

Frank Lloyd Wright's works continue to stand tall as wonders

By John Conti

<http://triblive.com/aande/architecture/7790001-74/wright-chicago-robie#axzz3SnKM8fy8>

Pittsburgh Tribune Review Says:



There's something about Frank Lloyd Wright that just keeps the crowds coming. The man has been dead for 56 years, yet interest in him and his architecture seems to have never been higher.

Two or three new books about him appear annually. Amazon lists well over 600 titles about Wright. Thousands of tourists flock to the several major Wright buildings across the country that are open to the public for tours. Fallingwater, near Ohiopyle, is the best example of that.

The Chicago suburb of Oak Park, where Wright worked in his early years, has about two dozen Wright-designed houses. Accordingly, scores of Wright enthusiasts can be seen

walking there just about every day, individually guided from one home to another by a recorded tour that enables them to view these still-private homes from the curb.

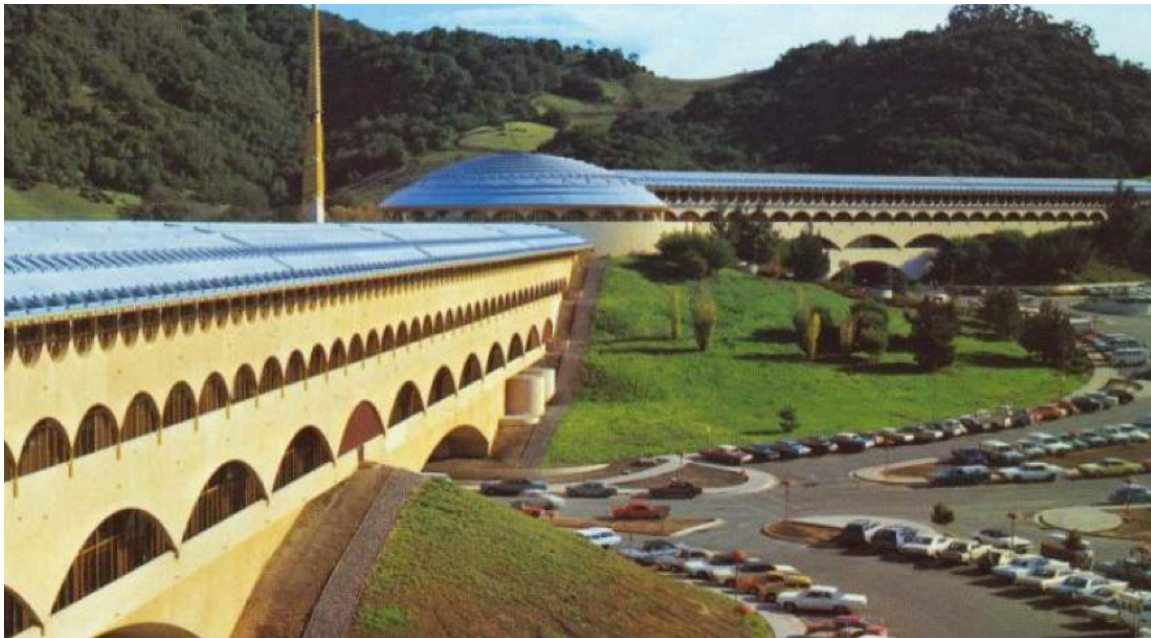
Elsewhere, Wright enthusiasts have taken unbuilt projects for which Wright's plans survive and built homes and other buildings according to those plans. In Buffalo, home to some significant Wright originals and with civic leaders anxious to attract tourists, there is a boat club, a mausoleum and even a gas station (albeit, indoors in a museum) newly built from old Wright plans.

New York's Museum of Modern Art, which has had more shows about Wright than any other architect in its 85-year history, is planning yet another — a major retrospective — for 2017, the 150th anniversary of Wright's birth.

And, last month, came word that the U.S. Department of Interior had officially nominated 10 Wright buildings for the World Heritage Sites list maintained by the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization — or UNESCO.

That list is dedicated to identifying for preservation natural and manmade wonders of the world. And it's likely that at least several — if not all 10 — of Wright's nominated buildings will make the list alongside structures as varied as the Statue of Liberty and the Taj Mahal.

Certainly, Western Pennsylvania's Fallingwater will make the cut. In 2000, it was voted the most important American building of the 20th century by the nation's architects.



In any case, if the UNESCO nomination is successful, it will likely be announced just in time for that 150-year anniversary. We can be pretty sure that within two years, we'll be hearing more about Wright, again and again.

You can't get your hands around Wright in one column, but there are several things that stand out about him.

First, just statistically, he had an unusually prolific, nearly 70-year career, designing more than 500 built houses, churches, a college and a handful of other famous public or business buildings, like the Guggenheim Museum in New York City and the Johnson Wax complex in Racine, Wis.

The modern revolution in architecture — though it had several antecedents — was jump-started in 1910 when Wright's early work was published in Europe.

European architects had been experimenting with alternatives to the by-then-tiresome Beaux Arts, and Wright's early work helped tip the scales decisively, showing a clear path to innovative treatments of interior spaces and beautifully simplified and expressive exterior designs.



There ensued, from that time, a virtual dialog between Wright and the famous Europeans — with each, in turn, influencing the other. Wright was also famous for his outrageous ego. He never acknowledged being influenced by any others and often disparaged the Europeans — at least, in public. He claimed that all his inspiration came from nature or from within.

Professor Frank Toker of the University of Pittsburgh, on the other hand, likes to describe the down-to-earth Wright as “the great assimilator.” Wright was acutely aware of architectural history, from the primitive to the present. And he managed to assimilate many styles and themes into his work.

Still, his genius is that all of them seemed to be magnificently transformed by his hand. His creative imagination and design principles turned it into something new.

For example, look at Chicago's Robie House of 1909 and Fallingwater from 1936 and you see two totally different styles. Robie House was built on a flat, corner lot on a busy street in a suburban part of Chicago. It is a triumph of arts-and-crafts-related design. Fallingwater is a famously spare modernist entity built in a remote and steep Western Pennsylvania ravine.

Yet, spatially, they are very similar. Each can be conceived as a stacked series of trays, weighted down and held in place by the building's masses.

Moreover, you enter each house from the side, near the back, and go through a compressed, low-ceilinged space or two, make a turn or two, go up a few steps, and then you turn, in each, into a spacious, open light-filled main room with windows all around. The rooms are centered, in each case, on a massive fireplace.

They are two versions of the same spatial ideals.

Grant Hildebrand of the University of Washington has shown that similar spatial effects (though usually without the “trays”) can be found in almost all other Wright houses from throughout his career.

Of the hundreds of Wright books out there, Hildebrand's “The Wright Space” and Toker's “Fallingwater Rising” are two that will give a viewer a good understanding of Wright's designs and his clients. Brendan Gill's “Many Masks” is my favorite Wright biography. A short book, titled simply “Frank Lloyd Wright” by Ada Louise Huxtable, sums it all up neatly.





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