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# **Frank Lloyd Wright versus America**

## **The 1930s**

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Europe as a threat to the status quo Gilbert himself represented. Moreover, in support of his artistic beliefs he linked radical art with radical politics. Gilbert belonged to and actively participated in a number of august organizations including the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Society of Arts and Sciences, the Architectural League, and the National Academy of Design. As early as the late 1920s he warned that there was “generally a tendency of such organizations to drift into the extreme Bohemian or vulgar form of association and thereafter to become radical or ‘Bolshevik’ in art, manners and point of view.” He thought it a “danger to be avoided.” As for the imported architecture, he stated with emphasis in 1933 that “crude and ill-drawn forms and strident inharmonious colors is *not* progress,” that there were people leading the United States “back to barbarism” and the American Academy of Arts and Letters should—must—“guide public taste toward the paths that lead to the higher realms of Arts and Letters and warn them against perversion.”<sup>5</sup>

Gilbert was a model of typicality of his time who, for his last commission, redesigned the Roman temple to house the U.S. Supreme Court, for which construction began in 1932. Note the difference: Gilbert was at all times defending historicism and the status quo while Wright sought new symbols identifiable as American. Wright’s arguments against the imported architecture and its political bias were always in a realm much distant from the more narrow protestations of those people typified by the ultraconservative Gilbert.

## **29 A Sad Ending**

The content and outline of Wright’s article for the London *News-Chronicle* sustained Wright on occasions when he needed to further his—and only coincidentally the isolationist—cause in the United States. The isolationists’ popular if not titular head was Charles Lindbergh, who around 1930–40 was almost more famed for his outspoken ultra-antiwar position than as a long-distance pilot. As early as May 1940 Wright wrote to Lindbergh a private communication of three short lines, praising the aviation hero and ending by saying that talk is “cheap and unreliable—you are brave enough to talk straight. I respect your integrity.”<sup>1</sup> Obviously Lindbergh and like-minded people were one resistance to intervention in the war, a thorn that irritated and effectively restrained Roosevelt. The position of neutrality as argued by the isolationists was a mighty force affecting America’s international diplomacy and measured its participation. Its influence ceased immediately with the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Again Wright played out his role not within the group but as one aligned with their purpose. One cannot help but hold a strong impression that Wright was for maintaining appeasement, that as far as he was concerned Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was not necessarily

strategically correct but certainly morally so when he obtained a written assurance from Hitler that there would be only peace in his time.

From 1931 on Wright periodically published magazines, pamphlets, and broadsides. Through 1939 their subject matter was devoted to the Fellowship or to architectural matters or to promoting Broadacre City and his "Usonian" houses. During 1940 Wright asked his summer visitor Stanley Nott to produce a new magazine entitled *Taliesin*.<sup>2</sup> Nott prepared two issues with that title during the summer. The editor was Wright and the issues carried short articles not only about Taliesin and the Fellowship and architecture but antiwar pieces; one was by Nott on "A Way to Beat Hitler." The second issue was released in about February 1941 and was much like the first in content, including an antiwar piece by one Burton Goodrich and another by Nott, "An Englishman Looks at Taliesin."

Beginning in 1941 almost all Wright's magazines were called *A Taliesin Square-Paper: A Nonpolitical Voice from Our Democratic Minority*. With few exceptions their content was, of course, quite political. The titles of some of the articles paraphrased their subjects: e.g., of what use a great navy with no place to hide, and how to beat the enemy. Some were altered reprints of previous publications. After the war Wright published on subjects such as the price of peace, building democracy, and "harum-scarum" (about Communism). In one issue Wright wrote one of his more notable pieces of illogical ambiguity: that democracy is "of such sense and courage; the highest form of Aristocracy the world has ever known because it is integral. In the nature of materials. Who would want to fight a nation built that way? Certainly not Hitler."<sup>3</sup> That was in a *Square-Paper* distributed in July 1941. The first issue of *A Taliesin Square-Paper* in March 1941 was in a square format and, supposedly, was a square-shooting broadside.<sup>4</sup> In it Wright reprinted (almost correctly) the *News-Chronicle* cablegram requesting his views; this was joined by a dramatically edited version of the article he had sent to London.

Handed out or distributed through the mails, Taliesin publications were sent to many people but held the attention of few; one recipient was Lewis Mumford, in particular the May antiwar *Square-Paper*. On 30 May 1941 he sent Wright a letter that was subsequently published as an open letter to Wright in *The Leader* newspaper. Mumford said that he was astonished by Wright's "crassness," blindness, and "shameless defeatism." He was amazed that Wright would reproach the British Empire and say not a word against the "Slave Empire" of Germany. Mumford continued his attack and then offered concluding remarks: "You shrink into your selfish ego and urge America to follow you," and "like Lindbergh, [you] have already freely given the fruits of victory" to "those

Nazi overlords.”<sup>5</sup> Wright responded ineffectually, defending his position and attempting to counter each of Mumford’s points. Wright ended with: “Goodbye, Lewis, . . . your real opinion is worthless whatever you may write.”<sup>6</sup>

There were other opportunities for Wright to express himself, each eagerly grasped with equal vigor; that was until the bombing of Pearl Harbor. There followed needed—if not respectful—silence. It was a sad ending to Wright’s second golden age . . . but what an age!

**Life demands that we go  
forward with wisdom and  
understanding. To remain  
dependent upon the personality  
that the person himself  
transcended through struggle,  
rather than upon the ideal,  
is to stagnate.**

**John Lloyd Wright, 1960**

