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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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United States Information Service as "one of a collection of 350 books about the United States of America" sent to many city, state, or public libraries in many countries of the world. For example, almost all copies in Australian libraries are of the 1943 edition donated by the Carnegie Corporation in 1957 through the USIS.

Interestingly a far more useful reset production of the second edition was published in London by Faber and Faber with a contract signed as early as November 1943. The first printing of 3,000 copies was in September 1945 (with Hyperion Press), a second impression in 1946, and a third of 2,000 copies on 20 March 1947 (without Hyperion). It was more useful because of size (octavo), format, the type selected, and especially for the inclusion of many photographs of family and buildings. (These illustrations may have been allowed, so to speak, since the book *In the Nature of Materials* with its many pictures was not published in Britain.) The Faber edition did not go out of print until May 1959.[34] Perhaps 30,000 copies of the various editions of the autobiography had been sold by about 1960. A new edition of *In the Nature of Materials* was planned as early as 1951 and in that year Wright gave Bruno Zevi "full authority" for an Italian translation of the autobiography of 1943.[35] If one includes French and Italian (*Io e L'Architettura*) editions of 1955, another 4,000 or so might be added by 1970. Indeed, Wright's second coming can be declared successful if measured only by the sales of his autobiography.

All of the above emphasizes that beginning around 1930, in Wright's mind it was important to gain some good, solid public attention of virtually any sort. If his friends had not bailed him out with Wright Inc. he would have been nearly destitute save for the farm (actually inherited from his mother's family) that he called Taliesin. Their financial assistance had to be repaid; he needed work. But architectural commissions were not forthcoming, at least not immediately. Therefore he had to find other means to obtain money. Royalties earned from writing were important and continued to be so for two decades; so too giving speeches. Since he charged for the loan of his artifacts, there was good publicity if little money in exhibitions. And there was the Taliesin Fellowship.

4 Fellowship

For decades Wright had thought about establishing a school presumably under his guidance and tutelage. In 1900 he spoke of the need for an "experiment station," inferring some kind of crafts school. In 1908 and 1910 he wrote that a design center was needed, and now and then the idea inserted itself into a text at the proper moment. Finally in 1928, free of a rather hateful ex-wife, able

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to work again at Taliesin, and in the quietude of a slow professional practice, he and Olgivanna proposed an art school to be located on part of his grandfather's farm on which he had built his home. He would provide the land and buildings (then near ruin) if others would become patrons.

He wrote a few letters soliciting comments on the idea; most recipients did not reply. Most knew he was in desperate need of money and realized this was an effort, perhaps sincere, to obtain cash flow. Of course its pedagogical foundation was not related to coarse practical necessities; Wright's rhetoric on the subject was quite sophisticated. It was to be a constructive step "to save the soul of man himself, from further atrophy, from greater degradation at his own hands." He believed the "creative-instinct" was dead in most people, that it had "ceased to exist." Yet optimistically he was certain that that "quality or faculty" could be reborn. The seed was in the force that would induce revival: imagination. The method was his school, where "this thing might be wooed and won" (see Appendix F). But he wrote little of how in practical terms it would be achieved except for one tantalizing piece of information. Beginning in 1928 and through 1929 he attempted to enlist "the help" of a university, left unspecified but no doubt the University of Wisconsin. Wright had good relations with the Madison campus and "occasionally" professors visited Taliesin. Probably the most influential of his contacts at the university was the amazingly popular poet, dramatist, and novelist Zona Gale, who at that time was a regent. Wright's and Gale's families were old friends. Before meeting Olgivanna, Wright had a serious love for Zona that was politely rejected. ("I just didn't know how to make love to Zona Gale.") As well, Wright was enchanted by Gale's stories and novels about Wisconsin, its people and places, and shared her loathing of war and conscription, her press for women's rights, and her liberal politics. Her dramatization of her own novel *Miss Lulu Bett* won a Pulitzer Prize "amid universal approval" and was made into a movie by Paramount. During the mid-1920s the University of Wisconsin was quite progressive and among other indicators was committed to a new experimental college. Many young, left-wing students in the creative arts had enrolled in the new college. It may be that Gale and the college's founder Alexander Meiklejohn considered that the administrative location of Wright's own experimental school of the arts could have been within the college. In the event, at the request of the university Wright prepared what he described as a "university-prospectus."

Without consultation or prompting and for inexplicable reasons, in December 1928 Wright proposed one of his staunch supporters in Holland, Henrik T. Wijdeveld, "to be the director" of his school. Even more amazing, he did not personally inform Wijdeveld of his proposal but did so casually in a letter to P. M. Cochius, Director of the Leerdam Glass Works outside Amsterdam with

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whom Wright had just begun designing some domestic decorative items. A copy of the prospectus was enclosed to be passed on to Wijdeveld. Just as casually Wright learned from Cochius via an offhand comment in a February 1929 letter that Wijdeveld was not interested in Wright's proposal; rather he was starting his own "school of architects."[1]

At this crucial juncture in his musing Wright was offered the series of jobs with Dr. Chandler in Arizona from which emerged only the poetically splendid Ocotillo Camp. Almost immediately on returning to Wisconsin from the Arizona desert in June 1929 the Wrights began more serious planning for something like an "Art School," formulating at least its generalities as well as preliminary architectural plans. Beyond floating the idea verbally to a few people (including Lewis Mumford, Douglas Haskell, and Jens Jensen),[2] until the end of 1930 little was done in a practical way—like financing—to see the school realized. It was then that correspondence was renewed with Wijdeveld, who was editor and publisher of *Wendingen* magazine in the 1920s and of a book on Wright in 1925. During 1930 John Lloyd Wright visited Wijdeveld; in August the elder Wright thanked the Dutchman for his hospitality and asked him to assist two of Wright's young acquaintances who were to visit Holland.[3] In about October 1930 Wright asked Wijdeveld to participate in the new school: "to have you join me in Wisconsin to work in the proposed school would be a dream realized." The role of Wright's son John is not clear, but in any event Wright briefly outlined the school, which by then was to include the crafts, named its initial cost (around $300,000), and then mentioned his desire for an exhibition of his work in Europe.[4] Wijdeveld happily agreed to arrange the exhibition's tour. The invitation to travel to America and "take the lead of the Hillside-school of Arts" (as Wright was then calling it) Wijdeveld found "very tempting indeed" but his own plans "in Holland [were] already so far advanced, that I [Wijdeveld] intend to try very hard to realize them in . . . 1931"[5] (his ellipses).

The vital contribution of Wijdeveld to Wright's life, including the wilderness years of the 1920s—and indeed the roles of Berlage, Mendelsohn, and Wils—is explored in detail elsewhere in a new study by Donald Langmead and myself. Here it is necessary to extract an outline of the critical episodes of the second phase of Wijdeveld's lively contribution during the transitional years around 1930, and especially his contribution to the Fellowship.

With Wijdeveld taking charge of the exhibition in Europe, in April 1931 Wright made an extraordinary revelation accompanied by yet another offer to Wijdeveld that was only superficially explained. He informed the Dutchman that a school was forming in Chicago to be known as the Allied Arts and Industries School, that it was to be along lines similar to Wright's proposed private

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school with an additional and major consideration: the Chicago school was to be endowed with "2½ Million Dollars." Wright had been asked to be director but, he said to Wijdeveld, "I suggested you—with me as Chairman of the board." Wright added that the salary was $10,000 per annum to fit a ten-year contract and that the school was to begin the following September or October.[6] (There was a suggestion that the Chicago school was to be a breakaway from the Art Institute of Chicago, where Wright had useful contacts, but he left this allusion ill-defined.[7]) At this more promising offer Wijdeveld was overwhelmed: in fact he "overwhelmingly" accepted the directorship by return cable; he left all matters with Wright.[8] And then silence from Wisconsin.

In anticipation, Wijdeveld wrote what he unashamedly described as "a curious letter of introduction" presenting individually his family and their accomplishments, and his dreams. It was a very long letter filled with hope. He referred to Wright's "Hillside-home School of Art" as an International Guild and encouraged Wright: "We both see International understanding one day coming. Why not, in the difficulties of our attainment, join our work and make the way free" since the mission required their "united power." He and Wright would "keep a strong mind and a strong hand and lead our plans towards the Happiness in Taliesin," The International Work Community. There was in the letter much delightfully effusive language so typical of Wijdeveld. He mentioned that he had $10,000 to $15,000 to invest.[9] Surprisingly, still no response.

Understandably worried by the lack of communication, two months later on 10 June Wijdeveld wrote Wright a long, handwritten, rather philosophical yet emotional letter that expressed a deep concern about the future course of his life; a concern not wholly rhetorical when one considers the Depression and the aggressive rise of Nazism in Germany. He tried to clarify his own intentions about the relationship between Wright and himself. He believed his efforts always had been directed not to the promotion of Wright personally but to nurturing "the growth of an idea" they shared.[10] A reply to this unhappy, very personal letter came not from Wright but his secretary. Somewhat callously Wright had delegated Karl Jensen, who wrote that he understood there must be some "suspense of not knowing about the school." While not reassuring, Jensen's few lines mentioned that Wright was to travel to Chicago in a few weeks to look into the matter.[11] Again silence.

Finally a note: Wright found Wijdeveld's letter quite "remarkable" but was reluctant to encourage the Dutchman until he was more certain of affairs. Wright had continued negotiations that included the enlistment, to borrow his word, and cooperation of a woman (no name mentioned) who was in some unexplained way "responsible" for the proposed Chicago Allied Arts school, and who was in some unexplained way to help develop Wright's own school at Taliesin. Apparently

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Wright was no longer involved in the Chicago venture, yet, rather confusingly, he would become chairman of the board of his own school, a task he would reluctantly assume. He wanted to concentrate on the practice of architecture "for fifteen years more," implying that he found the task of administering a school too distracting, but he would be the "deciding voice." He informed Wijdeveld of these vaguely structured ideas and warned that "times are bad here," the school would take many years to develop; all would "not go smooth."[12]

Wijdeveld did in fact travel to the United States late in 1931 but surely with uncertainty and only a modicum of optimism. He visited Boston and Chicago before traveling to Madison and Taliesin in November. The two men talked; Wijdeveld spoke of his ideas for a fellowship; Wright even prepared a draft contract between himself and Wijdeveld as the nominated director of what *they* decided would be a Taliesin Fellowship. Wright was described as founder, Wijdeveld as "leader," and there were other conditions (including an investment of $10,000 by Wijdeveld) that remained only in draft form, for the contract was never signed.[13] On returning to Holland Wijdeveld wrote a thank-you for Wright's hospitality that contained a "longing" to join Wright; "I hope we'll find agreement."[14] A month later, in February 1932 Wright wrote his friend and colleague:

My dear Dutchy:

Much as I like you and hard up for help as I am, perhaps chiefly because of both, I am going to say no to your coming to join me in America.

He told Wijdeveld that the personal responsibility Wright would need to assume if the Dutch architect and his family made such a permanent change of life was "too great," that it was based on "the slender basis of hope." He closed the door firmly by saying the "leader should, I am now sure, be an American." He said Wijdeveld should begin a school of his own, his own fellowship, free to give it direction and character. With Amadée Ozenfant, Erich Mendelsohn, Serge Chermayeff, Paul Hindemith, and others, Wijdeveld did create and build the Académie Européenne Méditerranée in France. Soon after construction the original buildings were consumed by fire, but the academy was revived on a site in Holland.[15] (On Wright's death in 1959 Wijdeveld was again seriously considered to head the Wright Foundation.)

What happened to the proposed Chicago school dedicated to the Allied Arts is anyone's guess as are the names of the players; extant evidence is mute. However, the unhappy affair with Wijdeveld emphasizes some interesting aspects of the development of the Taliesin Fellowship. The initial idea of a Hillside Home School was not well calculated. Wright and Olgivanna were not certain of its purpose or course. In part this was due to frustration over an incomplete professional life; in

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part to a lack of funds; and in part to the ambiguities of their life and to an unclear future. Events claimed attention simply because they appeared desirable, not because of their intrinsic value or natural fit into a grand scheme. So Wright could abandon his own school for another; he could give away the directorship to someone else; he could give an inevitable committee great persuasion. In other words he could halve all his dreams just to be involved in the Chicago School or see his own school to reality. However, so little is known of the byplay behind the scenes in Madison or Chicago that accurate analysis is difficult.

Sadly, the Wijdeveld affair must be seen as somewhat malicious. Wright put the proposition of the school only after Wijdeveld agreed to organize and conduct the exhibition around Europe; no easy task. Wright was silent or imprecise about the school and related matters at critical moments in their correspondence to an extent implying tactical delays. Thanks to Wijdeveld the exhibition ran in various European cities from April 1931 to January 1932. The letter to "dear Dutchy" withdrawing the offer to join Wright in America was written *within days* after the exhibition items had returned to Taliesin.

In retrospect, it can be reasoned that at least one other purpose for considering Wijdeveld as "leader" was clear: to unite the philosophies of Europe and America through a Wrightian center where Wijdeveld (a fellow believer and, it should be noted, one outspokenly full of adulation of Wright) and Wright would openly and harmoniously work together. Because of the Hollander's work on Wright's behalf in Europe during the 1920s, this view would hopefully gain greater credibility. The impression Wright wished to convey in 1932 was that Wijdeveld had abandoned the cause they shared.

One other aspect of Wright's and Wijdeveld's relationship is revealed by a much later exchange of correspondence. In October 1947 Wijdeveld wrote Wright a fairly long and typically elaborate letter that said at one point, in mid-letter and mid-paragraph: "Dear Wright; . . . what has happened that you don't answer me in my distress? I wrote you September 1945, telling you our grief during war, the loss of family and my school of arts . . . find a form for my joining you . . . at Taliesin or Arizona. INVITE ME!!" (Ellipses were his.) The distress he refers to stemmed from the fact that after the war and based on flimsy, hastily drawn evidence, he had been briefly blacklisted (and no more than that) by official professional bodies. A zealously idealistic man, he was firmly apolitical.[16] Anyway, to this appeal Wright responded almost immediately, but it proved to be a difficult letter to compose for a number of drafts are extant. He appeared to be forthright when he said Wijdeveld was "one of the occasions" that weighed on his conscience. "I have not known,"

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said Wright, "just how to square myself with myself where you are concerned, so not knowing what to write I did not write." Nonetheless, he believed the Hollander was "right, when, faced with a part in my enterprise (was it more than twenty years ago?) you said, 'he is difficult to work with. It will take many years to build up this place. I have only ten thousand dollars. I do not know what to do.' . . . In fact I am impossible to work with . . . [I am] a solo creative worker," he said. "I would like to be of help to you and yours—your appreciation reached me when my fortunes were at a low ebb and I am not ungrateful." However, "you could not ('nor any older man I fear') *work with me*" (the last three words Wright underlined).

That is what Wijdeveld received. The letter drafts were more revealing and included some sharp words. Wright wrote that America was "over-filled with left wing modernists," among whom he included Gropius, Mies, Mendelsohn, Breuer, Saarinen, Chermayeff, and Lescaze. He (quite incorrectly) set Wijdeveld in their camp. He thought Wijdeveld "a man of deeper feeling and greater vision" than the others listed. But in the Dutch architect's buildings Wright (incorrectly) saw "much the same character" as theirs. He wrote of a widening breach between himself and those men, that their "apostasy" had "betrayed the cause of an organic architecture in the nature of materials which I believe to be the architecture of Democracy." Wright believed that their architecture was "distinctly Nazi." However, that draft was *not* sent. Rather, Wright said less pointedly that "no good ever came or will come of temporizing with one's ideals just to be kind to a friend." The letter as received closed with an invitation to visit Taliesin West and said that, ideals aside, Wright would do everything he could "for you as a friend." Taken together, they are strange but revealing documents.[17]

But Wright knew full well Wijdeveld's political views and their manifestation in architecture. They were discussed while Wijdeveld was at Taliesin in 1931, and in a letter of 1 January 1932 he reminded Wright of their talks. He also said that his work was then in an exhibition in Moscow and that he had been invited to give a lecture there, among other capital cities. The invitation from Moscow was tempting for he saw it as an opportunity to convince himself of the "sovjet experiment and its growth" so that he might have his "own opinion" when he lectured "at Taliesin."[18]

In the light of the 1947 letter and its drafts, the more obvious reasons for Wright's distasteful act of reneging on his offer to Wijdeveld in 1932 become clear. It was not, as he seemed to say, that Wijdeveld was one of the European "left wing modernists" and that the breach between those architects and Wright had widened to a point where, by 1932, he was not just irritated or mad but intolerant. Although that may be true generally, in the case of Wijdeveld he quite simply had nothing to offer but promises too difficult to keep.

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