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# **Frank Lloyd Wright versus America**

## **The 1930s**

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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."<sup>1</sup>*

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.

Wright has confined himself in his prose to insights and explosions. He makes magnificent love to the blue domes of Persia but vast denunciations of Michaelangelo. The broken-nosed Italian as an architect was a good painter, who felt no thrust or tension in materials or the muscular distribution of forces. Wright turns away from St. Peter's to write with tenderness of stones, lava, tile, wood, glass, steel, canvas. He is not a commentator noting this and that in an orderly fashion. He is a poet identifying himself with these materials. He climbs into this concrete block. He becomes the brick. His words grunt and struggle with the unaccustomed effort.

Or he writes his hates of cramping institutions with pompous contempt. It is scattered anathema strewn across the pages amid anecdotes and communiques of personal and philosophic life. To most readers it seems disordered and sudden, very different from his buildings. His prose is angry, sometimes vituperative, and noisy. His buildings never are, for buildings express dislike only by silence. Wright deprecates his prose style and has called himself a "dub" as a writer. For so confident a spirit this is a remarkable admission.

His prose indeed is not consecutive. It lacks flow. It lacks linear order. To the reader it seems disorganized, flashing forth abruptly with a cosmic utterance, then sinking back into formless superlatives and mumblings until the time for eruption comes round again. To the reader it lacks the mystic grace of his buildings. His prose never gets itself said, while his buildings are the utterances of a great spirit. They, not his words, are his poems.

All this may be said of Frank Lloyd Wright's prose; still I believe him to be a great writer. His prose may not be subtle, but it has power. It may lack craft, but it flows all from one source. It may not have linear continuity, but it has spiritual coherence and a proud though harsh integrity. His prose is not sensitive to the materials that the writer must use. Wright sees those materials; he walks among them with eyes open; but I am not sure that he hears them or feels them. He can find more poetry in a brick than in a word and more sensuous delight in his lyrics of glass and stone than in the niceties of language. But his language is direct. And if he is blank sometimes to verbal distinction, quality, and sound, he is also blank to the worn dance routines, the times kicks and fillips of the professional word masters of our day.

On the background of the thousands of fully written books and articles, raised like a screen to filter the sun, produced with endless competence in all the professionally tested modes, Wright's prose is somehow naked and revelatory. It is direct, whole, abruptly real. Though it is not always professional or fluid, nor even competent, his prose has the sting and substance, not of a book, but of a man.

It is integral rather than linear. It lacks the marching rhythms and proximate coherence of style that goes, as it were, from one place to the next. His words shift and run like quicksilver under his hands. They bulge beyond his control, and their damned plasticity makes fixation of meaning for him, or definition, impossible. But his style has the kind of spherical continuity, wholeness, the mystical or spiritual coherence, that often mark great work.

Wright, indeed, is never mainly linear in his thinking but integral. Because his thinking lacks connectives, it seems saltatory. Because it is not a line or a linkage of one thing related to the next thing in terms only of those two things, his conversation seems to be a series of pounces. The things that he writes emerge abruptly like divers from under the water. They come up like bubbles. They have radial organization rather than surface continuity. Because his thought is integrated on other levels, the visible bubbles seem to have little continuity with one another.

This lack of continuity in his prose style may be related to the fact that architecture, his chosen field, is involved more in the rhythms of space and matter than in the time and movement of words. That may or may not be true. Beyond that however is the fact that things in an integrated situation are deeply and wholly related in terms not of one line of functions or causes but of many. Wright's prose, for all its literary faults and incapacities, or because of them, reveals this deeper integration. Structurally it is a body, not a line. Each item of it refers not merely to its proximate predecessor and successor but in a multitude of imitations to all the members of the group.

His recent book, *Genius and the Mobocracy*, is an appreciation of the master, or *liebermeister*, Louis H. Sullivan. The book does indeed uncover, as it drifts like sand across the years, brilliant bits and memories of Sullivan as well as searching insights into his meaning as an artist. But these seem incidental. The drifts seem incidental. Each comment and wise saying, each person uncovered anecdotally, and even Wright himself as told in the scattered events of many years, all seem incidental to a great storm, hidden and brooding, pressing on the barriers of events. This storm is not in the book; still it conditions the items in it. It is implicit, passionate, a half-frustrated giant, that would overturn our culture, blow through the lies and greed and the massed towns, and restore human life to what is right. This angry power generates Wright's prose. In his architecture, because of the nature of the art, it finds little or no expression.

**Note**

1. Reprinted from Baker Brownell, *The Human Community* (New York, 1950), pp. 235–237, with the kind permission of Harper & Row. The rather romanticized overtones to Brownell's analysis resulted, in one case, in his asking, "Did not Wordsworth commune with Nature, and Frank Lloyd Wright with his beloved bricks and stones?" And later, with pseudo-Oriental insight, Brownell observed that "the brick in its simple way may experience Frank Lloyd Wright, even as Wright on his part experiences the brick" (p. 241).

**Appendix C "To the young Man in Architecture—a Challenge," by Frank Lloyd Wright<sup>1</sup>**

I have taken over the writing and editing of the January ARCHITECTURAL FORUM.

I turned editor partly because Howard Myers came to Taliesin and asked me to—partly because I felt the time had come to restate a few fundamentals which are strangely missing from the contemporary scene.

The days and nights and the long hours I have put into the making of this issue are important only to me. But important to you are the months and years that went into the making of these buildings whose plans and photographs this issue brings you for the first time with critical text.

This ARCHITECTURAL FORUM is the first and only record in print of what we have come to call the modern movement, from its inception to its present interpretation. Some of the buildings shown as examples were built more than forty years ago. Some were recently completed. They were produced under a wide variety of circumstances—both social and economic, and for clients from West to East.

Together they show the basic principles which give vitality and integrity to such architecture as we have. Here in some 100-odd pages of plates, text and plans, you will see architecture as indigenous to America as the earth from which it springs, just as here you will see the futility and dishonesty of trying to transplant to America an architectural veneer which finds its roots in God knows where or what.

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It is a sense of the whole that is lacking in the "modern" buildings I have seen, and in this issue we are concerned with that sense of the whole which alone is radical. There is more beauty in a fine