

Frank Lloyd Wright

"What we need is American genius to the fore – and this is the Welsh definition of a genius: a man who has an eye for nature, a man who has a heart for nature, and a man who has the boldness to follow nature."

By Penny Parkin

In 1956, at the age of 90, Frank Lloyd Wright delivered this speech to a meeting of the American Municipal Association in St Louis, Missouri, as part of his address, 'The Shape of The City'. Today, it stands as an astute illustration of his inimitable genius, as well as a tribute to his Welsh ancestry.

One of America's most original and prolific architects, Wright built close to 500 residential, commercial and religious buildings across America during a 74-year career. Today, his legacy of more than 1,000 building designs – of which 400 still stand – is a fitting monument to a remarkable architect and an outstanding blueprint for architects of the future.

A colourful character, Wright set out to follow his family motto "Truth against the world" by developing his own 'Usonian' (United States of North America) style. It reflected American democratic values and humanity, rather than what he considered to be passé European models, such as the Greek, Egyptian and Renaissance styles. His premise was that man should build 'organic' architecture, ie, from the inside out, like nature.

Wright's wholly-American style, his sympathy for nature, and his genius for breaking the box-like Victorian style of then contemporary architecture



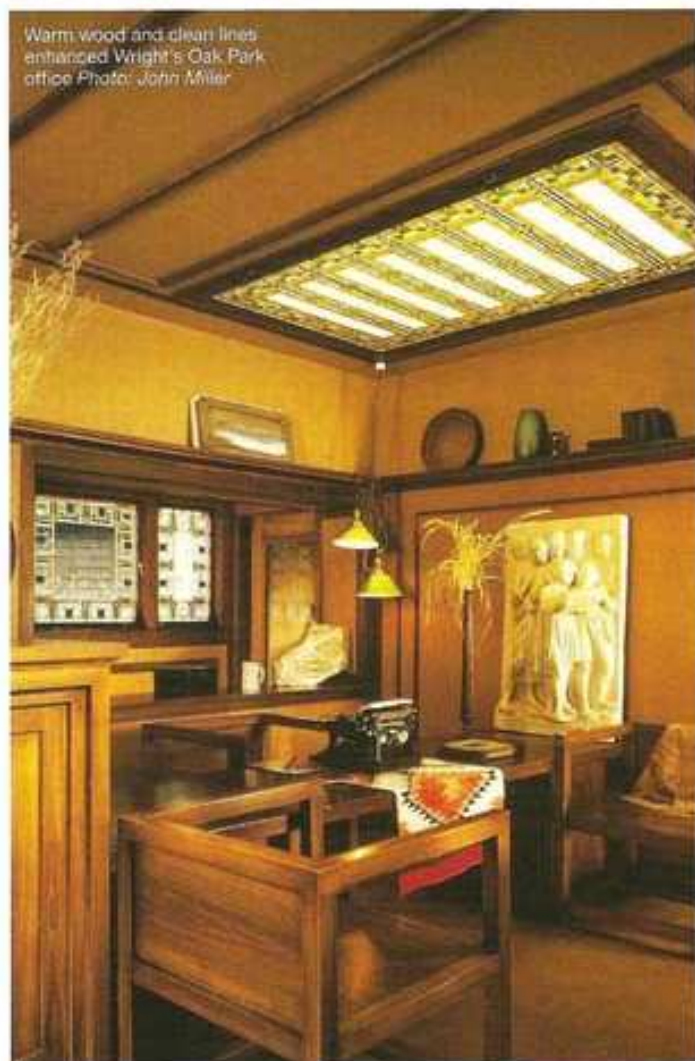
Frank Lloyd Wright at his desk Photo: Getty Images/Hulton Archive



The comfortable living room of Wright's Oak Park home Photo: John Miller



Warm wood and clean lines enhanced Wright's Oak Park office. Photo: John Miller



Fallingwater, near Pittsburgh, is beautiful at any time of year

impressed his peers. In 1929, Lewis Mumford commented: "At the very time when the archaic note of colonialism was being emphasised by the fashionable architect, Wright was showing his respect for the actual landscape and the actual problems of his day and locality. Wright has embodied in his work two qualities which will never permanently leave it – a sense of place and a rich feeling for materials."

THE EARLY YEARS – WISCONSIN AND ILLINOIS

The son of a Methodist preacher, Wright grew up among the lush, rolling hills of Spring Green, Wisconsin. His mother, a schoolteacher, wanted a son who would design beautiful houses. Therefore, he was encouraged to draw from an early age, using German-styled Froebel blocks, spherical, cubic and rectangular forms that reflect forms found in nature.

In his 1932 autobiography, Wright wrote about his formative years in the Wisconsin countryside: "As a boy, I learned to know the ground plan of the region in every line and feature. For me now, its elevation is the modelling of the hills, the weaving and fabric that clings to them, the look of it all in tender green, or covered with snow, or in the full glow of summer that bursts into the glorious blaze of autumn. I still feel myself as much a part of it as the trees and birds and bees are, and the red barns".

Despite his love of Wisconsin, Wright began his career as a draughtsman in bustling Chicago, after his uncle recommended his apprenticeship to architects Adler and Sullivan. He quickly "became to Sullivan the pencil in his hand" and even built his own first house in Oak Park, just outside Chicago, with money borrowed from his employers.

Using his own house as a constant architectural experiment, Wright substituted open-plan rooms and a bright, welcoming hall



San Francisco's former VC Morris Gift Shop, designed by Wright, is now the Xanadu Tribal Arts Center.

featuring a central fireplace for often-cluttered contemporary Victorian architecture. Certainly, as a family man with a wife and six children to accommodate, he needed the space! His house and studio (restored by the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation) and many of his Oak Park buildings, such as the Unity Temple, survive today.

After six years as Sullivan's apprentice, Wright was sacked for bootlegging commissions, despite the fact that his work had stirred up a great deal of excitement in the Oak Park area. Aged 26, he set up on his own, initially designing a series of long, low 'Prairie-Style' houses, which suited the surrounding landscape. Built to an open-plan layout, his interiors were made from natural materials and included a trademark central chimney.

Wright's first individual commission, the 1893 Winslow House in River Forest, Illinois, became the nucleus of this style. Nine years later, the cruciform structure of the Ward Willits House in Highland Park, Illinois, extended the concept. Inspired by the prairie upon which it sat, it incorporated windows on both sides, which allowed a feeling of light and space to permeate the adjoining rooms.

Chicago's Robie House, designed in 1909, is another ingenious concept, built to ensure that its owner had sunlight in his living room in the morning before he went to work, and that he could look out and down the street to his neighbours without having their gaze invade his privacy. From the moment it was completed, the building could be seen to epitomize Wright's work during this era.

CREATIVITY AND A TURBULENT PERSONAL LIFE

The end of this hectic 1893-1910 period in Wright's architectural development heralded an equally dramatic twist in his private life. Having fallen for a married neighbour, Meyma Borthwick Cheyney, he asked his wife, Catherine, for a divorce. It created such a scandal that he and Meyma spent a year in Europe, hoping the scandal would die down. However, hounded by the 'yellow press', they were forced to abandon Oak Park on their return. Seeking refuge in his beloved Spring Green, Wright built his most famous residence, Taliesin, among the verdant hills of Wisconsin.

Named after a Welsh poet and knight of the Round Table, Taliesin ("shining brow") has been called "the greatest domestic space in American history". Twice burnt to the ground – the first time by a deranged servant, the second time by lightning – and twice rebuilt, it includes many courtyards and domestic buildings, such as a red barn, a windmill and a school, where Wright taught his apprentices.

THE WRIGHT PLACES TO VISIT



Wright's uncluttered 'Prairie' style is manifest in the Dana-Thomas Home, Springfield, Illinois. Photo: Doug Carr

Frank Lloyd Wright House: 428

Forest Avenue, Oak Park, Illinois.

Winslow House: Auvergne Place,

River Forest, Illinois.

Ward Willits House: 1445 Sheridan

Road, Highland Park, Illinois.

Robie House: 5757 South

Woodlawn Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Taliesin: Route 23, Spring Green,

Wisconsin.

Fallingwater: Bear Run,

Pennsylvania.

The Johnson's Wax Company

Headquarters: 1525 Howe Street,

Racine, Wisconsin.

Wingspread: 33 East Four Mile Road, Wind Point (near

Racine), Wisconsin.

Herbert Jacobs House: Madison, Wisconsin

Taliesin West: Shea Boulevard, Scottsdale, Arizona.

Solomon R Guggenheim Museum: 1071 Fifth Avenue,

New York.



Taliesin West was the winter headquarters for Wright and his students.

Tragically, the first Taliesin fire of 1914, started by a disenchanted servant, claimed Meyma Borthwick, as well as her son from a previous marriage. Throwing himself into his work to somehow endure the loss, Wright rebuilt Taliesin in her honour and, two years later, sailed for Japan, where he spent the next seven years working on the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. In 1923 – a year after Catherine finally granted him a divorce – he married the unstable Miriam Noel.

Just one year later, Wright was embroiled in scandal once more, having fallen for Olgivanna Lazovich, the disciple of a Russian mystic. Another lengthy wait for a divorce followed before the couple eventually married in 1928. On Olgivanna's advice, he developed the Taliesin Fellowship, which allowed apprentices, paying \$650 a year, to live and work alongside him in the great drafting room at Taliesin.

RELAUNCHING A CAREER AT 70

Offered his first commission for years – at 70 – Wright effectively relaunched his career by building a country retreat near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for the father of one of his apprentices, Edgar J Kauffman Jr. Fallingwater, as it became known, gave Wright the perfect excuse to unite man with nature by building into a cliff and incorporating a pre-existing waterfall. When completed in 1935, the dramatic cantilevered building's effect, particularly when viewed from downstream, was simply breathtaking.



The simple but pleasing lines of Oak Park's Unity Temple

Painted buff to merge in with its surroundings, it looks as if it might take off at any minute, embodying successfully Wright's fascination with the dual nature of flight and security. To Kauffman's protestations that the house was too near the waterfall, Wright simply retorted: "I want you to live with your waterfall, not just look at it."

A year later, Wright designed the Johnson's Wax Company Headquarters in Racine, Wisconsin. Personifying Wright's ideals of light and space, it created an inspirational environment for its inhabitants and inspired plaudits from Herbert Johnson, who remarked: "The building's so beautiful and attractive I'll just put a cot in my office and live there." "Oh, no, you won't," Wright replied, "I'll build you a house."

The result, Wingspread, is Wright's last Prairie-style house and, as its name suggests, follows a four-winged structure. Its red brick core, which harbours three fireplaces, allowed the Johnson family to follow the sun's rays around its 'zone living plan'. Famously, Johnson telephoned Wright to complain about the building letting in the rain during a dinner party. "Why don't you move your chair?" retorted Wright.

Perhaps overshadowed by Wright's more prestigious commissions, Herbert Jacobs' \$5,000 Usonian home was a significant development in that it exemplified the architect's concern with providing affordable, well-designed housing for all, regardless of cost. Nevertheless, he was initially sceptical about Jacobs' intentions. "Are you sure you want a \$5,000 house?" he asked. "Most people want a \$10,000 house for \$5,000."

After a doctor declared that winters in Wisconsin were too harsh for the elderly architect, Wright decided that the hot, sunny desert around Scottsdale, Arizona, was the ideal spot for his apprentices

to build Taliesin West as a winter retreat. "Living in the desert is the spiritual catharsis a great many people need," he explained. "I am one of them."

Completed in 1937, the hilltop structure is constructed from a matrix of volcanic rocks, arranged in a series of interlocking shapes and echoing the jagged peaks surrounding the desert. Open-plan and completely unlike the original Taliesin, which was built to shield Wright from the outside world – this teaching and working centre grew out into the desert, rather like a traditional frontier camp. Here, Wright planned many more commissions, including Florida Southern University, subsequently constructed by its own students under Wright's supervision.

Wright's last project, commissioned in 1943, was the amazing Guggenheim Museum, his only building in New York City. Based on the free-form, spiral structure of a snail shell, it is a structure of continuous space with no boundaries, giving visitors a comforting, leisurely feel as they stroll about the exhibits. Its futuristic appeal seems a fitting legacy to an architect who was always ahead of his time.

On April 9, 1959, Wright died in Phoenix a month or so before his 92nd birthday. He was at first buried next to Meyma Borthwick in the grounds of his beloved Wisconsin Taliesin, but later reinterred by Olgivanna Lazovich at Taliesin West. On his drawing board when he died was a simple, new garden plan, a symbol of a man who was passionate to the last about his work.

Penny Parkin is a UK-based freelance travel writer, who has previously produced features for the 24 Hour Museum website and for magazines, including Homes and Gardens.

USEFUL CONTACTS

For general information: The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, www.franklloydwright.org or e-mail flwfdn@franklloydwright.org

Taliesin (open May-October): 5481 County Highway C, Spring Green, Wisconsin, 53588, USA; tel: 001 (608) 588 2511.

Taliesin West (open November-April): PO Box 4430, Scottsdale, Arizona 85261-4430, USA; tel: 001 (480) 860 2700.

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