

May 1959  
Frank Lloyd Wright, 1869-1959

EDITORIAL

Measured by even the simplest terms of success. Frank Lloyd Wright's career was phenomenal. Despite struggle, misunderstanding and occasional neglect, he executed something like seven hundred buildings, ranging the gamut of major architectural functions save (tragically) for a governmental building. Success of this order is "success" by the crassest commercial standards of the profession, except that in his case financial return was invariably invested in further creative enterprise. Never has an architect of absolutely first rank executed so many of his designs. Nor has any creative architect written more extensively and influentially, if somewhat repetitiously, than he. (Only Le Corbusier's literary career matches his in profuseness and impact.) Few have experienced in their lifetime his world acclaim, however controversial his achievement remained to the end - and *must* remain.

He was at once both profoundly nineteenth-century and profoundly American. Hence his two favorite adjectives with respect to his work: Organic and Democratic. The central significance of his career appears only in his own large meaning for his terms.

As the modern architect who brings the creative tendencies of the nineteenth century to the twentieth, Wright was influenced by the pseudo-evolutionary aesthetics pervasive at the end of the nineteenth century. He broadened Sullivan's "functionalism" (which, in any event, had never been narrow) to "organicism." Behind the vague theories of organicism "in the air" at the time lay the architectural development of the picturesque domestic tradition, especially from the 1840's onward. The picturesque tradition emphasized irregular massing, relatively flexible and open planning, interiors broadly linked to porches and gardens, revelation of structure, the "honest" use of materials for their inherent textural and color values and, finally, the symbolic quality of roofs, chimneys and porches as evocations of "home." Quite obviously this romantic, and at the same time rationalistic, naturalism provides the seed of Wright's organicism. But only the seed. His organic philosophy as it first appeared in the "prairie houses" of the first fifteen years of the twentieth century augmented the popular simplicity of the picturesque domestic tradition with naturalistic, structural symbolic and humanistic meanings.

In its simplest, or naturalistic, meaning, organicism implies an intimate relation of the house with nature and the exploitation of materials for their natural color, texture and inherent properties. But Wright's houses are no vine-strangled bowers. Vines he denounced, as the sole recourse for architectural mistakes - nature's eraser. His naturalism is foiled by a sense of formal discipline and abstract order such that the building proudly asserts itself as man-made, and thus complements rather than merges with its surroundings.

The structural meaning of organicism implies the fragmentation of the building into a three-dimensional interweaving of visually discrete entities. In Wright's words, "fibrous 'integument' takes the place of 'solid mass.'" By thus separating and interweaving his structural elements, space and solid interact throughout the building. Moreover, structure tends to become its own decoration. Finally, because of the structural "explosion," part operates against part in a clearly articulated, and hence organic, manner. Thus the studding appears in its action of *supporting* the roof, the chimney pierces the roof, the roof *spreads* beyond the walls. Empathetically, we feel the structure at work.

Now Wright not only fragments his building with reference to narrowly structural elements - such as "column" versus "panel," which would be Mies van der Rohe's opposition - but more especially to units with symbolic significance - "chimney" versus "roof." To dramatize the hearth as core and the shelter as spread is to maximize the symbolic potential of the building. His plastic manipulation of interior space for empathetic effect is especially magnificent. As such, architecture evokes archetypal experiences basic to human consciousness. Thus Wright's humanism depends, at once, on the relation of man to nature, on the affirmation of the building as the abstract product of human consciousness, on the empathy between structure and space and human experience and, finally, on the appeal to archetypal response.

And if Organic Architecture so richly provides for such varied human experience, then it is also Democratic, not in the hard-eyed materialistic sense, but in the liberating sense of the enhancement of human experience.

It is hardly surprising that Wright should have been at the time of his death the most popular creative architect in America. Not that his work was popularly understood in its profundity; but because his total program was, like his buildings, fragmented for piecemeal popularization. Witness the "ranch house," and the articles on patio living or barbecue pits in the "homemaking" magazines. If, however, the general public "accepts" Wright a great deal more than it does Mies or Le Corbusier (who have, for example, never created a building as universally admired as Falling Water), professionals and (shall we say?) architectural connoisseurs are rather less interested, in Wright today than they were in the thirties. Sadly enough - there is no point in denying it - Wright died when his star among architects and connoisseurs had somewhat dimmed, at least temporarily.

In part, their reaction may be snobbish. In part, it stems from dismay at the degree to which Wright himself finally catered to home-and-garden commercialization - perhaps mostly for "recognition," already abundantly attained; but the struggle of a lifetime for the right to create had become habitual. In part, the sophisticated attitude maybe due to the widespread absorption of so many "Wrightian" principles into modern architecture that they now seem axiomatic. In part - and again why deny it? - Wright's last works, insofar as they are known, do not quite measure up to his greatest achievements.

Although his late work, especially after 1950, shows no falling off in its brilliance of conception, as a whole it does reveal some decline in sensitivity to scale, in the integration of parts to the whole, as well as to the refinement and finish of detail. Was it fatigue, the press of too many commissions at the end, the feverish desire to "finish" what could never be finished, or a mixture of causes? In any event, Mies in his old age perfects themes already stated; Le Corbusier moves on toward new discoveries. Wright restated in fresh and exciting ways his customary ideas, but, compared to his greatest works of the past, he seems to have left them as sketches - not so much his finished work as starting points for his successors. Finally, the organic image of Wright seems psychically less relevant to the mid-century than either the mechanical-classical image of Mies or the primitive-classical image of Le Corbusier. There is not space here to delve into reasons. Suffice it merely to say that, despite a humanistic point of view which transcends naturalism, Wright's agrarian-suburban bias remains. Popular opinion is with Wright as the apostle of an "American way of life." The profoundest problems, however, are urban; the profoundest need, not to escape to a green idyl (rather, to preserve it so that escape will be possible), but to face the self and the group in the classical spirit.

If Wright's star is somewhat dimmed today, it was dimmed before, especially during the twenties. It is in no respect so dim today, nor doubtless will it ever be in the future. Pondering the full implication of Organic and Democratic architecture is to realize that only the superficialities of his work have been discovered. In density of meaning and implication, only Le Corbusier among modern architects equals Wright. Out of a fullness of love for building and what building can do for the human spirit, Wright created his masterpieces. Their profound comprehension some successor will demand the same awareness of architecture as a complex experience, the same fullness of spirit, and equal audacity. In his boldness and integrity of vision, Wright dared to become the first architect to achieve a completely "modern" style in our present sense of the word. He led the way.

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ARTS/May 1959