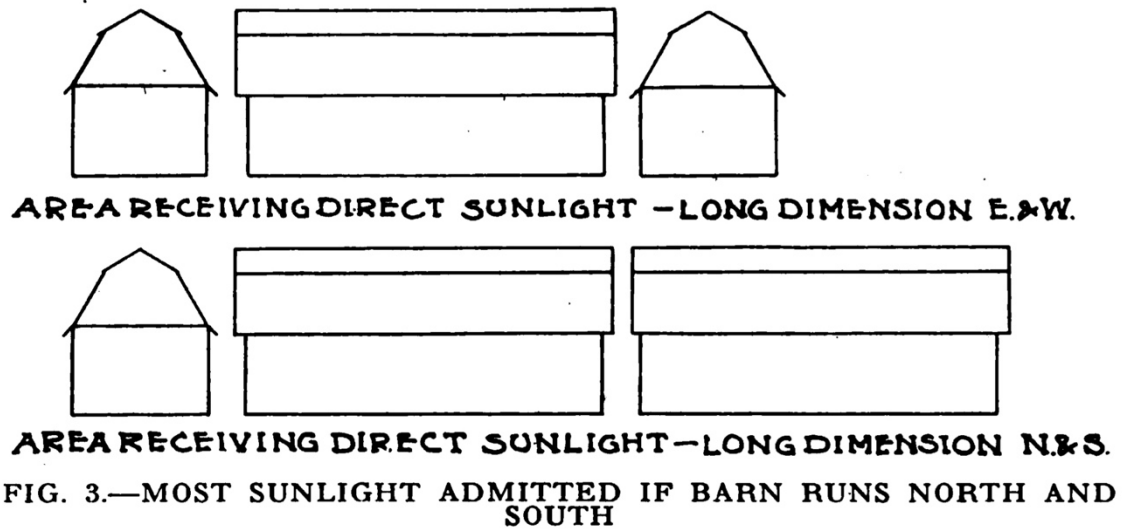


FIG. 14.—A WOOD OVERLAY FOR THE STALL FLOOR

Figure 19: Graphic guidelines for building orientation and floor construction for barns from "Barns for Wisconsin Dairy Farms," Wisconsin Bulletin (Madison, WI: Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Wisconsin, April 1916), 8 and 22.

Just as Midway Barn shared many of the physical traits with traditional Wisconsin farms, its operation was also generally reflective of the shifting agricultural trends of the region. Wisconsin had been a major wheat-growing state since the settlement period, but by the late 19th century its profitability had begun declining sharply. This left Wisconsin farmers no choice but to quickly turn to other substitute crops (corn, oats, hay, potatoes) and livestock,

notably the dairy cows on which Wisconsin agriculture became more concentrated.⁵⁷ Although it is hard to say that he followed this trend to the dot, Wright likewise had taken up wheat-substitutes as mainstay crops at Midway; the commercial production of corn, oats, and hay had become its largest operation from 1930s to 1950s. The recorded number of dairy cows kept during this period ranged from 20 to 30 but in 1945, Taliesin reported having 36 milk cows on site reflecting Midway's increased capacity as a dairy farm necessitating the milk tower and the pumphouse to be added in 1940s.⁵⁸

Thinking about Efficiency

At this point – to borrow Spirn's words – “one cannot help but wonder if there has ever been a farmer quite like Frank Lloyd Wright”, he seems to have been very attuned to both the traditions and innovations in farming. With the premise that the notion of efficiency maximization is inherently embedded in farming practices, the natural question to ask of Midway Barn seems to be to what extent does it demonstrate contemporary theories of efficiency maximization in practice?

There is absolutely no doubt that Wright was aware of Taylorism and knew how to make a building efficient; his Larkin Administration Building in Buffalo opened in 1906 is a prime testimony to that fact. The office building is a showcase of regulatory infrastructure ranging from the organization of labor around an atrium to the placement of furnishings and ventilation systems to facilitate the movement of work along desks as well as air throughout the interior in order to improve the quality of the work environment.⁵⁹ Although further

⁵⁷Wyatt, “THLR”, 149; Apps, *Barns of Wisconsin*, 38-42: the agricultural history is traced in more detail in both publications.

⁵⁸ Wyatt, “THLR”, 203.

⁵⁹ Michael Osman, *Modernism's Visible Hand: Architecture and Regulation in America*, Buell Center Books in the History and Theory of American Architecture (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 171.

research is required to better comprehend the performance quality of Midway Barn's structures, the methods of achieving natural ventilation – the primary, if not the only, evidence being the gable vents and ventilator board on the east elevation – hint at Wright's attempt at achieving physical efficiency, albeit superficially (Fig. 20). The same goes for the actual workflow at Midway in that additional research is needed but some oral accounts of the activities at the barn, as little evidence as they might be, seem to imply that principles of scientific management may have been at play, or attempted at the least, in its agricultural operations.



Figure 20: Drone aerial image looking westward to Midway Barn. The louvers of the hayloft and the ventilator board near the original silo provided natural ventilation. Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Center for Architectural Conservation, 2020.

Randolph Henning wrote in 1934 that planning for farmlands were done in the same way as building planning marking garden layouts, delineating fields and allocating crops using

colored pencils on large maps (Fig. 5 & Fig. 6).⁶⁰ The fact that Wright revised them on a regular basis seems somewhat evocative of a Taylorist approach that entailed frequent monitoring to ensure productivity. Perhaps the more convincing evidence of Taylorism at Midway is Wright's experimentation with the "foreman system" in 1950 in which labor at the farm was divided up among apprentices. Curtis Besinger, a former Taliesin Fellow, recalled in 1995:

Wes was to be in charge of the fieldwork: the plowing, planting, cultivation, and harvesting the crops. John Hill and Kenn Lockhart were to be in charge of the cows. Erick Wright was to be in charge of the chickens, and Larry Martyn, a new apprentice, was to be in charge of the pigs.⁶¹

The actual implementation does not seem to have been effective, not quite living up to Wright's expectation that "Taliesinites can do anything better", as he is known to have called the Fellows back in the studio only after two years saying, "You've proved my point, boys. Thank you very much. Come back, I miss you."⁶² The same went for gardening around the Taliesin estate as Mrs. Olgivanna Lloyd Wright described the division of work and its subsequent failure:

We have tried all kinds of methods of distributing the garden work. The one which seems the favorite of all is to assign to each apprentice a certain row or two of vegetables that are all his own. One takes care of the onions; another, tomatoes; and others, cabbages, and so on. [...] The trouble is that this kind of enthusiasm lasts for only a short time. It is not long before Mr. Wright and I notice the weeds growing high and the vegetables growing low.⁶³

When it comes to investigating the structures more closely, the principles of efficiency-maximization become all the more difficult to detect. The structures and functions are not

⁶⁰ Henning, 198. From a column published on March 15, 1934 quoted by Spirn, "Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect of Landscape", 146.

⁶¹ Curtis Besinger, *Working with Mr. Wright, What It Was Like* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 220 quoted in Wyatt, THLR, 204.

⁶² Frances Nemptin interviewed by Wyatt, "THLR", 204.

⁶³ Olgivanna Lloyd Wright, *Our House* (New York: Horizon Press, 1959), 280 quoted by Wyatt in "THLR", 204.

arranged in a way that would have minimized 'lost work'⁶⁴, that is, any unnecessary movements and lost time that hinders efficiency. In fact, the Fellows would have had to "do" more in most instances at Midway Barn. The movement of livestock throughout the complex is one example. By the nature of the unique entry sequences as discussed, the cows and horses had no direct access to the fields requiring them to be walked out to the upper farm courtyard first before being brought out into the lower fields (see plans in Appendix). The process of transferring hay to the hayloft on the upper level of the Train would also have taken more work than necessary as all of the silos were quite removed from the storage space. The new cow barn also not being directly connected to the hayloft made the more efficient method of gravity feeding an unviable option; the hay would have to be hauled back down, most likely the same way they were hauled up, to bring feed to the cows in the new cowbarn using the hay fork on the south elevation (Fig. 21).

⁶⁴ See Osman, *Modernism's Visible Hand*, 131-137 for a more in-depth discussion of Taylor's concept of 'lost work'.



Figure 21: Frank Lloyd Wright overseeing apprentices bailing hay on the drying rack, c. 1950-59. Photograph by Pedro E. Guerrero, 1953. Courtesy of Taliesin Preservation Inc.

One of the structures which did not function as well as they should have are the double-walled cylindrical silos.⁶⁵ In an ideal construction, the air space between the walls would be able to dry the silage more effectively. This was not the case for Wright's silos – suggested by the fact that a separate hay-drying rack⁶⁶ was present on site – which were much shorter than the optimal height required to be able to carry the necessary weight to compress as well as to increase the updraft necessary for drying the silage (Fig. 22).⁶⁷ Brandoch Peters,

⁶⁵ Another anecdote on the silos: “The silo that is located in the barn, at one point had another wooden silo built into split into three compartments. This interior silo also created a fourth compartment around it. The idea was that the corn could be unloaded simply by shoveling from the unloading door and then gravity would force it out. This did not happen, as the corn would get lodged causing someone to have to go into the outer ring and push the corn to the unloading door. It is unclear to me how they unloaded the grain. This story was related to me by a Fellowship member.” This anecdote was provided by Ryan Hewson, Director of Preservation at the Taliesin Preservation Inc.

⁶⁶ The hay-drying rack was created sometime during 1940s and was replaced by the twin silos which were constructed in 1952.

⁶⁷ Leatherbarrow and Wesley, “*Rustica and Urbana*”, 55-56.

Wright's grandson, explained that Wright kept the silos shorter intentionally in order not to interrupt the roofline, being yet again a strict adherent to his architectural philosophy of unifying building with place.⁶⁸ The stories of the silos become more interesting considering Wright's preference of aesthetics over functionality against the 20th-century architectural history context during which modernisms of European architects were gaining prominence.



Figure 22: Hay-drying rack at Midway Barn. The intact Machine Shed and the milk tower is visible in the background, c. 1940-50. Courtesy of Taliesin Preservation Inc.

At the turn of the century, many European modernists had turned to American culture for inspiration taking particular interest in the formal qualities of industrial structures. Le Corbusier was one of the most vocal architects who celebrated the American industrial buildings lauding the grain elevators and factories as “the magnificent first-fruits of the new

⁶⁸ Randy Leffingwell, *The American Barn* (Osceola, Wisconsin: Motorbooks International, 1997), 161 quoted by Leatherbarrow and Wesley in “*Rustica and Urbana*”, 56.

age.”⁶⁹ This was also when a selection of Wright’s work, including Taliesin, was on display at the 1932 *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* at Museum of Modern Art in the same room with those of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and J.J.P. Oud. Yet the placement of his works in a less prominent location as well as his exclusion from the list of the “four founders of the International Style” in the exhibition catalogue was suggestive of the fact that he had already begun to be perceived as an architect of a past generation.⁷⁰

This would not have sat right with Wright being the competitive figure as he was who openly acknowledged that “the best work I have ever done was the result of provocation.”⁷¹ Refusing to be outmoded by European modernists, Wright’s take on the silo was a critique of the Europeans’ formalistic approach to a fundamentally American and utilitarian typology. Silos were prime examples to showcase his philosophy that “form and function are one”, although in executing the design of the silos at Midway Barn he too had failed to make functionality a priority.⁷² In this narrative of Wright being “driven by profound intellectual and psychological needs” to be considered superior to his European counterparts, Wright’s farming appears somewhat of a folly. Ostensibly agricultural in typology, Midway Barn seems to have been more of an architectural and intellectual endeavor to counter European modernisms as Neil Levine suggests, his “Ruralisme (ruralism) as distinguished from ‘Urbanisme (urbanism)’” was a direct play on countering Le Corbusier’s ideas as delineated in his book, *Urbanisme*.⁷³

⁶⁹ Le Corbusier, *Towards A New Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), 31.

⁷⁰ Leatherbarrow and Wesley, “*Rustica and Urbana*”, 37-38.

⁷¹ Correspondence of Frank Lloyd Wright to Earl Baldwin Smith, Feb. 17th, 1930 quoted by Levine, *The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright*, 157.

⁷² Wright, *An Autobiography*, 132.

⁷³ Levine, *The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright*, 161.

The Gospel of the Farm: Unity

Was Wright's agricultural involvement really a mere ruse to promote himself – recall the image-making tradition in American agrarianism – as representing the true American spirit? True to a certain extent, again, in Wright being the notorious of a figure as he was for his ego; it is important to understand his aesthetic tendencies to conform Midway Barn to its landscape was fundamentally rooted in his profound desire to continue the legacy of his family of farmers who shaped the Jones Valley.

The history of Wright's maternal family – the Lloyd Joneses – in the valley near Spring Green, Wisconsin dates as far back to 1856. Beginning as a small group of Welsh immigrant farmers, they gradually expanded their holdings to what we would come to associate with the Taliesin estate. It was here that he would pride on as his birthplace and as the landscape of his boyhood where he spent summers toiling in his family farm; witnessing the vitality of life his family achieved through agriculture would exert a tremendous influence on Wright's life and career. Taking the lessons of his rural childhood, it would be to these rolling hills of the Jones Valley that he would return to continue to shape and cultivate the land like his family of immigrant farmers. In that effort, Midway Barn was a reenactment of his family saga; just as the Lloyd Jones family enjoyed the fruits of their land through the free labor for their children, it was the Taliesin Fellows, who by extension became Wright's family, that provided the inexpensive labor for Midway Barn that permitted Wright to achieve economic abundance.⁷⁴

The Unitarian faith of his family is also essential to understanding Wright's architectural expression at Midway Barn of which its form and structures were refined to comprise a harmonious whole with the landscape. A principal tenet of the Lloyd Joneses' Unitarianism was "unity" of the Emersonian strain which Wright recalled as "their watchword,

⁷⁴ Leatherbarrow and Wesley, "*Rustica and Urbana*", 64-65.

the sign and symbol that thrilled them.”⁷⁵ While he found that his family had found beauty in this truth, they had failed to see the “truth of beauty”; Wright took up as his own cause to transform the Jones Valley “into a celebration of the landscape of the southwestern Wisconsin and the cultural heritage of his mother and her family” by addressing the beauty of unity through architecture.⁷⁶

In this campaign of unifying his family landscape, it was Wright’s intention to not only embed Midway Barn’s structure to its immediate setting but also to the larger landscape of the Jones Valley. Wright groomed the landscape, “just as the eighteenth-century English landowners embellished their estates – planting groves, damming streams to form lakes, moving whole villages, building landmarks to guide the gaze.”⁷⁷ In this aspect, Midway Barn is similar to the *fermes ornée* of the 18th-century tradition (Fig. 23).⁷⁸ The circuitous roads that surround and connect Midway Barn to other buildings of the Taliesin estate as well as the water features of the pond and the dam that were meant to be among the first things seen by the visitors portray Wright as a proper gentleman farmer (Fig. 24). Yet unlike typical 19th-century ornamental farms where functional aspects were usually forgone, Midway Barn always remained as a working farm but nonetheless a conscientiously designed one, “genuine in point of comfort and beauty, yes, from pig to proprietor.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Wright, *An Autobiography*, 20.

⁷⁶ Spirn, “Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect of Landscape”, 136.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 136: the author describes Wright’s involvement in the landscaping of the Jones Valley in more detail from his fascination and aptness with dams and contour gardening to the razing of farms along Route C and 23 in Spring Green, Wisconsin. Also see landscape plans in THLR, 160, 190, and 208.

⁷⁸ Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello is a prime American example of a ornamental farm. Also see A. J. Downing’s *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1849) for the principles he laid out for creating a *ferme ornée*.

⁷⁹ Wright, *An Autobiography*, 153.

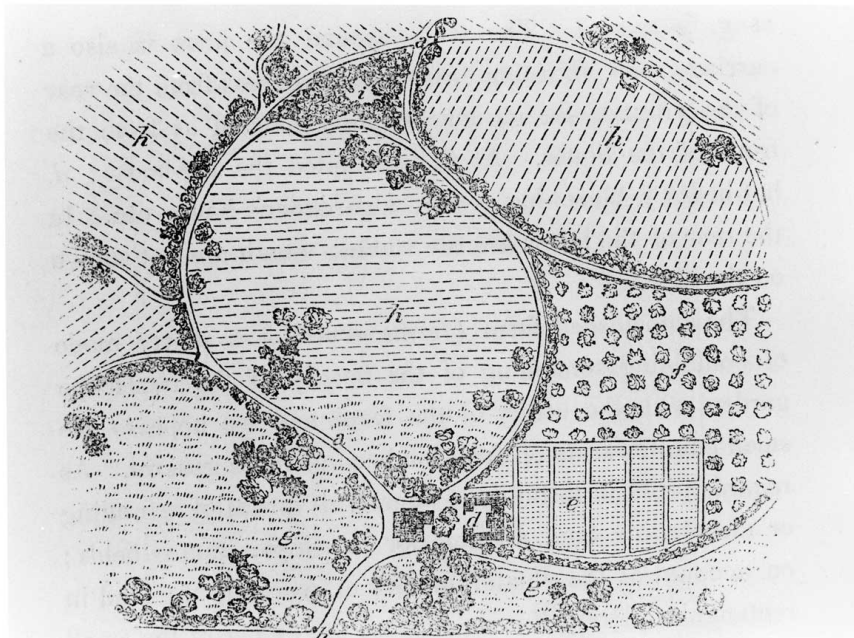
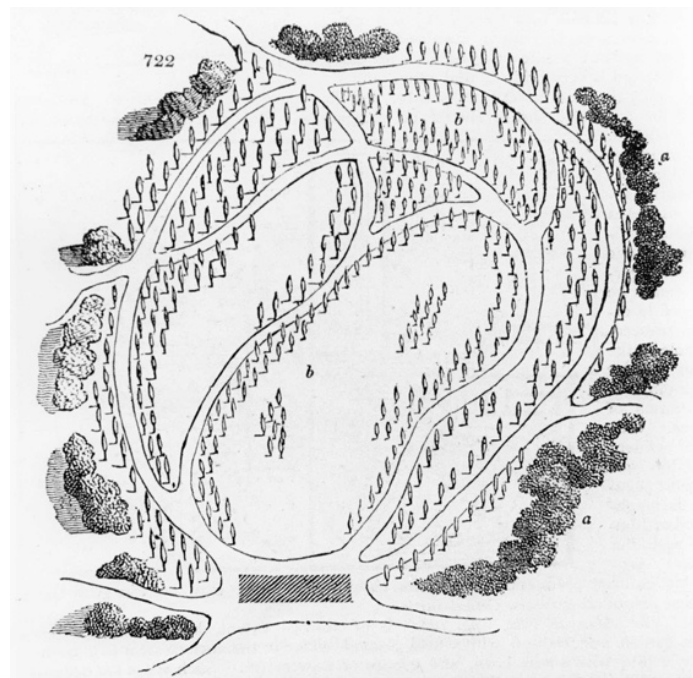


Figure 23: “View of a Picturesque farm (*ferme ornée*),” in A. J. Downing’s *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1849) (top) and J. C. Loudon’s plan of a *ferme ornée* with wild and irregular hedges. Drawing from *An Encyclopaedia of Gardening* (London: Longman et al., 1826) (bottom). Courtesy of History of Early American Landscape Design Website.



Figure 24: Aerial photograph of the estate taken in 1955. The image has been cropped. Midway Barn is seen in the center, the Hillside School to the left and the Taliesin residence to the right. The pond is also visible. Photograph by the Iowa County Soil Conservation Office. Courtesy of Taliesin Preservation Inc.

The uniqueness of Midway Barn thus seems to be in its capacity to lend itself to seemingly contradictory readings oscillating between it being a country estate of the Jeffersonian tradition and a humble – albeit not in its size – working farm of the American countryside. The truth is that both views are not mutually exclusive of one another, and it is in this aspect that Midway Barn’s significance lies in interpreting the complex idiosyncrasy of Frank Lloyd Wright. Yet again, it is in Midway Barn’s origin in Wright’s aspiration to celebrate the agrarian roots of his lineage that makes him appear less idiosyncratic; the heartfelt affinity with which he approached the landscape of his childhood and the desire to establish Midway Barn as a “true successor to the self-sufficiency of the Lloyd Jones settlement” make Wright appear more less of an architect with a capital “A.” As a product of

interlocking forces of American agrarianism, local farming traditions as well as his rural upbringing, Midway Barn has the potential to extend the relevance of Frank Lloyd Wright. His architecture serves as a platform to both challenge our contemporary ways of American living as well as to rediscover the value of connecting with each other, as Wright's motto goes, in unity.

Interpreting Midway Barn: Schemes and Guidelines

The following section outlines concise interpretive schemes and guidelines for Midway Barn distilling the research into distinct themes that show the most potential of extending the cultural significance of the site to a wider audience. The research is not without limitations, however. First, as mentioned throughout this thesis, there is an existing need for further research into the physical workings of the site such as spatial relationships and workflows. The findings from future research may offer new and different, or even contradictory perspectives to the current scholarship on the site resulting in the need to revise the interpretive themes outlined in this research. Although this thesis offers certain ways of interpreting Midway Barn, it is not to be taken as a comprehensive interpretive planning document which requires a more systematic approach incorporating research, planning, implementation, and evaluation. At best, this thesis could be considered as a foundational stage on which the FLWF can base its future interpretive planning for Midway Barn.

With that said, three schemes and corresponding guidelines have been identified – not in any order of significance – for the interpretation of Midway Barn. The schemes refer to a general theme and the guidelines serve as supportive policies outlining the communicative goals and suggestions for programming, in keeping with the FLWF's preliminary initiatives to

use Midway Barn as an educational center for agriculture and land management.⁸⁰ It also heeds to the mission and the vision of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation to “make life more beautiful, the world a better one for living in, and to give reason, rhyme, and meaning to life” through inspiring people to “to discover and embrace an architecture for better living through meaningful connections to nature, the arts, and each other.”⁸¹

Interpretive Scheme: Frank Lloyd Wright’s American Boyhood

It goes without saying that Midway Barn is the quintessential site to interpret his rural youth being built in Wright’s very birthplace and family farm, the experience and lessons from which became foundational to his architectural expression as well as to the operation of the barn. Contrary to the scholarly consensus about the enormous extent to which his childhood in the Jones Valley had influenced Wright, the general public perception of Wright seems to be to understand him as a man of his own genius. Interpreting Wright’s agrarian roots has the potential to challenge the currently prevailing image of him as an Architect whose brilliance seems to set him off as a figure incomprehensible and irrelevant to the common minds. Telling the story of his childhood in the Jones Valley can not only provide the rationale for his architectural decisions but also make Frank Lloyd Wright a relatable human figure shaped by his background (Fig. 25).

⁸⁰ Taliesin Preservation, Inc. (TPI), “Midway Barn Rehabilitation Plan,” October 20, 2020. PDF. This document has been provided by the TPI. The FLWF and the TPI has published a preliminary rehabilitation plan for Midway Barn to use it as a “center for land use.” The initial plan entails restoring the barn as a demonstrative farm with an public educational objective “to communicate, educate, and demonstrate the agricultural land management legacy at Taliesin and promote a healthy and sustainable food system for tomorrow.”

⁸¹ “What Is the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation?” Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Website, accessed April 15, 2021, <http://franklloydwright.org/about-us/>.



Figure 25: Portrait of Frank Lloyd Wright as a young boy. Courtesy of Wisconsin Historical Society.

Guidelines

- Centering Conversations on Childhood:

His rural upbringing in the Jones Valley is naturally the core of this interpretive scheme.

The story of Wright's birth in the Valley and summer work on his uncle's farm can be incorporated into docent tours and/or presented in interpretive spaces at Midway Barn. In highlighting the tremendous amount of influence his childhood had on Wright, the interpretation should also engage the public to consider their own childhoods and of others to think about how different backgrounds foster different thoughts and ideas about life.

- On Unitarianism:

The Unitarian faith of the Lloyd Jones were closely tied to their agricultural lifestyle and likewise influenced Wright's approach to designing and farming at Midway Barn. The focus need not be religious. Communicating its fundamental tenet of unity as foundational to his architectural philosophy, it can help enhance the understanding of the architectural forms of Midway Barn. This aspect can be also be conveyed at Unity Chapel where Wright's Unitarian lineage is more obvious.

- The Value of "Learn-by-Doing" Principle:

Wright acquired the value of "learning-by-doing" from his childhood experiences on the farm. Just as this principle formed the basis of the Taliesin Fellowship's education, new programs can also take advantage of the principle that encourages tactical experiences with designing, gardening and farming etc. The scope of the current Food Artisan Immersion Program at Taliesin can be extended to include involvement in farming at Midway Barn in conjunction with the Otter Creek Organic Farm that manages the farming grounds.⁸² Other educational programs and demonstrative farming can be centered on the principle encouraging direct involvement of the visitors in programmatic activities.

Interpretive Scheme: Frank Lloyd Wright the Wisconsin Farmer

Throughout the history of the Taliesin estate, the one constant criticism it received from the surrounding community was its isolation.⁸³ The stigma of which it being a self-serving

⁸²"Food Artisan Immersion Program," Taliesin Preservation Website, accessed April 22, 2021, <https://www.taliesinpreservation.org/cafe/food-artisan-immersion-program/>

⁸³ Sarah Freeman, "A Sustainable Farm Rises from the Ashes of Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin," *Vice Magazine*, June 17, 2016, accessed April 15, 2021. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ezkmep/a-sustainable-farm-rises-from-the-ashes-of-frank-lloyd-wrights-taliesin>. The author quotes Lidia Dungee,

operation can certainly persist if it continues to be interpreted without rediscovering larger connections to the area. The common thread is of course the architecture, which in Midway Barn, as the research suggests, has a certain likeness to the traditional barns of Wisconsin. In this reading of Midway Barn as a Wisconsin farm, Wright is again able to appear as less idiosyncratic, expanding his relevance to fellow Wisconsinite farmers and to the broader agricultural community (Fig. 26).



Figure 26: Frank Lloyd Wright on a road-grader, date unknown. Courtesy of Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Facebook.

a farmer for the Otter Creek Organic Farm: "Throughout the whole history of this place, they were so isolated that people in town shunned them, called them socialists, and didn't want to get involved with them. They didn't know what was going on with them and didn't want to know. I think that carried through history and people still don't know."

Guidelines

- Forging Broader Connections:

Given Wright's association with University of Wisconsin-Madison and its Agricultural Experiment Station⁸⁴, the partnership can be re-established for educational programs and workshops related to farm architecture, agricultural land management and sustainable farming. The college can be involved in various scales from sharing knowledge to supporting educational programs at Midway Barn. The site can inversely provide research and internship opportunities for students and the academics.

- Innovative Farming:

Although it has been suggested that efficiency was not prioritized, Wright was still attuned to the best farming practices of the time as indicated in the research. Building on partnerships with UW-Madison and/or Otter Creek Organic Farm, promoting organic and sustainable farming methods can become Midway Barn's one of core initiatives. This can also forge connections to local farms and farmers markets in the Spring Green area and beyond.

Interpretive Scheme: Closing the Rural and Urban Divide

Wright saw agrarianism as necessary to counter the damages of the city on the democratic principles of America but also knew of the advantages reserved in urban settings. His ultimate solution was to citify the countryside; Midway Barn as understood within the Taliesin estate expresses Wright's intention to merge the "American, and truly democratic" countryside with elements of the city "without losing a single advantage urbanism can offer."⁸⁵

⁸⁴ As indicated, further research is required to understand the exact extent of the relationship.

⁸⁵ Levine, *The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright*, 161. The author notes that the latter part of the quote was penciled additions that Wright made in the unpublished manuscript, "~~In the Cause of Architecture: The City~~," 8.

Given the enduring dualistic American discourse on the country and the city – likely shaped by the anti-urbanism imbued in American intellectual thinking as discussed in the research – Midway Barn can become a platform for challenging the divergence that are often implicated with social, economic, and political divisions.

Guidelines

- Wright's Urban Rusticity - A Larger American Story:

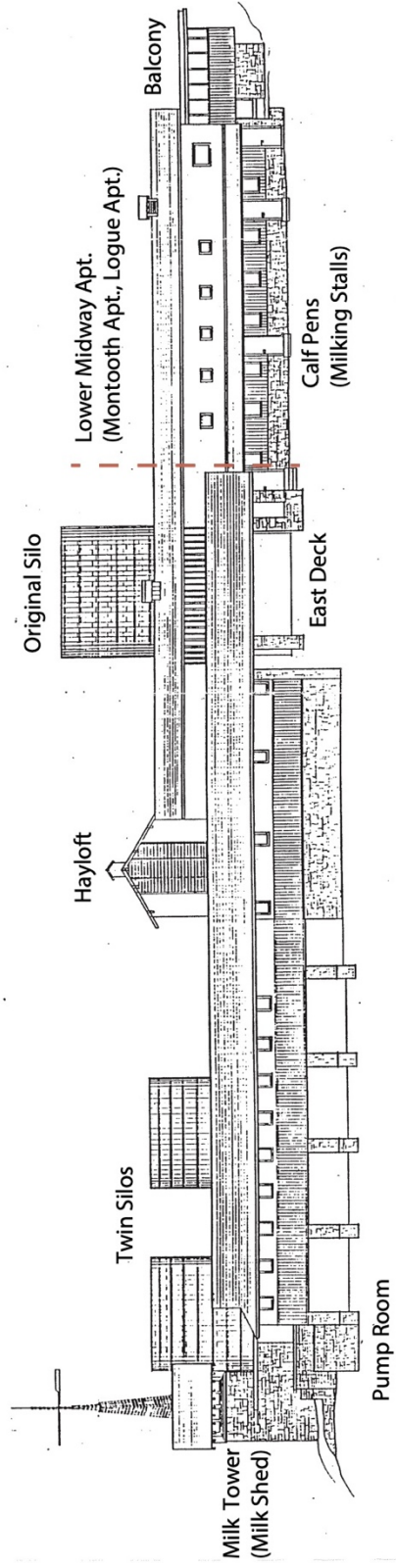
As indicated in the research, the Taliesin estate brings together the rural element, Midway Barn, and the urban elements (Taliesin residence and Hillside School) into a harmonious whole. In that way, the Taliesin estate was Wright's version of an ideal American living. The value of unity can once again be highlighted in this interpretive scheme as well as other principles of living in cooperation and in creative independence. This serves as an opportunity to enable Midway Barn to enter into a broader social debate and extending its identity to go beyond as a piece of art to a site with social imperative to connect people across the nation. Tour conversations can be intentionally be centered around this theme as well as being included in interpretive spaces at Midway Barn.

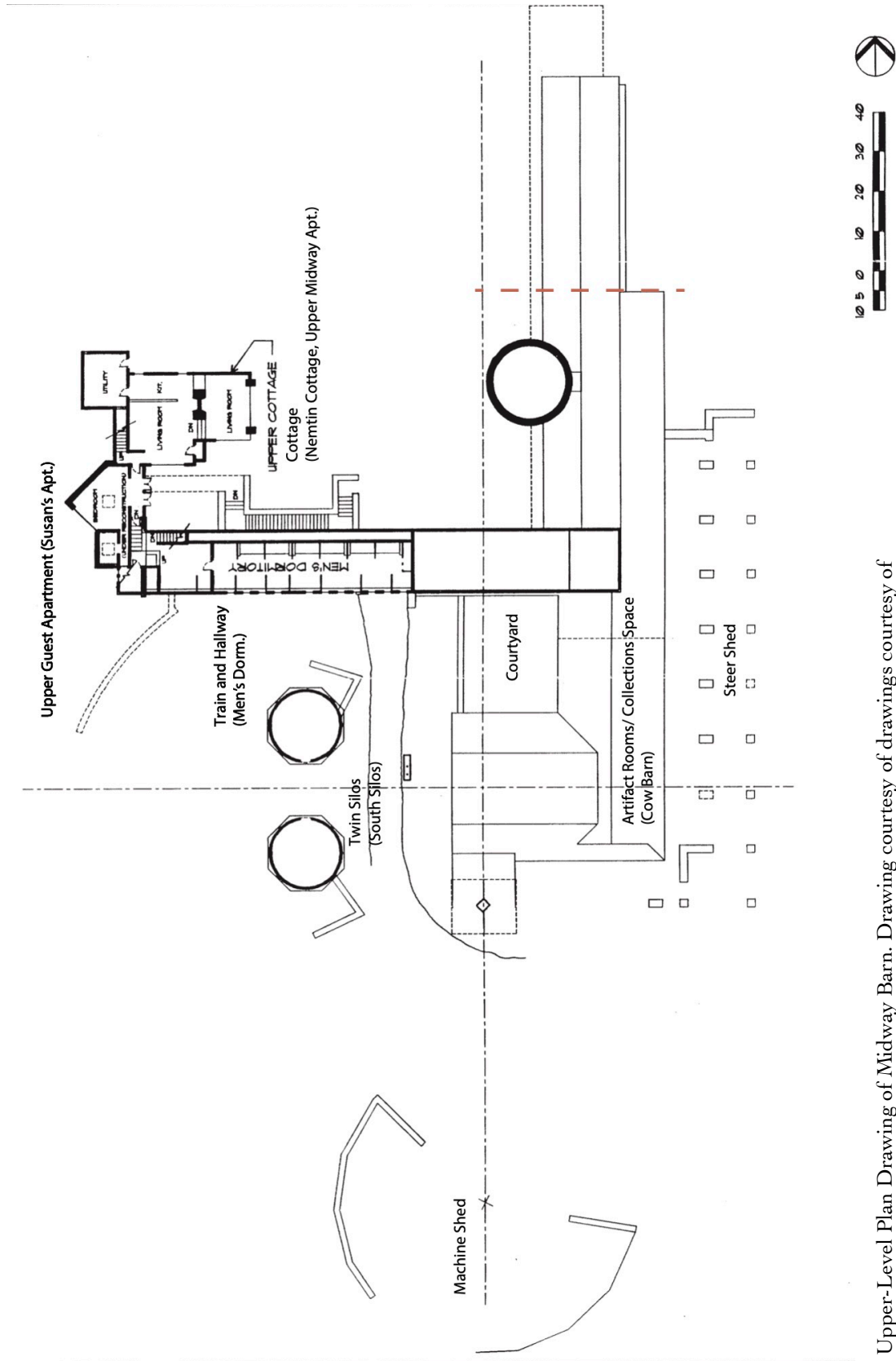
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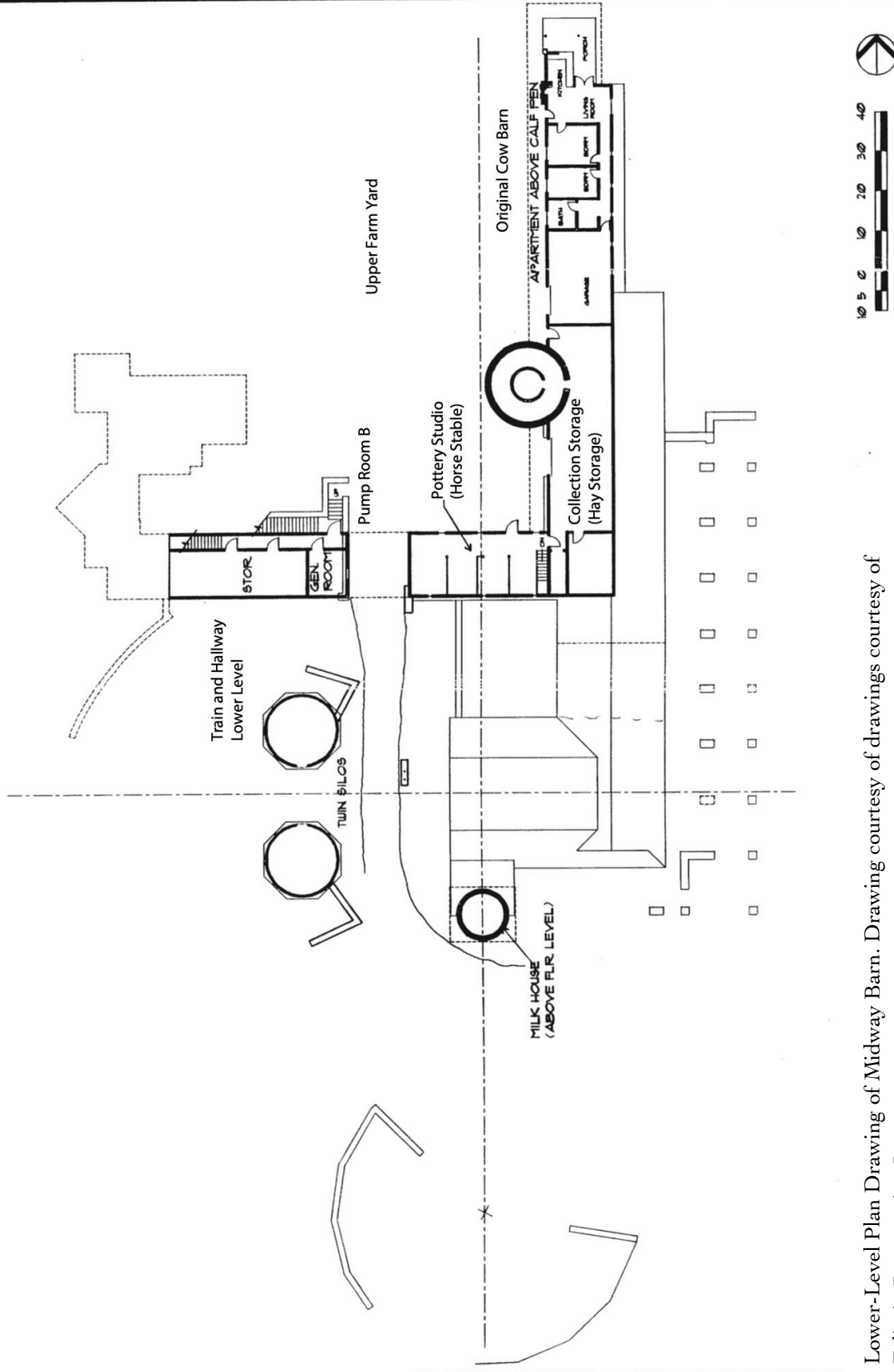
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APPENDIX: Building Sections Glossary & Floor Plans
(Note: historical references are in parentheses)





Upper-Level Plan Drawing of Midway Barn. Drawing courtesy of drawings courtesy of Taliesin Preservation Inc.



Lower-Level Plan Drawing of Midway Barn. Drawing courtesy of drawings courtesy of Taliesin Preservation Inc.

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