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# **Frank Lloyd Wright versus America**

## **The 1930s**

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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."<sup>12</sup> 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

appearing at the All-Union Congress. Nothing could have been more persuasive for the Soviets in inviting Wright to Moscow than their admiration of American technical excellence and their love of probing the innermost workings of a theoretical proposition, especially when elevated to seeking the riddle of human aspirations or foibles.

Technical expertise had always been an issue in the Soviets' relations with foreign architects. In 1925 Erich Mendelsohn was invited to prepare designs for a factory for the Leningrad Textile Trust. Construction took two years but Mendelsohn was dismayed by the interference of local authoritarians, lack of materials, and the abysmal quality of workmanship. He refused to allow photographs to be published of the buildings and nearly disclaimed any association. Mendelsohn was one of the few Europeans or outsiders we know of who was allowed commissions in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Then, with the first Five-Year Plan announced in 1929 a few architects from around the world offered their labor and ideas to see the plan to fruition. Most arrived in the early 1930s only to leave disillusioned soon thereafter. A few Central Europeans were involved, though usually with theoretical matters rather than with more practical endeavors. An even smaller number of those Europeans were employed for more than a few months, Hans Schmidt and André Lurçat being well-known examples. The usefulness of all these architects to the Soviet Union was limited because the great majority were too idealistic, perhaps dreamers. Gropius returned from a visit to the USSR in 1932 a bitterly disillusioned man, shaken by what he had experienced. While in Russia Hannes Meyer found essentials such as glass, nails, and steel "worth their weight in gold," and the foreign architects were treated as "precious precision instruments."<sup>1</sup> However, two American architects invited to the Soviet Union in 1929 were the most practical of men, Albert and Moritz Kahn. No precious theoretical stuff for them.

Between 1929 and late 1932 the Kahns designed an amazing 521 factories throughout the Soviet Union's colonial empire, from Kiev in the Ukraine to Yakutsk in eastern Siberia. Their association began with a \$40,000,000 automobile plant built outside a new town called Stalingrad. This was followed by a plant at Moscow to house production systems for cars and Fordson tractors. A second Ford plant was simultaneously built at the new town of Gorky (then Nizhni) by the Austin Company of Cleveland, Ohio. (By 1927 when negotiations for the plant began, eighty-five percent of *all* tractors and trucks in the Soviet Union were "Ford built."<sup>2</sup> The major problem was servicing those vehicles: there was no expertise or systematic training.)

But why seek the assistance of Henry Ford? A short but instructive history of Ford's relationship with the Soviets in 1920–35 has been written by Allan Nevins and Frank E. Hill. Their

answer is clear. Ford was a revolutionary; he had radically changed production and manufacturing systems and thereby provided inexpensive transport for the proletariat and farmer. Further, **while Henry Ford was alternately denounced as a slave-driver and lauded as a mighty innovator, [his] ideas were thirstily accepted as promising the regeneration of Russia. . . . Ford's name [was] emblazoned on banners in workers' processions, as emblematic of a new era; long articles appeared on Ford methods; and the Communists eagerly devoured translations of Ford's *My Life and Work* and *Today and Tomorrow*.**<sup>3</sup>

In his 1922 *My Life and Work* Ford spoke at great length against Communism and more generally socialism for all the reasons one can imagine; most of them many times over proved correct. He also spoke clearly about the need to decentralize urban and industrial centers. A major part of the Soviets' first Five-Year Plan was to reach extraordinary extremes in the dispersal of manufacturing and creation of new towns. Forced migration and labor "camps" policed by secret police were one of the social consequences. Anyway, on the 1929 contract Ford lost considerable money. But as Nevins and Hill have said, "To give his ideas a practical illustration on the world stage, Henry Ford would gladly have sacrificed twice that sum."<sup>4</sup>

The decision of Albert Kahn to take on the initial commission was difficult for the Jewish emigrant from Germany. The United States did not recognize the Soviet government in 1929. Kahn believed the people with whom he did business in America had strong feelings against Communists and further, the enemies of "his people" were taking the Nazi line that accused the Jews of fostering Communism. But the challenge "fascinated" him. More importantly he believed that people in the Soviet Union, "regardless of their form of government—were entitled to help after all their generations of suffering under the czars." He soon became convinced that to accept the challenge was, as he said, "the right thing to do."<sup>5</sup> Once in the USSR and faced with rural peasants in his labor force (who were actually forced laborers living in camps always under guard), the Kahns did not become dismayed or retreat. Moritz supervised in Russia and it was he who offered a solution to the Soviets; they allowed the Kahns to train the peasants to be builders, to become craftsmen in the construction industry, to convert peasant to "worker."<sup>6</sup> The Kahns applied American technical and management expertise directly, practically, and materially and thereby made a significant contribution to the reconstruction of the various Soviet societies. One result of the Kahns' efforts was remarkable: over 1,000 people were trained in industrial architecture. As previously noted, many if not most of the new towns and many of the industrial buildings were built by contractors from the United States. Why go to the most powerful capitalistic nation in the world? Who else could they

go to for the expertise they needed? As well, no other nation had the capacity to respond not only to the enormous size of the building programs throughout the USSR but to the urgency demanded by the schedule of the first Five-Year Plan.

Wright knew Albert Kahn and his industrial architecture well, and visited him on occasion. Apparently Kahn was offered Wright's job in the office of Adler and Sullivan when Wright left—or rather was fired—in 1893. While the two men were at opposite poles of the strange profession of architecture they nonetheless held each other in respect. Kahn thought Wright well-intentioned if misguided, and therefore a noble champion.<sup>7</sup> Wright was once asked, "Who do you regard as the best architect in the country?" He replied without hesitation, Albert Kahn.<sup>8</sup> After visiting a Ford plant designed by Kahn he said it was "a beautiful building," that it "was a fine thing."<sup>9</sup>

Kahn satisfied the Soviets' admiration of American technical know-how and excellence; so too, it must be added, their need for willing cooperation. Yet while Wright applied technology differently and in often dramatic ways, he more satisfactorily responded to the Russians' love of things theoretical and philosophical. While one was more rational, both Americans had offered means to ends. Further, Wright was a founder of the new-age architecture, of modernism. Part of the Russian love of philosophy was a trust of the venerable in history, in those who in some way nurtured the Russian soul or in the 1930s the Soviet presence. It was almost natural for the Russians, or more exactly the Soviet Communist Party, to invite Wright and certainly it was appropriate for them to ask him to offer his "impression of USSR" even if they suspected his response might be slightly incomprehensible.

This he did at the end of June 1937 in a short article for the *Moscow Daily News* (see Appendix E) in which he praised Soviet expertise in the 1930s and criticized those who would criticize it. The article ended with an attempt to marry America and the USSR in a communion dedicated to freedom. "Yes—the world has at least two great hopes for a better life struggling forward—the USSR and the USA. Two different roads to the same place—a free life for a free people."<sup>10</sup> This theme, together with an attempt to link the two nations by invoking historical similarities, often erroneously conceived, were contained in writings offered to the press immediately after his Russian adventure.

Almost his first act on returning to American soil was to write an essay that was subsequently published in both *The Architectural Record* and the pro-Soviet magazine *Soviet Russia Today*.<sup>11</sup> The essay was close to an apologist's view on all issues touching the USSR—even architecture. That view of Russia's Communism was held by Wright and Olgivanna until the American

Congress's House Un-American Activities Committee became active again in the late 1940s, preceding the rise of McCarthyism in the early 1950s.

Wright's position was fundamentally genuine, almost ingenuous in its unsophisticated presentation. He admired the Soviet experiment. He acknowledged there were problems but there were problems with America too. The Soviet desire to begin anew and eliminate the shackles of the old aristocracy had, in Wright's mind, an affinity with America's casting off of British colonialism. He ignored the repression exerted by Soviet colonialism on independent nations. He deplored, he noted elsewhere, the continuing hereditary aristocracy in Britain. Connected with this was his contention that there existed a new dual aristocracy in America: big business and big government. The Soviet *desire* was therefore central to his admiration. With honest conviction he believed that "if Comrade Stalin, as disconcerted outsiders are saying, is betraying the revolution, then, in the light of what I have seen in Moscow, I say he is betraying it into the hands of the Russian people."<sup>12</sup>

The American architect was not totally naive: he was hopeful. He sensed very strongly and with some intellectual insight, not only the folly but the danger of failing to at least attempt to understand the Soviets in Russia. Against the odds—and of course he enjoyed the position of underdog—he defended their cause. To many people, the narrow-minded and bigoted in Wright's estimation, it was a cause possessing horrific ingredients, one therefore to be approached with grave suspicion. Undaunted, Wright wanted to participate, to counsel, even to enter a new competition that he proposed for a future Palace of Soviets.

"Iofan! What do you say?" said Wright, "Let's declare it off with the Palace of Soviets. Let's have another competition. I will gladly enter myself and we shall see how much you have grown."<sup>13</sup>

In making such an offer—and with such paternal arrogance—he could not have understood the pain many architects suffered in seeing the competition through its bureaucratic morass to a pathetic result.

His attitude can be summed up positively by reissuing his frankly spoken words to the Association of Federal Architects in Washington, D.C., in October 1938, shortly after returning from Moscow. America today, he said, lacks

**what we properly call culture. The same lack of culture—the "cultural lag"—is here that exists in Russia today—which does not flatter us. Russia—a great nation, 90% illiterate (mostly serfs who had far less than nothing) is now free. Eating, during their life time, of the hand of a superior class—seeing what culture the upper classes had—their tall ceilings, glittering glass**

**chandeliers, sensual paintings, statues, with fountains playing on wide terraces: utter magnificence—now what? Can you talk to these freed serfs of simplicity? Can you talk to them of the things of the spirit and mind? You cannot. They want that which they did not have and were subject to when they were slaves—only now they want all of it twice as tall, want twice as many glittering chandeliers, more sensuality, more and bigger statues: more “magnificence,” in short.<sup>14</sup>**

Wright understood the observation that the Soviet Union was governed by people who had been peasants, that the former serfs were now powerful rulers. As to his own profession, perhaps he really understood the Soviets’ need for architectural revivalism. Not that he believed they were correct, just that he understood. Conceding that his words might have sounded “like socialism, communism or what-not,” he emphasized that

**I am no student of socialism, but I *am* a student of organic structure; and in search for it in the bases of our civilization today I could not find it. I have read Henry George, Kropotkin, Gesell, Prudhomme, Marx, Mazzini, Whitman, Thoreau, Veblen and many other advocates of freedom; and most of the things that applied in those great minds in the direction of freedom[,] as conditions exist for us today[,] point to a great breakdown. Before the long depression we, as architects, did not think much of this—but this is no “depression.” It is certainly a breakdown. One that cannot be “fixed” by tinkering.<sup>15</sup>**

Wright saw for the Soviet Union a glimmer of hope; in America he felt the tinkering of Roosevelt’s New Deal offered little help. The Washington speech was similar to much of what he had written before visiting Moscow and it did indeed read as a socialist document, albeit rather befuddled. Was Wright aware of the fragility of democracy, of its inward nature, of its loathing of threats to its existence yet its reluctance to counter them, of its weakness in defense—internal especially—against enemies who might seek its annihilation, indeed of its inherent character of tolerance even toward those who would work against it legally? Probably not. Otherwise he would not suggest dramatic interference and alterations regardless of the nobility of his intentions. And further, for those who might have sympathized with him there was a paradox: if you cannot control one anarchist, how do you structure what might be called socialist anarchy?

The Communist Party branch at the University of Wisconsin challenged his interpretations of Communism and published an open letter to him in the Madison, Wisconsin, *Capital Times* rhetorically charging that he committed a “serious slur on the Communist Party of the United States.”<sup>16</sup> Their letter and his replies were equally vague. He prominently included this parochial

issue in his 1943 autobiography in order that he might air his views generally, not specifically. He also unashamedly altered relevant texts in his autobiography of 1943—even those that had been previously published—to elaborate and further promote his views.

There is yet another paradox. He often appeared more on the right, more conservative than he might have believed, or wished. The “great breakdown,” as he would have it, of the American system, of the American dream was, he surmised, also linked to the coming war. He disliked the thought of America’s possible entry into the war, for he feared it would prejudice elemental freedoms and individualism; that there would be increased centralization of government bureaucracy, even more than the Roosevelt administration had centralized it in the 1930s. Further, he believed that private capital would reap excessive profits from the war. But fundamentally he believed as his preacher uncle Jenkin Lloyd Jones believed: “War is the culmination of wickedness, the sum of all the villainies!” Uncle Jenkin has been described as an “intense, earnest, zealous man, a big man physically as well as mentally.” Around the turn of the century he established All Souls Church and soon thereafter Lincoln Center, both in Chicago, and “eloquence in his sermons caused him to loom large” in Chicago’s and Wisconsin’s history.<sup>17</sup> He was outspokenly against America’s participation in World War I and acted in consort with the likes of Zona Gale, Robert La Follette, Henry Ford, and Jane Addams. Uncle Jenkin was a powerful influence on Wright. In the months before December 1941 Wright endorsed Charles A. Lindbergh’s “isolationist sentiments.” During the war Wright encouraged conscientious objection; a few from his Fellowship became COs, as they were called. The farm he inherited from his mother’s parents and on which he built Taliesin was then about six hundred acres. During the war it expanded and diversified its agricultural output. In 1943 Wright estimated the role of the Fellows in the war effort: “We have 27 boys in armed services, 3 in jail as C.O.s, 2 in concentration camps—about twelve still here, several on agricultural deferment.”<sup>18</sup> Wright blasted away as late as 1944–45 when in his book *When Democracy Builds* he exclaimed that “conscription is the ultimate form of rent.” He was deeply concerned for the welfare of those on deferment and the COs. The support he and others outside the Taliesin family, so to speak, gave to those men, including the three in a federal prison, is revealed in part in a recent book of *Letters to Apprentices* which contains some of Wright’s wartime correspondence.

There was little contact between Soviets and Wright after 1943. In 1949 he confided that as soon as Russia “found out what I was all about she has had no use whatever for me. I am an individualist—democratic in thought and action—opposed to her methods in every sense.”<sup>19</sup> In view of his words in Moscow and immediately after, that was proven to be only partially true. Beginning

in the 1950s Olgivanna wrote a few comments about Soviet Russia and Communism in a Madison, Wisconsin, newspaper and here and there in books such as *Our Home* (1959), *The Shining Brow: Frank Lloyd Wright* (1960), and *The Roots of Life* (1963). As an interesting footnote to all of this it should be mentioned that Wright's trusted right-hand man at Taliesin, William Wesley Peters, married Stalin's mercurial daughter Svetlana in 1970; however, they were soon divorced, she denouncing the Fellowship. With great publicity she returned to Moscow in 1984 and then, after a brief respite and with little publicity, she returned in 1986 to, of all places, Taliesin, if only briefly.

Beginning with his return from Moscow, Wright received many books, pamphlets, or plain propaganda from the USSR Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (or VOKS), principally during 1938 through 1940. Also he received requests for statements in support of Soviet policies and later their war against the Nazis. Included were requests from the American Russian Institute and the magazine *Soviet Russia Today*. In October 1937 he was invited by *Izvestia* to write a short piece about "culture and fascism," which he did but which apparently did not make a deadline and therefore was not published.<sup>20</sup> In March 1938 Samuel Sillen, literary editor of the magazine *New Masses*, asked Wright to review Mumford's book *Culture of Cities*,<sup>21</sup> and in that same month Wright's former client Elizabeth Noble wrote a sympathetic survey about "Architecture in the U.S.S.R." for the same magazine.<sup>22</sup> But Wright resisted all overtures to be officially tied to a domestic faction.<sup>23</sup> Rather, he elected to remain an outsider and support issues or people selectively, more or less as each occasion presented itself. Alfred Kazin may well have been right when in the late 1930s he said that Louis Sullivan and Wright were really not socialists, but merely "social-minded architects" and perhaps as such "children of John Ruskin."<sup>24</sup>

Wright did not become the authority on Soviet affairs that he might have wished, not even on its architecture and city planning. Nonetheless two speculations emerge from this study. First, he wanted to test his peculiar holistic ideas and ideals by presenting them to people in conversation and to the public via his Moscow talk and its subsequent publication. Soviet Russia was a place remote and different to the point of appearing hostile to the West. If his holism, his organic philosophy could prevail in such a place then it should sustain itself anywhere. The Soviets proved unreceptive. And there is no evidence that Wright's architectural philosophy offered any sustainable stylistic influence on Russian architects—or anyone else in Europe—beyond that initially exerted just after the turn of the century and so well remembered four decades later. His architecture of the 1930s was known and discussed but rather dismissively for it was believed too idiomatic, too idiosyncratic especially for the dominant Central European proponents and Soviet regulators. His

Broadacre City concept was less an individuated idea and therefore of more polemical value to the practical Soviets.

The second thought suggests that Wright wanted to test his intellectual liberality. A proper individualism must not, he might have argued, exclude things and ideas, there must be no predeterminism; *his* pragmatism must be inclusive. Ideas and things he did reject were those that insisted on exclusiveness and its allies of artistic and cultural devolution. Therefore, with a preponderant general intolerance in America of and about Soviet Communism it was his duty to defend what he saw as the liberalism of Soviet Communism with his own liberalism. The test was to face it personally, on its own soil, so he might share, understand, and evoke responses—theirs and his.

Concomitant with his investigation and a second part of his test was the need to defend his actions and views on his return; actions and views that had been exercised or offered before and during his visit to Russia. His defense was a verbal offense, often pugnacious: this was a means to conceal the weakness of his position vis-à-vis Stalin's tyranny and the nature and extent of Soviet artistic suppression. If he did not realize the nature of his offense then it was a subconscious act and for good reason. To reveal that either weakness could be interpreted as acceptable to him would be to renounce his own individualism and his sense of propriety. His intellectual liberality, then, would be a sham and devalued as a hoax. On the other hand he made statements that were naive and others that were intended to be intelligently suave but were only clever; statements such as that the more you analyze Soviet Communism along with "German Fascism, Italian Fascism, British Democracy and American Democracy, the less you will be able to see any substantial differences between them in practice."<sup>25</sup> Do we not, he generously supposed, desire the same things? Not even clever.

It turns out that Kazin was at least partially right. In the end Wright was more socialist than not, but he discovered he could not be fully committed. The individual and society could not be engineered: people and their society were much more than a science or the sciences. Simply and ultimately he did not believe that the individual could *assign* his personal conscience to the collective conscience, including a political party or a state. That would be blasphemous. So by definition he could not practice his individualism under the strictures of a total—or even a quasi—socialist state. Its proven tendency for a central authority was abhorrent to him. This was consistent. As early as 1914 he said that a "socialist might shut out the sunlight from a free and developing people with his own shadow" but an "artist is too true an individualist to suffer such an imposition, much less perpetrate it."<sup>26</sup>

His form of schizophrenia was clear. To some the dichotomy between his words and architecture was patent. The Hollander J. J. P. Oud once remarked that “Wright the artist renounces what Wright the prophet proclaims.” This was true. Moreover, Broadacres spoke the language of a moderately reformed socialism: his architecture spoke the language of artistic libertarianism practiced only as a *result* of basic freedoms such as the practice of speech, artistic will, and individualism. This too was consistent. Through all of his mature life the highest, most precious realm was what he called “the Sovereignty of the Individual.”

### **27 The U.S. Government**

In 1935, before architectural commissions returned to Wright, he sent a letter to Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt at the White House, addressed incorrectly to “My Dear Madame President.” He told her that in Washington’s Corcoran Gallery across “the lawn from your home” was an exhibition of Broadacre City. He noted that the exhibition was about an idea that, through models, etc., “seeks merely to sensibly interpret certain changes taking place in us and around us to find for them some way out of chaos.” The hopelessness of the present situation demanded action, and he had the wherewithal. He asked that the President visit the Corcoran and he mentioned—not wholly in error—that he and his ideas had been accepted overseas but not in America: “‘no prophet is with honor in his own country’—(you see how modest I am).”<sup>1</sup> The letter implied that Wright wanted to influence government bureaucracies through the President’s office and was, of course, hoping to obtain some work.

There was good reason for Wright to approach Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt.

**I want to destroy all [these urban slums] . . . this is no way for people to live. I want to get them out on the ground with clean sunshine and air around them, and a garden to dig in. Spread out the cities, space the factories out, give people a chance to live.**

**[Take] industry from crowded urban centers to airy villages, and [give] scrawny kids from the slums opportunity for sun and growth in the country.<sup>2</sup>**

That was not Wright or Henry Ford speaking but Roosevelt. He was expressing a heartfelt yearning for a solution to two problems: slums in the city and rural displacement. Rexford Tugwell was an agricultural economist and one of Roosevelt’s “brain trust.” In 1935 he presented the President with an idea he called resettlement. Tugwell believed that because of agricultural technology, rural demographic decline was inevitable and therefore pressures on city housing with the possibility of slums were always a real threat. Resettlement was meant to rehouse both distressed population groups in new towns dispersed away from large cities. As Wright proposed in Broadacre City, none