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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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Note

1. As published in the *Moscow Daily News*, 28 June 1937, p. 4; reprint as "An American Architect's Impression of USSR," *Moscow News*, Sunday, 7 July 1937, p. 4. In the adjacent column was the following, which was condensed from "Eminent Foreign Architects . . .," *Moscow Daily News*, 30 June 1937, p. 3.

Architects Vote Congress Huge Success

The First All-Union Congress of Architects, which ended in Moscow last week, was voted a huge success not only by the Soviet architects but by the many distinguished foreigners who had been invited to attend the sessions.

"I had assumed that it would be the sort of narrowly professional gathering that we are accustomed to in the West," the British architect C. Williams Ellis said. "I was therefore astonished at the alert interest displayed apparently by the entire public in the congress and even in its long and often highly technical debates. If an architect in my country were to speak not merely as a specialist, but also as a severe critic, mentioning the names of colleagues whom he considered had made grave mistakes—well, I really don't know what would happen!"

Mr. Ellis felt that the congress should be repeated on an international scale, similar to an olympiad, with architects of all democratic countries participating. He expressed his admiration for the advances made since his last visit to the Soviet Union, five years ago, evidences of which he found on every hand. A similar statement was made by F. Jourdain, French architect, who last visited Moscow 10 years ago.

"The first thing that strikes one on arriving in Moscow," he said, "are the new buildings, wide streets, cleanliness, new appearance of people who do not seem to experience need; and large shops filled with goods and buyers, bookstores which cannot keep pace with the tremendous demand for literature. The love for books and thirst for knowledge seem to me most characteristic of the Moscovites and apparently of the Soviet people in general. This great cultural rise is naturally reflected also in architecture."

Appendix F Education of the Architect: A Letter from Frank Lloyd Wright to Jens Jensen¹

It is never possible to bring out the meaning of any subjective matter without being rehearsed in the language—in being sure that all are speaking the same language. The only difference between Olgivanna and myself is that she believes that the creative instinct is the original birthright of mankind and in most of them it lies dead—in any case paralysed and that by proper treatment it may be revived. I too believe that creative-faculty is the birthright of Man—the quality which enabled him to distinguish himself from the brute, but that owing to his betrayal of himself, the tricks which he has played upon himself with his brain, what he calls his intellect—and by means of his arrogant assumptions, abstractions, all turned into a system of so called education, he has sterilized himself. And I believe that now not only is this creative-instinct dead in most, but it has ceased to exist at

all, to such an extent that perhaps three fifths of humanity lacks any power of that kind. Now I believe the creative instinct in Man is that quality or faculty in him of getting himself reborn and born again—of getting himself born into everything that he does, everything that he really works with. By means of it he has got the gods if not God. It is his imagination that is chiefly the tool with which this force or faculty in him works. By putting a false premium upon will and intellect he has done this injury upon himself—he has worked this injury upon himself.

Now how to get it back—this quality of Man—back again to men. How to preserve what little there is glimmering of it in whatever human being it may be glimmering in. Our first concern about that should be the first thought of every thinking man in our country today.

And that Jens, is why I am interested in this proposed school. I should like to be one to initiate steps that would put a little experimentation station at work where this thing might be wooed and won, if only to a small extent. I know it cannot be taught.

No doubt what you mean by “dried-up” and being “hooked” is what you imagine to be the exorbitant egotism of the man who arrogates to himself creative power and denies it to most. Very well. Hypocrisy has many good and desirable features—modesty is among them, chivalry too. Where people live much together, these things are essential. But men “dry up” from the inhibition which imposes these things upon the ego. Those who allow the ego a natural scope and insist on the privileges and rights due to the equality of man he may feel working in him are wiser—Walt Whitman foremost among these. Of course Jens, that man will be most beloved who concedes most to his fellow man, who will make the grandest gestures and say the things he knows his fellow man likes to see and hear about himself. But there is a wholesome candor more valuable in any final analysis, conspicuously lacking in any such democracy as ours and while I have no less faith in man than any or all of my opponents in this long-lasting argument of ours, I have less faith in men. And I am for taking steps—constructive steps—*now*, not sometimes, to save the precious quality which is the soul of man himself, from further atrophy, from greater degradation at his own hands. So I am no singer from this false sentimentalized American democracy. I see the evil consequence all too plainly of this making of gods of Demos—of this patting of the common-denominator on the back and ascribing to it the virtues of deity.

Note

1. Excerpts from a letter from Wright to Jens Jensen, Chicago landscape architect, 8 December 1928, reprinted in whole in F. L. Wright (1984), pp. 71–72; quoted with kind permission of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. These excerpts should be compared with F. L. Wright (1936b).