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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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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

letter Wright included one of Olgivanna's thoughts and compared it with his own. Through muddled phrases it can be seen that there is in fact little difference between husband and wife. It should be remembered that the letter was composed at a critical transitional moment in Wright's life and career.

Wright described Olgivanna's belief "that the creative instinct is the original birthright of mankind and in some of them it lies dead—in any case paralysed and that by proper treatment it may be revived." The last six words are important. Wright also believed that the "creative-faculty is the birthright of Man" but that man has betrayed himself by playing tricks upon himself by application of his intelligence, "by means of his arrogant assumptions, abstractions" and bad education. He goes on to say that because of laziness and inactivity over generations the faculty of creative ability probably has been genetically sterilized. Wright also believed that a treatment was possible that would rekindle and effect a rebirth of "the creative instinct in Man" by—and this is interesting—"getting himself born into everything that he does." The force or chief "tool" by which this might be effected was *imagination*, which he saw as a positive and active opposition to the overemphasis in civilized worlds on selfish rationalism, on the "false premium upon will and intellect," on science. The mechanism was participatory education, a "little experimentation station" to woo and win humankind's lost creative instinct. But it was not a school of book learning but of "work." This outline of his contemplations can be favorably compared to the ideas of Gurdjieff and his acolyte Olgivanna.

Gurdjieff was born and raised in the Armenian town of Alexandropol, now called Leninakan, in the southern Caucasian mountains about 125 miles inland from Batumi. It was a land of ever-changing political borders—Turk, Kurd, Russian, Azerbaijani, but mainly Armenian throughout history. Gurdjieff's parents were Greek but perhaps of Russian nationality. Their name was Gordiades and his father was a "bard," an *ashokh*, perhaps in the tradition of Homer. Gurdjieff was brought up in the Orthodox church, a brilliant student at the nearby Kars monastery (which shared a site with a Russian fort to help protect the newly conquered lands taken from the Armenians.) Why he took the name Gurdjieff is not clear. Perhaps it was a slight russification of his father's name, or related to the Arabic or Semitic word *gurj* or *goorj*, meaning a person guided by personal interest. More than likely it came from the Sanskrit *guru*, more particularly *guruji*, which is a name of respect given by students to a teacher. With the suffix "eff" or "ov" it would mean belonging to a revered teacher.

In any event, at an early age Gurdjieff became intrigued by man's fears of evil spirits, by the supernatural, by magic and wizardry, by the occult. He traveled widely and made friends with Orthodox priests who believed in the supernatural, with *fakhrs*, dervishes, yogi, a group called "Seekers of Truth" in Turkestan, and many Muslim ascetics and/or magicians. In short, as a young man he was, through his varied practical experiences, in training to be a sophist. While Gurdjieff now rates only a mention in occult or parapsychology or psychic literature, he was for some people, especially from around 1922 to the late 1930s, a teacher and mystic of great importance. One follower contended that he was "so profound as to be ultimately unknowable," a contention held by many.¹ When Olgivanna met him he was at the height of his "powers."

Crucial to Gurdjieff's teaching is the proposition that for most people it is unrealistic to speak of themselves as "I." I breathe, I move, I laugh, I converse; the fact of the matter is that "it" (Nature, external forces) does these things. "It" breathes me, "it" moves me, etc. We *think* we do these things and that they are performed by a definable, consistent, purposive "I." But we can do none of these things because, according to Gurdjieff, there is no unity in us. There is no permanent "I"—only a multiplicity of little "I's"—jealous, competitive, conflicting, and changing places every minute as external influences vary. We don't notice this chaos because we are asleep, and so have no knowledge of what is really going on.

When Gurdjieff said that sleep is the chief feature of our being he was not speaking entirely metaphorically, nor was he talking chiefly about the human tendency to daydream and fantasize. He meant that nearly everything we do is done "on automatic." The most striking example of this is driving over a familiar route and "awaking" at our destination with no recollection of the journey, which must have included hundreds of observations and relevant adjustments to our driving. But our whole lives are like that, in fact. We are slaves of circumstance. Whatever we do we can't help doing and we do it unknowingly.

Gurdjieff sometimes called his system of spiritual teaching the "way of the sly man" who exploited the three ancient teachings of the fakir, the monk, and the yogi without renouncing the world as they did. The fakir tries to attain a state of bliss by physical denial and mortification; the monk seeks the love of God by the way of religious emotion, faith, humility, and service; the yogi desires enlightenment or union with a Supreme Being by mental concentration. In Gurdjieff's system the student worked simultaneously in these three directions of control over bodily, emotional, and intellectual functions. The only renunciation was not a material but an existential one. It required a denial of the fundamental human conviction that, at least in our ordinary daily existence, we

possess the power to direct our lives. To make decisions and act on them; in short to will, to act, and to do.

All this, said Gurdjieff, is *illusion*. Man is an automaton, a mere machine activated by external stimuli, like a typewriter, a record player, or a gun. *Things happen to* machines; forces act upon them. Machines can do nothing of themselves; nor can people. To those who indignantly reject the charge that they are composed of such volatile, inconstant, and chaotic stuff it is necessary only to ask them to concentrate on themselves for the space of a single minute. It is doubtful that anybody can manage this without practice. But even if they can, it is certain that they will be unable to entertain *any other thought* at the same time, which makes self-remembering (a core of Gurdjieff's method) useless as far as pursuing the business of daily life is concerned.

If we could self-remember it would be uncomfortable because we should become aware that we tell lies incessantly. These are the product of an automatic control system that "buffers" us from the force of the shock we should experience if we were not shielded from full consciousness of the contradictions of words and actions of the various competing false personalities that all bear our name. To be truly master of oneself, to create the foundations of a permanent and consistent "I," one must stop telling lies to oneself and to others; one must cease being a machine.

The first requirement for achieving this was to renounce the illusion that anyone had free will to do anything. Without awareness of our sleeping state we remain almost indistinguishable from the great majority of human beings who are going nowhere and don't know where to go, who hate to think about themselves, have no wish to change *themselves*, but only to change others, in the sense of making others do their bidding. Such people, Gurdjieff thought, were *walking dead* and there was no hope for them since they couldn't recognize their sleeping condition. To wake up it was necessary to study oneself; but before that it was necessary to *learn* how to study; and then how to do work on oneself. This was the Institute's *raison d'être*. Study and work had to be carried out in a group, selected and organized by a teacher. All work consisted in obeying the teacher's directions absolutely and uncritically. People came to Gurdjieff because they felt themselves to be handicapped or imprisoned in some way (the image varies; tunnel, maze, darkness) and had a compulsive desire to escape without knowing how to begin.

Theoretical knowledge was ancillary to self-study; not psychological self-analysis but self-recording of the activities of the "centers" of the human machine: motor, instinctive, sensational, emotional, and intellectual. Thus the Institute's program included breathing and rhythm exercises, gymnastics and dervish dances, mental exercises, and others to strengthen memory, attention, and

25.1 Photograph of G. Gurdjieff in the 1930s.



will power: all this under unsparing direction. Those who persisted in such extraordinarily strenuous and distressing work proved the sincerity of their belief that, in Gurdjieff's words, it is better to die making efforts to awaken than to live sleeping.²

The methodology of Gurdjieff's teaching focused on work. It should be recalled that when Gurdjieff first spoke to Olgivanna in Tiflis, he said, "You do nothing, and you wish for immortality!" He went on to say that it did not come "by wishing but by a special kind of work. You must work, make effort, for immortality. Now I will show you how to work. First, tell servants to go and begin by doing everything yourself."³ The practical reality of work was one thing, the people another. "What Gurdjieff did at his institute was to turn bored, egotistic, confused people into well-balanced machines, too busy to think about themselves." The plan was to "allow" his students' "natural capacities to operate again." Therefore Olgivanna could argue that through proper treatment certain instincts, including the "creative," could be *revived*. Wright could argue that even if it was lost over centuries of genetic desensitization, a proper education could restore creativity to mankind.

Further, work at Avon was bound to dance. Various aspects of Gurdjieff's teaching were also part of the public shows he put on, very much like performance exhibitions. One observer present at the New York "display" of 1924 (in which Olgivanna participated) said that what excited and interested him "was the amazing, brilliant, automaton-like, inhuman, almost incredible docility and robot-like obedience of the disciples, in the parts of the demonstration that had to do with 'movement.' They were like a group of perfectly trained zombies... They did things, without suffering any apparent hurt, almost as dangerous as dropping off a cliff, and certainly more dangerous than leaping through fiery hoops." The observer went on to say that what he felt "the demonstration showed, even more than their control over themselves, was the terrific domination of Gurdjieff, the Master." At another point in the description of the event, the observer felt Gurdjieff was "a slave-master or wild-animal tamer, with an invisible bull-whip swishing inaudibly through the air." Gurdjieff was described as a "calm, bull-like man, with muscles in those days as hard as steel, in immaculate dinner clothes, head shaven like a Prussian officer's, with black luxuriant handlebar moustaches, and generally smoking expensive Egyptian cigarettes."⁴ As noted in an earlier essay, music was for Wright, dance or movement was for Olgivanna. In Wright's first press release about the Fellowship in 1932 he mentioned that "drama and rhythm" were to be "collateral" studies.⁵ Dance for Gurdjieff took many forms, but always it was related to conscious mental control of the body's musculature as well as dervish rhythms and induced ecstasy.

How was this theory applied at Taliesin? Contrary to what most descriptions of the regime suggest, the complete set, as it were, of teachings were not attempted. Yet it is worth remembering that as early as 1933 Wright had said, if ambiguously, that the human soul can only be free again if “able and willing to work,” that work was the “first condition of true gentility. Taliesin sees work itself where there is something growing and living in it as not only the salt and savor of existence but as the opportunity for bringing ‘heaven’ decently back to Earth where it really belongs.” Work was a vital routine and it was composed of a great variety of activities often too menial for many people. Olgivanna and Wright made no demands of their Fellows to participate in yoga or tricks or exercises for body control, or for that matter meditation or divination, at least in the 1930s. There was field, kitchen, servant, and construction work. For the Fellows Wright selected only the less contentious aspects of Olgivanna’s teachings. He seemed to adopt a paternalistic tone and attitude toward his youngish student entourage. The reasons may be many: the principal work of the Fellowship was to assist Wright in his architectural office, so time elsewhere was not helpful; he wished the Fellows to have practice in construction, so they built buildings for Wright’s school and later at Taliesin West; most Fellows were mature people and dedicated to a profession and not initially prepared for work other than as it might be directed toward fulfilling architectural ambitions; and there may be other inhibiting factors including a belief that all that mystic nonsense was not going to help create architects who would spread the gospel according to Wright.

However, as Gurdjieff’s influence decreased in England and Europe and after he closed his Institute at Avon to take an apartment in Paris, his influence became more obvious on Olgivanna and her daughter in the 1930s, finally culminating with great activity in music and movement in the late 1940s and the 1950s. The growth of that influence can be measured in the many ways already described or alluded to. Further evidence is found in a short passage in Wright’s 1932 autobiography where he wrote of a minor domestic routine: the 6:30 “ante-breakfast” rang, then everyone got up and went to the living room where they turned on recorded music and had “the morning frolic.” There the description ends. In 1940–41, however, in revising that portion of the book, he made significant clarifications and additions: that in the living room they played their “favorite dance music” and had a “morning frolic” that they called “setting-up exercises, but really they are more like dancing”; the dances Olgivanna had learned at the “Institute at Fontainebleau and taught them to us.”⁶ This rewriting occurred after a visit to Taliesin by Gurdjieff in 1939 and a summer visit by Gurdjieff acolyte Stanley Nott in 1940.

Thus it seems that by c. 1930 Wright and Olgivanna practiced her teachings privately. By the late 1930s if not earlier Wright was more willing to admit an association with the occultist, perhaps because he was more secure professionally and in his social life. His willingness can be measured, for he continued his autobiographical rewriting in 1940–41 with new additions that suggest he thought himself familiar and knowledgeable in the subject. Instead he exposed ignorance and used Olgivanna as a disclaimer. “The Institute Gurdjieff,” he said, “I had already heard about”; apparently that was before meeting Olgivanna in 1924. “The Asiatic savant had brought his group to New York the summer before [sic] and performed remarkable studies in human correlation at Carnegie Hall. She herself had been in the group and I now [in the 1920s] learned from her more of that remarkable training. The Institute took unrhythmical”—he wrote—“neurotic human beings in all the social stratas, took them apart, and put them together again better correlated, happier, more alive and useful to themselves and others.” This was followed by the disclaimer: “I am putting here what Olgivanna said. . . . It seems that Ouspensky, Orage, Lady Rothermere, Katherine Mansfield, and many others were Gurdjieff beneficiaries and disciples. Olgivanna, Jean Zartsman, Lili Galounian, the Hartmans, and Schoenvalls were all star leaders in the teachings Gurdjieff.” The strange language and misspelling of names aside, that was his offering on the subject.⁷

In 1949 Ouspensky was in New York City, and the Wrights attended his lectures and encouraged others to do so.⁸ By then his understanding of Gurdjieff seems to have matured; at least he was attempting to better understand “Gurdovanich,” as he once called the mystic. Wright believed that “everybody in America” should know about Gurdjieff and read his new book *In Search of the Miraculous*, for America must cease its “arrogance and become a little more understanding,” especially of the Orient, its people and philosophies. Gurdjieff “pursued” those ancient cultures and to Wright’s reckoning “came out” of his search “with the most profound analysis of an organic relationship to the cosmos.” As far as Wright was concerned Gurdjieff’s illuminations might assist Americans not to misjudge other peoples.⁹ The iron curtain, cold war, and “red menace” were realities in 1949 and they troubled Wright as much as anyone else.¹⁰

There is a tale, not necessarily apocryphal, about an episode when Gurdjieff was trying to make a point to students gathered about him at the Institute. So that they would forever remember the point, he squatted and defecated on the dance floor. A kind of shock treatment no doubt, but effective, or at least effective enough to be remembered as a peculiar act. Routine, norm, prejudice, commonplace, the automaton, the machine, or whatever, need to be constantly and actively chal-

lenged, eventually altered. Wright understood this when he said that Gurdjieff would take people “by the scruff of the neck and fling them in. If they couldn’t swim, he would listen to their shrieks with delight.”¹¹

So, Wright might have reasoned that this was true singly or collectively; at least his conduct of the Fellowship and public actions through words strongly suggest such a reasoning.

It is not implausible to suggest that Wright believed there was *cultural* apathy, machine conditioning, daydreaming, fantasizing—automatic responses—and that there were corporate bodily, emotional, and intellectual functions blinded by routine and indifference. Perhaps there was a cultural “self” or a collective “I.” In a manner like Gurdjieff, therefore, he applied a verbal shock, a SLAP as it were, so his audience might not just hear but listen more carefully; that they should see, think, concentrate—on Wright’s words and equally importantly his architectural works. Examples of the application of the method applied are many. In a bastion that prided itself on perpetuating the history and traditions—and myths—of English-colonial America, the state of Virginia, Wright said colonial America was the worst thing that happened to the USA, and he denounced the Rockefellers’ restoration of British Williamsburg. At another time he said he favored the relocation of the nation’s capital to Mississippi, away from the hidebound center of the northeastern states. But why not the geographic center, Kansas? Simply because that was too reasonable.

Two points should be made. First, this manner of presentation was not used by Wright before 1925. It might be suggested that he presented similar challenges much earlier, say in 1908 in his famous essay “In the Cause of Architecture” for *The Architectural Record*. But the parts of that essay that concern the point here were more like lamentations about historical eclecticism and a severe chastisement to those who would mimic his architecture. Moreover, he claimed authority and creative originality—always about architecture and his contribution—as a genius. Louis Sullivan had provided the words but Wright had *created* the architecture and his readers must never doubt that truth. The second point may seem obvious: the world had honored him as a talented and innovative architect and the *creator* of a new architecture that evolved to become a potent artistic expression of the twentieth century. This acknowledgment heightened his arrogance and urged his conceit to an extent that he believed he had a license, almost a sanction, to lecture America and England, even the Soviet Union. A simple understanding of Gurdjieff’s teachings provided a method. And so his personality was allowed free rein and he acted out on unsuspecting audiences the lessons he learned from Olgivanna. It seems fair to say that he believed his method in support of his organic philosophy would see humanity transcend cultural impedimenta.

Was his and Olgivanna's method successful in shaking the apathy, so to speak, out of his audience? In brief, no. Note that Wright wanted to change people and therefore he was, in Gurdjieff's reckoning, one of the walking dead. Wright's shock treatments, as mild or as extreme as they may have been, together with his strangely constructed verbal logic, *appeared* to his audiences as naive or as merely extensions of an inflated, narcissistic ego. He may have assumed that he did not need to undertake fundamental self-study because he was the teaching Master, was not like "most people" and above such needs. However, he was ill-prepared to undertake the program he set for himself as philosopher and curator of cultural ills. His audiences did not see him as a sage but as a strangely hapless eccentric; and there were times when he seemed rather content in that role.

Yet Wright's elemental philosophy remained virtually unaltered from his earliest days in Chicago in the 1880s: a Whitmanesque Americanism and an Emersonian agrarianism. "Work" and a collective "I" fitted—perhaps in Wright's mind they enhanced—the idea of returning to the land, to a rebirth of agrarian America, to forms of small or subsistence farms, "little farms" beside a democratized Broadacre City. The inherent correctness and pleasurable morality of providing one's own living through labor—work—applied to the land was always central to Wright's at times seemingly disparate actions. Thus Olgivanna's teaching reinforced Wright's fundamental outlook on life. Indeed, she said that "he taught me to see into the great visible world, and I taught him to see into the invisible world."¹² Do these notions of work and self fit Jaeger's *paideia*? The wholesomeness of mind and body developing in concert is an obvious connection. But Jaeger was describing a historical precedent established in ancient Greek culture, and therefore his work was an *explanation*. It was not clear how practice would be effected, especially in modern society. Nonetheless the Wrights found much intellectual sustenance in *paideia*.

The following must be made plain: politics, economics, autobiography, and philosophy *dominated* Wright's utterances during the 1930s. He seldom talked about architecture except as it might relate to those dominant themes; and even more seldom about the stuff of architecture—materials, proportion, plan, scale, construction techniques, order, and such—the very foundations of his writing from 1900 to 1910 that architects worldwide found so attractive.

26 The Soviets

With knowledge of the practical aspects of Wright's relations with the Soviets, and parallel activities, philosophic hypotheses can be more easily established as well as the reasons for his actions after