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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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Appendixes

Appendix A "Frank Lloyd Wright and the New Pioneers," by Lewis Mumford¹

This monograph² on Frank Lloyd Wright has the honor of being the first of a series on the masters of contemporary architecture; and, as everyone knows who is familiar with the history of modern architecture in America and Europe, the honor is well-deserved. The writer, however, is not a Frenchman, but an American, Mr. Henry-Russell Hitchcock—a fact which possibly testifies to the unfamiliarity of the French with Mr. Wright's work, since his influence in France has been negligible, and his method and point of view are foreign both to the official architecture of the past and to that of the contemporary classicists of the machine.

Mr. Hitchcock's introduction occupies only four pages of this monograph, the rest consisting chiefly of photographs of Mr. Wright's buildings, together with a few obscurely reproduced plans, yet in these four pages Mr. Hitchcock manages to raise, by statement or implication, many of the important issues that must be faced in modern architecture. I find myself a little puzzled by Mr. Hitchcock's summary of Mr. Wright's career, for the critic's admiration is so thoroughly counterbalanced by his disapproval of the central motives in Mr. Wright's work that one is driven to conclude that either Mr. Wright is not the great master Mr. Hitchcock says he is, or the critic's feelings do not square with his abstract principles.³

Let us try to clear up this confusion. To begin at the beginning, Mr. Hitchcock places Mr. Wright at the head of the movement which is represented by Berlage in Holland and by Hoffmann in Austria. This manner of placing Mr. Wright puts him definitely with the past generation, and it serves to bring out Mr. Hitchcock's underlying thesis of a cleavage in form between the generation of Wright and the generation of Le Corbusier and Oud, but it ignores the fact that America has gone through a different architectural and social development from Europe, and that the contemporaries of Berlage and Hoffmann, architecturally speaking, are Richardson and Sullivan. The worship of industrialism, which has become the keynote of the modern movement in Europe today, belongs to an earlier generation in America, that which actually built the grain elevators and the primitive skyscrapers of Chicago. There is, of course, a difference in technical methods between a stone construction like the Monadnock Building [Chicago] and a house by Le Corbusier but the philosophy and method of approach are exactly the same.

This limitation of architectural design to its technical elements was native in America; but it was none the less thoroughgoing; and the buildings that it produced are still, in their rigorous

line and bold mass, among the best we can show: if they lack much that architecture can give, everything they do possess is a clean gain. When Mr. Hitchcock observes that Mr. Wright has learned less from the "lesson of Ford" than the European has, he neglects the fact that the Chicago of Mr. Wright's youth was wholly conceived in the image of Ford; business success and mechanical efficiency were the only factors that entered into the architectural problem; and Mr. Wright's development, instead of being toward the goal of the "building-machine" had this conception, rather, as a starting point.

Had the Chicago architects of the eighties been as intellectually conscious as Le Corbusier, and had they had an intelligent public, ready to apply in the home the successes they could boast of in the office building, there would have been dwelling houses which reflected all the virtues that the "new pioneers" seek to enthrone. The victory of the new pioneers in Chicago was incomplete, partly because, in the hands of Sullivan and Wright, their architecture began to go through a natural and inevitable process of development. With his fundamental education as an engineer, and with that solid acquaintance with utilitarian necessities which the very being of Chicago gives, to a philosopher like Dewey or to a poet like Sandburg quite as much as to the business man or industrialist, Mr. Wright took the next step. This step consisted in the modification of mechanical forms in harmony with the regional environment and with human desires and feelings.

Here is the point where Mr. Hitchcock's admiration suddenly wilts. He sees in Mr. Wright's use of ornament partly the pressure of rich clients, partly the "bad influence" of Sullivan, and partly Mr. Wright's own concern for the picturesque. Instead of becoming harder and harder in line, starker and starker, and bleaker and bleaker, Mr. Wright's art became more rich and warm. In the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo Mr. Wright forced to design for a people with habits of work other than those of the West even embraced handicraft and permitted the building to take on the complicated forms of craftsmanship, the result being a monument far less European and mechanical than the painful sub-European specimens of architecture which the native architects scatter over the East. There is more ornament in the Imperial Hotel, 1916, or the Millard Residence in Pasadena, 1923, than in the Willett's [sic] House, 1901. If Mr. Hitchcock is right, this phase of Mr. Wright's development is an unfortunate atavism, and it makes more and more pronounced the breach between his work and that which will be produced during the coming generation.

That is one view of the case, but my own belief is just the opposite of this. The glorification of the machine by people who are just becoming acquainted with its possibilities and are learning to use it is "modern" in Europe today precisely because it is forty years behind our American

experience. While for Europe the lesson of Ford is increasing standardization and mass-production, because few of the economies in design so introduced have been practised there, for us the lesson of Ford which he learned at a price that would have bankrupted an ordinary manufacturer is the pathetic insufficiency of our old-fashioned industrial design, with its contempt for problems of pure form and its disregard for other human interests than efficiency. If this be true, Mr. Wright is not the forerunner of Le Corbusier but, in a real sense, his successor. He has passed that painful step in learning when one is conscious of one's movements and one's instruments, and has reached that period in pure mechanical design when he can play with it, in short, the engineer has given way to the artist, and despite a hundred efforts to prove either that the engineer is the artist, or that engineering is the only possible type of art in the modern world, Mr. Wright's work exists as a living refutation of this notion. He had achieved Cubism in architecture before the Cubists, and he has gone on to an integral architecture which creates its own forms with, not for, the machine.

Mr. Hitchcock's aesthetic and social philosophy keep him, I think, from recognizing this as a valid development, hence his disparagement of Mr. Wright's art at the very moment he is seeking to praise it. For me, on the contrary, Mr. Wright's architectural development justifies itself, and not the less so, certainly, because I am more interested in humanity and its needs and desires than I am in the abstract perfection of the machine, or in the pragmatic justification of Spengler's historical dogmas.

In failing to grasp the inevitability of this humanization of the machine, this addition of feeling to form, or of poetry to mathematics as we become more and more the master of it, Mr. Hitchcock has, it seems to me, lost the central clue in Mr. Wright's career. This becomes apparent in the final apostrophe, in which he compares him with Wren and repeats the phrase so true of Wren in the city of London: "si monumentum requiris circumspice." The comparison does not hold at any point, but it falls down chiefly on the mere historical detail that one cannot find Wright's work by looking around in Chicago; on the contrary, one must search and pry and go on long motor rides, only to find, as in the Midway Gardens built but fifteen years ago, that vandals have already ruined the building. Up to recently Mr. Wright had built no skyscrapers, and with all the vast volume of industrial and semi-industrial building he has had little to do. His architecture is not in the current of the present regime any more than Walt Whitman's writings were in the current of the Gilded Age: hence his value is not that he has dominated the scene and made it over in his image, but that he has kept the way open for a type of architecture which can come into existence only in a much more humanized and socially adept generation than our own.

Mr. Wright's art is prophetic: it does not simply conform and adjust itself to existing conditions, it reacts and makes demands, demands that the builder of speculative houses or rent-barracks has no intention of complying with. Success under present conditions demands unhesitating conformity on the part of the engineer to the terms laid down by the banker and investor, the result is sometimes good design and economy, and quite as often it is poor design and deformity and inadequacy to perform the function that the building is supposed to perform. This is not the milieu in which good architecture can become the rule, and if modern architecture flourishes in Europe and lags here, it is because the Europeans have far better conditions under which to work, as a result of the socialized activity of European municipalities, with their comprehensive and financially unremunerative housing programs.

The truth is that Mr. Wright's capital qualities alienate him both from the architects who do not acknowledge a handicap in conforming to the present demands and from the society that ignores the higher values of life if they happen to conflict with the principle of a quick turnover and a maximum profit. Chief among these qualities is Mr. Wright's sense of the natural environment; and here again, I think, Mr. Hitchcock's principles keep him from grasping Mr. Wright's significance. Mr. Hitchcock refers to the "absurdity and the provincialism of the term prairie architecture" to characterize Mr. Wright's early Chicago work. On the contrary, the phrase is not absurd but accurate. Mr. Wright is, definitely, our greatest regional architect, his Chicago houses *are* prairie houses, as his Pasadena homes are "mediterranean" ones, to harmonize with that climate and milieu. Even machines, as some of our new pioneers forget, differ in design according to the region they are used in: steamers designed for tropical trade have larger ventilating units than the usual North Atlantic liners, and automobiles in England are designed for low power because of the relatively easy contours of the country. The essential form of architecture is of course largely conditioned by the method of construction, but this again is not independent of regional qualifications, as the use of the concrete form instead of the steel frame in Chicago testifies.

Now, these qualities are largely ignored by the older classical architecture, with its concern for a single method of construction and a single mode of design. Wherever a building was placed or whatever its purpose, the problem of the architect was to make it resemble, as far as possible, a Greek or Roman temple. The neo-classicists of the machine have revamped this formula, but the spirit behind it is the same, the chief difference being that the archetypal form is no longer a temple but a factory, and the principal offense against taste consists, not in the use of free or "barbarous" ornament but in the use of any ornament at all, however integral, however intimately

a part of the design and necessary for its completion. Mr. Wright's great virtue consists in the fact that he uses to the full modern methods of construction and boldly invents new forms without losing his great sense of tact, the tact of the artist with his materials, of the lover of nature with the earth, and of a man with other men. Hence the importance of the garden which surrounds and completes almost all of his buildings: it is a true symbol of his entire work the picture of life, warm, earthy, insurgent, breaking in waves of foliage over the stony masses of the building, and showing the power and logic of the form at the very moment of departing from it and counterbalancing it. This is an art which cannot be contained in a narrow classical formula, and if the new pioneers have as yet no place for it in their philosophy, so much the worse for their philosophy. Mr. Wright's architecture is an early witness of what may generally come to happen when our regional cultures absorb the lesson of the machine without losing their roots or renouncing all those elements which give landscapes and men their individualities. The formula which would exclude such a manifestation belongs as little to the future as the five orders.

Notes

1. First published in *Architectural Record*, 65 (April 1929), pp. 414–416.

2. In this article Mumford was reviewing Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Frank Lloyd Wright* (Paris: Editions Cahiers d'Art, 1928), a pamphlet whose authorship should be shared with André Lurçat, a French architect who ventured to Russia in the early 1930s. It was Lurçat who selected the illustrations that occupy 30 of the book's 34 pages. Presumably he also wrote the captions. The plan of the Dana house was incorrectly captioned as the Coonley house, and the Isabel Roberts house was called the "Maison Isabey," while the Coonleys' kindergarten building was referred to as their home. Hitchcock incorrectly aligned Wright with a European "movement" represented by Berlage, Hoffman, Garnier, and Perret; stated that Wright received a "diploma" in civil engineering in 1889 (he did not study civil engineering and did not receive a diploma or degree); called the term "prairie architecture" absurd and provincial; said that in residential design Wright's "exteriors" were never really "sound" (whatever that meant) and his ornamentation only interesting; said that the Imperial Hotel contained "mediocre reception rooms," and regretted that it survived "various earth tremors"; and believed that Wright's California block houses displayed "excessive taste" and that his work during the mid-twenties contained "nostalgia" for the Orient and, with Strzygowski, a nostalgia for ancient Nordic art (how strange). Yet Hitchcock believed Wright's architecture greater than any of his contemporaries', calling him a brilliant engineer and the greatest American of the first quarter of the twentieth century. Hitchcock also referred to Mumford as a distinguished critic. In spite of the accolade it is no wonder that Mumford responded so emphatically to Hitchcock's tendentious, delicate, and art historically naive essay.

3. Mumford's puzzlement was not only resolved with utmost clarity in his 1929 review but again much later, in his 1952 *Roots of Contemporary American Architecture*, when he was more concise. "That a real break in the American tradition had taken place between 1910 and 1925 . . . is proved by the fact that the new doctrines of

architecture, derived from the Machine and from Cubism, came *back* [my emphasis] to America in the mid-twenties without most people noting that they were only returning to the country of their origin. Even such a good historical student as Henry-Russell Hitchcock could treat Wright's early work, which was aesthetically far more developed than Le Corbusier's, as if it were by then a back-number; a fact that made his early (1929 [sic]) monograph on Wright's work irritatingly patronizing. . . . From the perspective of a whole generation one can now see that Le Corbusier, in his historical innocence, sought to substitute a mannerism for the genuine organic style, visible in our grain elevators and our factories, that was in fact still in existence in America."

In 1929 and 1952 Mumford refrained from stating the obvious: that in the late 1920s and 1930s Hitchcock—and Alfred Barr—were mainly interested in architecture promoted by the political left, therefore out of necessity the Central Europeans' style. Americans were of interest to them only in as much as they emulated or adopted that style.

Appendix B Wright's Writing

Wright changed what had already been published not to correct the earlier writing nor to alleviate what might have been a misunderstanding—except in odd cases. Rather, he was interested in carrying on a polemical battle that confronted him more or less at the moment of writing or editing. This does not infer he was thematically inconsistent. On the contrary, he was true to fundamental themes such as individualism, European cultural hegemony, or his interpretation of holism. Issues that were contrary and engaged him at a given moment or over time, seemed enlarged in his own mind; perhaps in fear that they might diminish his philosophy, generally or specifically.

To most readers Wright's literary style is imprecise yet evocative, lacks concision, is contradictory, railing, negative, grammatically incomparable, desperate, at times confusing or barely intelligible. Now and then he approached literary brilliance, but only the odd moment. Some readers have tried to read Wright aloud, speaking a variety of inflections or emphases; usually to no avail. One person, Baker Brownell, tried to analyze Wright's style, if briefly, in that part of his book about The Human Community where he analyzed "The Philosophy of the Community."¹

In this incidental work of a great artist [Wright] can be seen at once the energy and integration of his impulse and the surface disorder of materials to which he is able to give no linear pattern. His impulse breaks through in his prose as if from a deeper level of integration. It erupts with all the power and consistency of a volcano, but its deposits on the surface of the earth are disorderly. Although an impressive number of books and articles have come from the great architect's pen, they have aroused, because of this lack of clarity, only minor interest in the reading public.