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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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The Closing

With Wright's life and concomitant architectural works in the 1930s now better known, a short piece he wrote in 1929 can be more easily understood as his own rather sketchy outline for action—and reaction—in the forthcoming decade. He was asked to answer several questions put to him by Oliver M. Saylor, an observer and historian of Soviet theater arts. It is valuable to know Saylor's attitudes to the arts generally and how he conceived and produced, so to speak, his book entitled *Revolt in the Arts* of 1930. Intended to be a survey of the creation, distribution, and appreciation of art in America, to be simply a "coordinated symposium on the subject by typical workers in the several arts, the book suddenly enlisted the author's own interpretive interest when he detected unmistakable trends and feasible goals emerging from the general chaos." He then wanted an analysis of the "multiple forces at work in the several arts, to determine the relative importance of esthetic, economic and moral factors, and their reciprocal interplay, to inquire causes and to formulate implications." Saylor conceived the arts "as handmaids to science"—it should be noted—"in the effort to explain life, replacing religion and metaphysics for those who have lost faith in these aids to cosmic understanding and supplementing their service for those who still retain faith in them." In a Machine Age "intimate art may exist alongside mass-production art, deriving support from the latter in return for serving as its laboratory, testing ground and inspiration."¹

With notable exceptions (reflected in the phrases "handmaids to science" and "replacing religion" and in the Marxist emphasis) Saylor's attempt to homogenize the arts had only the slightest affinity with Wright's and Baker Brownell's ideas. The bringing together of well-known artists in a symposium was similar to Brownell's university course, to the initial intention of the book he coauthored with Wright, and to his later essays of 1939 published as *Art Is Action*. Wright could see the polemical value of participating in Saylor's 1929 effort, and it was also nice to be among "distinguished contributors" at a time when his newly reformed career was about to begin. His contribution for Saylor was short.

Architecture—"In Between"

The first declaration—that I know anything about—of the value of the machine as an artist's tool was made twenty-seven years ago at Hull House, Chicago. I read a paper there called "Art and Craft of the Machine," since translated into many languages, making the assertion.

Today, Holland, Austria, Germany, Switzerland and recently France have contributed work that not only subscribes to that ideal, but is more “protestant” than my own. There is distinctly now a modern architecture,—in world-wide preparation. America has less in quantity to show.

Among the forces, factors and circumstances which stand in the way of complete and general recognition of architecture as an art are: “Tradition” as the refuge of the incompetent. Academic sentimentality. “Art” in quotation marks. Unqualified wealth. A government, the helpless creature of the majority.

The immediate future of architecture in America will probably consist of a superficial emulation of the work of certain protestants. Eventually, we may have an organic architecture.

The revolt in architecture has little if anything to do with the general revolt in the arts, except as life in general insists upon itself and birth in some form is inevitable. Not much can be accomplished of a revolutionary character except in, and as, architecture because architecture is the synthesis of all arts.

Form is determined by function and modified by use when the forms are living-forms. “Renaissance” is impossible. Real forms, even once “re-born,” are put on or taken off like garments. The machine ruined even these vestiges or vestments of the old order. New forms became imperative. They must be created.

Of course, all arts are subject to the same law. Principle in one is principle in all. Only technique changes, although, strangely enough, few artists knew anything about architecture. Anatole France was only annoyed by music.

Perhaps this is a good time to interrupt Wright’s narrative in order to make a point about a problem common to many artists professing modernity: the dichotomous practice of their beliefs. A personal example should clarify the problem generally. I can vividly recall an experience as an undergraduate in an architectural school dedicated to modernism. One of the studio critics invited a few students to help with the drawings for a competition he had entered. As we worked we talked about modern architecture and architects, the need for honesty to the ideas of modernism, and so forth. We were speaking over seventeenth-century baroque music selected from the critic’s record collection! Wright’s love of classical music and especially of Bach, Handel, and Beethoven is well known: horror of horrors, all Old Europeans. Only once in his writing did he include a modern composer, Stravinsky, and only once did he speak of enjoying American modern music and that was jazz (“sometimes”)

and negro spirituals (“sometimes”). He did not otherwise support modern American composers or music. Anyway, his piece of 1929 for Saylor’s book continued.

We in America have no outstanding modern achievements as “architecture” except as Europe accepted the early work of Sullivan and myself and some few of our architects subsequently learned from Europe to accept their acceptance. (This is frankly immodest. But if I must answer—it is at least true.)

There is no leadership in American architecture at the moment, at least, none that is sound and honest. A timely confusion may be seen everywhere.

The old leadership, if it can be called leadership, included: the Schools; the medievalists; the pseudo-classicists and their plan-factories. Last, but not least, the “modern” modernists themselves, may be seen as falsely assuming the role.

Public appreciation may be enlisted in the interests of better architecture by letting the people actually see some of it. Photographs can not show it nor advertising “tell” it. Nor does the propaganda of the half-baked architect and snapshot critic do more than harm.

The economic obstacles in the way of better architecture include: the natural timidity of vested “Interests”; the women paging Culture; the frailty of the architects themselves.

The American Business Man, unintimidated by “candy”-culture or “rocking-chair” esthetics, should be an asset to architecture. He has been the only asset, so far.

There is no trouble in the relations between client and builder. It is the architect who is in difficulties,—in that triangle.

Cooperation with the architect is the only real opportunity either painter or sculptor will ever have—or ever had, for that matter.

The work of the architect does not yet in any way correspond to mass-production. In a period of revolt, no leader of the Old can guide the New or should do so. Youth is a quality—in art as in life. The New is simply Youth—with all that is thereby implied. The Old is Old—that is all, and the Old may be found with a “new-esthetic” in modern architecture. The only possible analogy at the present time with “machine-made” and “hand-made” in industry is the “machine-made” structure itself and the “hand-made” ideals of “Exterior or Interior.” Result: Architecture as a bad form of surface-decoration.²

“Youth is a quality.” Indeed, it is a tidy outline.

Of course the more controversial of Wright’s promotions in the late thirties were the object of comment and reaction, much of it rather severe in its criticism. His sincere belief in his

own genius; his sincere friendship with the Soviet Union; his sincere hatred of colonialism, cultural especially but not musical: these combined with careless and extrovertish explosions championing his works and beliefs could not pass unchallenged, or at least unnoticed. The implications of his straightforward if not so plain talk were many. Some have been noted in the essays above; others can be found in the following. They reveal that it was not architectural productivity that closed the second most important decade of Wright's career.

25 Talent and Work

Undoubtedly there was a connection between Wright's patent talent, his architectural genius, and the way he employed his personality, or rather certain traits of his personality. At various moments in his career, both during the 1930s and after, there were peculiar outbursts about such issues as the folly of perpetuating colonial architecture, or damning aspects of American society, or insulting listeners or readers (as in his invitation to the skeptical English to laugh at his proposal and be bombed). Further, there was the perplexed observer or participant such as Elizabeth Kassler who spoke of her experiences at menial, almost trivial tasks and who, it should be recalled, noticed Wright's distrust of intellectuals. Many other examples may be cited of his bombastic and irreverent outbursts usually against tradition, authority, or the intelligentsia.

At first glance a reading of these episodes would seem to support the generally held belief that they were exhibitions of a pompous and arrogant man. To some extent they were, for Wright had displayed his conceit on many occasions throughout his professional life. It began in about 1900 and thereafter he exhibited not only an arrogance about his talent but a willingness to challenge anyone who held beliefs contrary to his. After he met and won Olgivanna his general outward demeanor altered marginally while the content of his verbal presentations changed markedly under the influence of the teachings of Gurdjieff. These were relayed to Wright by Olgivanna in the first instance and during the mid-1930s at odd moments by Gurdjieff himself. Nothing even hints of such influences or parallel thoughts intruding on Wright's writings before meeting Olgivanna. On the other hand, prior to 1925 there were no precipitating causes pressing for an examination of new philosophies, and there was little time for such an impractical extravagance before 1922.

The first indication of these influences was contained in a letter of December 1928 to the Chicago landscape architect Jens Jensen, an old and trusted friend (see Appendix F). It is the most lengthy exposition by Wright on the subjects of work, creativity, and education, which also link to Gurdjieff. Later notes by Wright are just that, limited to a line or two in other contexts. In the same