

Indian

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FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

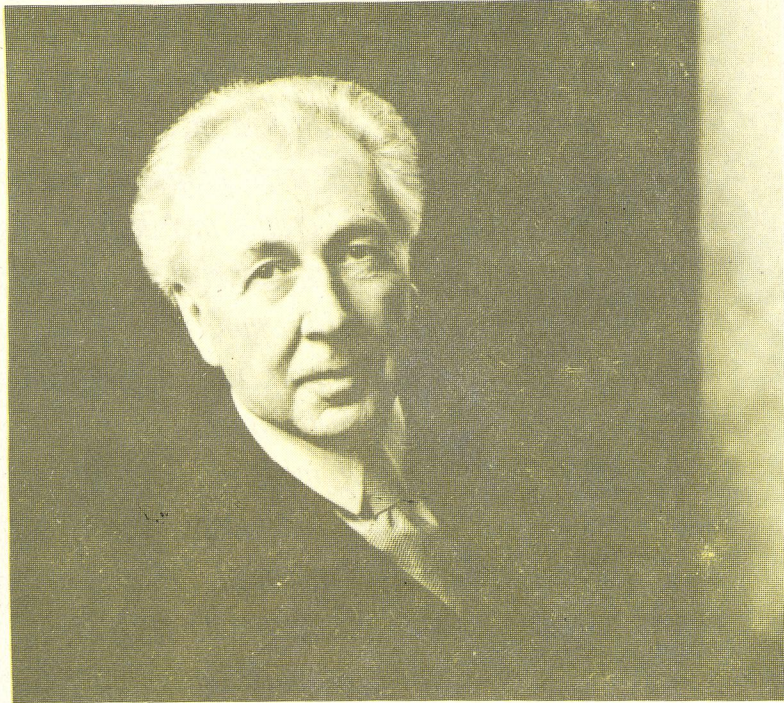
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# Retrospectively Wright



Frank Lloyd Wright

## A brief history of Frank Lloyd's Times

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**T**he irascible Wright would have been 125 years in 1992, the 50th anniversary year of 'The Fountainhead,' (Ayn Rand's novel inspired by Wright), that celebrated the architect's egotistical quest for originality. Wright was a performer and a dissembler who lied routinely about matters as trivial as his date of birth. He cheated on his spouse and abandoned his children. He was arrogant and stif-

led his creditors. Yet despite his unorthodox, and often contrary, private life, he worked diligently throughout his life to perfect the untenable myth that he was the original inspiration for much that has happened in the world of architecture in this century. He is one of America's greatest architects and certainly has a solid claim to being the greatest architect of this century.

A host of books about Wright

and his work have been published, and exhibitions and seminars are continually being planned around the world. In the midst of all this, one might ask, why all this attention now? Terrence Riley, the head of the Museum of Modern Art's (New York) department of architecture argues that the retrospection serves as a corrective measure. Wright had been overlooked throughout the European dominance of modernism



Sliding doors (fusuma) remounted as a six-panel screen.

(1930-60's), and was once again passed over by the postmodernists, for he was too big a movement in his own right to fall into any of the architectural 'isms' of this century.

Unlike Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn, whose buildings and writings have had a profound influence on architecture in India, Wright's influence has been limited on the Indian sub-continent. Only a few have had the privilege to have trained under him. Although Wright's projects are less known outside America, his influence through his writings is widespread throughout the world.

The article attempts to revisit some of his contributions and summarise his vision, from the turn of the century until his death in 1959.

#### Roots:

Wright's enduring involvement with landscape was initiated in the hills of southern Wisconsin (USA), where he was born in 1867. While working summers on his uncle's farm, he acquired a deep respect for the diversity and richness in nature, and the agrarian way of life. His early influences were his father, a clergyman, playing Bach and Beeth-

oven, and his mother, who introduced him to Froebel's geometric building blocks. The volumetric qualities of these geometric archetypes would later be realized in the form of his architecture.

**'I sat at the kindergarten tabletop and played upon these 'unit lines' with the square (cube), the circle (sphere), and the triangle (tetrahedron or tripod). Eventually, I was to construct in other mediums. But the smooth cardboard triangles and the maple-wood blocks were most important. All are in my fingers to this day.'**

Forced to drop out of high school to support his mother, he worked with the Dean of Engineering at the University of Wisconsin, where he also studied draughtsmanship for two years. This experience proved valuable as his architecture, from then on, would always grow from a sound engineering concept.

Wright never attended an architectural school, learning instead by apprenticeship. In 1888, he was hired as an apprentice for the famous architectural firm of Adler and Sullivan, where he stayed until 1893. His

talent was quickly appreciated and he soon became Sullivan's assistant. Throughout his life, he would refer to Sullivan as *Lieber Meister* (dear master).

At a time when ornament was increasingly being criticized by the European architects, and the purist principles of machined design had stripped architectural design clean, Wright's exuberant texture and designs seemed to belong to the nineteenth century Art Nouveau. For Sullivan and Wright, ornament remained an integral part of architecture.

At age 21, Wright got married. He asked Sullivan for money to acquire a piece of land in Oak Park, and build his house. Sullivan offered him a five year contract with a generous advance. To meet the demands of an expanding family, Wright began moonlighting - designing and building houses for Adler and Sullivan clients. When Sullivan found out, the two had a wordy altercation that ended in the demise of this glorious relationship. By 1893, he had left Sullivan's office and established his own practice, designing homes for the newly developing Chicago suburbs.

## Prairie Style

'I cannot believe in adding enrichment merely for its own sake. Unless 'enrichment' by detail adds clearness to the enunciation of the architectural theme, it is always undesirable.'

Victorian houses were immensely popular during the early part of the twentieth century. Wright decided to take on the European avant-garde proponents of Victorian styles. He assimilated the architectonic lessons of the Victorian styles - namely the desire for harmony with nature, and radically transformed the means of their representation. In 1901, Wright's early design for what was to become the Prairie House was published in *The Ladies Home Journal*.

'Taking a human being for my scale, I brought the house down in height to fit a normal one - ergo, 5'8" tall. I broadened the mass out all I possibly could, brought it down into spaciousness . . . I was working towards the elimination of the wall as a wall to reach the function of a screen, as a means of opening up space... The planes of the building parallel to the ground were all stressed - to grip the whole to earth.'

His house 'broke the box' of the traditional homes. Rooms open out from a core, the fireplace, which for Wright was the symbolic centre around which all family life revolved. Screens or low level partitions replaced walls in public areas. Sets of doors open out onto the terraces, allowing for an exchange between inside and outside. The Prairie Houses were characterized by a cruciform plan, long, low buildings, often without an attic or a basement with broadly overhanging low-pitched roofs. Rows of casement windows further diffused the sense of enclosure and infused the interior with light and air. Over the next decade, Wright refined the concept in several houses around the Chicago area.



Left: Living Room, Robie House, Chicago.



Right: Unity Temple, Oak Park.

Wright extended the principles of fluid space and streamlining, to public architecture, by expanding the vertical dimension in the Larkin Company Administration Building, and the Unity Temple. In both these buildings, ornamental devices were minimized further, pronouncing the planar abstraction of the flat surfaces.

The Larkin Building bore its resemblance to the prairie house in the interior; it institutionalized hierarchical patterns of authority: a large main floor area for the clerical staff, lit artificially and through a skylight, with balconies around the perimeter for supervisors, who could observe

the staff below.

Unity Temple is one of the best examples of Wright's principle: 'the reality of the building is the space within.' The space is defined, yet is plastic and flowing. One does not feel confined by walls. It was his first building to be constructed of poured concrete. The rich interweaving space inside further reinforces the rhythm of abstract shapes, with light filtering through the coffered grid above. Wright designed the interior decor (lighting, furnishings, choice of colours, and carpeting) to ensure that all details added up to a harmonious whole.

## Overcoming Adversities

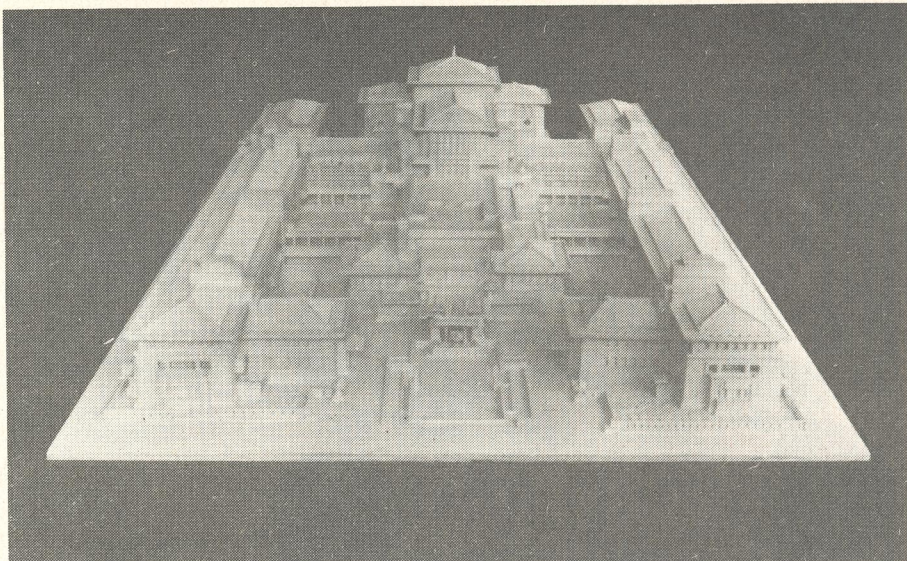
By age forty, Wright had achieved both social and professional successes. Mies van der Rohe and Corbusier were only beginning their careers, working in Peter Behren's office.

In 1909, upon receiving an invitation from a publishing house in Berlin, to prepare a comprehensive book on his work and troubled with the burdens of domestic life, Wright scandalized the Chicago society by leaving his wife, six children, and his practice, and sailed for Europe with the wife of a client. He toured the continent, and prepared two editions of his work to be published in Germany.

**No house should ever be 'on' any hill or 'on' anything. It should be 'of' the hill, belonging to it, so hill and house can live together, each the happier for the other.'**

Upon returning home, and to escape the social ostracism for his unconventional behavior, Wright sought to return to the soothing landscapes of his childhood in Wisconsin. There he built a home and studio called Taliesin (Welsh for 'shining brow'). Taliesin represents Wright's search for 'Organic Architecture,' that is indigenous of the soil, the time, the place, and the human being.

In 1913, when he was away from Taliesin, designing Midway Gardens, an entertainment park in Chicago (1913-14; demolished in 1929), he received a telephone call informing him that an angry servant had run amok at Taliesin, murdered his mistress, her two children, an apprentice, and three others, and had burned Taliesin to the ground. Wright returned to Taliesin alone, to bury his mistress. He rebuilt Taliesin II over the ashes of Taliesin I. Finished in 1915, the house, finer than before, represented Wright's triumph over the worst adversity in his life.



**Imperial Hotel, Tokyo.**

(Photograph: Toshiaki Kawai, Collection: Kyoto University, School of Architecture.)

## Genius at Work

After 1915, the austerity of earlier work gave way to a new grammar and vocabulary of architectural forms and structures.

**'Art is universal when it is art in the true sense . . . This building—the new Imperial Hotel of Tokyo is not designed to be a Japanese building: it is artist's tribute to Japan, modern and universal in character.'**

The commission to design the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo took him to Japan in 1915. An avid admirer and collector of Japanese prints, Wright was inspired by the principles of Japanese architecture: simplicity, open plan, honest structural expression, screens, and the relationship of the structure to nature. The hotel combined Western construction principles with the aestheticism of the eastern world. Like a ship, the Imperial was designed to float. Instead of sinking deep piles into the bedrock, Wright rested the building on several slender, pointed 8 foot piles, distributing the weight evenly on a 60 foot-pad of mud; this ingenious method of construction helped the Imperial survive the earthquake

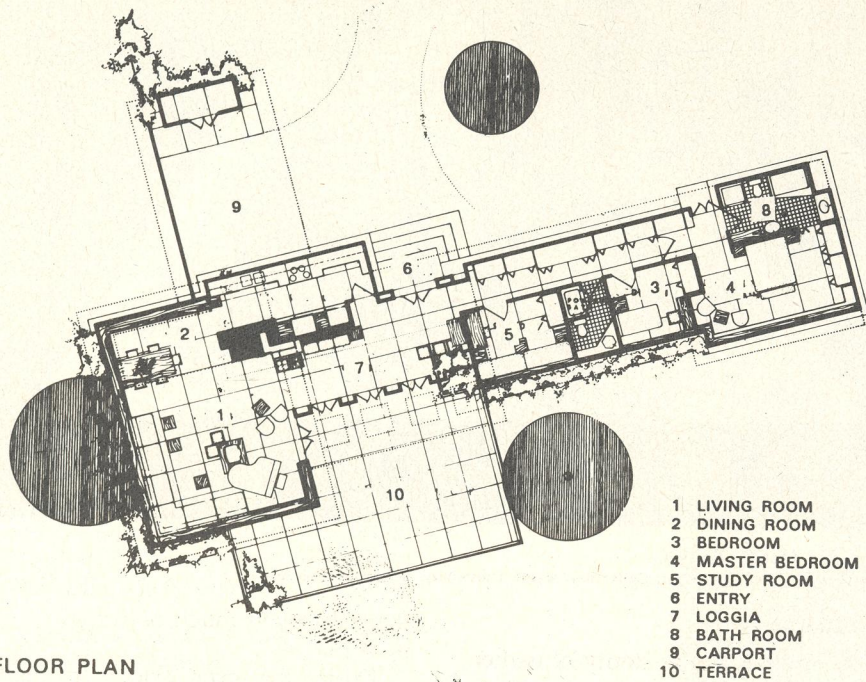
that destroyed much of Tokyo in 1923.

During the seven years that Wright was working on the Imperial Hotel, he had passed through California several times, and had established a small office there. He designed several California residences known as 'textile block' houses. Cast on-site from moulds, these ornamental blocks (plain, patterned or perforated) reaffirmed his principle of 'organic architecture: where the part is to the whole as the whole is to the part.' These blocks also afforded him the great flexibility of following the contours of the dry terrain.

Limited by financial difficulties, the Great Depression, fewer commissions, and a failed second marriage, Wright turned to writing and theoretical projects. He published his autobiography along with his other articles, books and lectures.

## The International Style

The Internationalists dismissed the qualities of local traditions, culture, and regional climate. They sought architecture to be universal. Its three distinguishing principles were: spaces enclosed by thin planes rather than suggestion of mass and



FLOOR PLAN

- 1 LIVING ROOM
- 2 DINING ROOM
- 3 BEDROOM
- 4 MASTER BEDROOM
- 5 STUDY ROOM
- 6 ENTRY
- 7 LOGGIA
- 8 BATH ROOM
- 9 CARPORT
- 10 TERRACE

solidity; regularity as opposed to symmetry; and dependence on elegance of materials and how they were put together as opposed to applied ornamentation.

For architecture to be universal in spirit, Wright adapted the local variations of the region: the indigenous materials, the local climate, and the socio-economic conditions. Organic architecture has no formal style; it models itself in response to function and nature.

Although Wright and the Internationalists had several elements in common such as flat roof, synthetic modern materials, honesty and absence of eclectic ornamentation, Wright generally found their approach sterile and machine-like. For Le Corbusier, the house was a machine for living. Wright did not see the machine as an object, but as a metaphor for the age and for the process of production. He explored modern materials: concrete, steel, glass, and plastic, but did not design buildings to look like machines.

### Usonia and Broadacre City, 1932

Wright brought his architecture to people of modest means by designing prototypes of small houses—a simplified and modest version of the Prairie house. Wright called these his Usonian houses (a term coined to emphasize their native US character). He skillfully combined inexpensive materials, such as concrete and plywood with extremely compact floor plans. Wright promoted building techniques in which the homeowners could participate in the process. Before World War II, twenty-six Usonian houses were built around the USA.

The Usonian house became the building block for Broadacre City—a vision for a modern city that would take advantage of technology and communications to decentralize the old city and create an environment where the individual would flourish. It was anti-urban, a sprawling place based on the notion that every individual was entitled to

an acre of land, and the enjoyment of freedom and space. The concentration of the 19th century City was redistributed over the network of the agrarian grid. In the end, Wright was not much of an urban theorist. His vision of the community was dull, and lacked the spontaneity or passion of a real cityscape.

Broadacre's intent for democratic distribution of land was not unlike Gandhi's vision for India: a country of self-sustaining ecological villages. Perhaps Wright's democratic proposal for an acre of land for every person, away from the ills of modern cities was more suitable for a big country like America with sparse population. But for a developing country like India, where of cities' infrastructure can no longer support more migrants, regional redistribution as proposed in Gandhi's self-sustaining villages seems more appropriate over Wright's rationalization for a new landscape. And one, that neither can, nor should, be planned on mere Cartesian principles.

### The Taliesin Fellowship, 1932

**'If I do nothing more than awaken young minds to the possibilities of architecture as a great element of life, then I will have done all I expected to do.'**

Wright's disapproval of the architectural educational system led him in 1932, with his third spouse, to found the Taliesin Fellowship, establishing a formal arrangement for training of resident apprentices. Apprentices were to gain experience not only in architecture but also in construction, farming, gardening, and the study of all arts.

Six years later, Taliesin West was founded as a winter residence in Phoenix, Arizona. Twice each year, architects, apprentices, and engineers would migrate between the two Taliesins. A routine that still continues.



Photograph Courtesy The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy

Above: Falling Water, Guest House Living Room.  
Below: Falling Water, suspended stair.



Photograph Courtesy the Author

### Fallingwater, 1935

Edgar Kaufman, Jr was introduced by a friend to Wright's *autobiography*, a book that inspired him to join the Taliesin Fellowship. Edgar introduced Wright to his father, a wealthy owner of a department

store. The Kaufmans owned 2,000 acres of virgin hills, ravines, and forest land. They invited Wright to design a year-round weekend retreat, away from the highway, deep in the forest, and close to the waterfalls.

The form of Fallingwater draws

inspiration from the stepped rock ledges that define the landscape—the architecture being a natural extension of the natural rock ledges and the falling cascades. Cantilevered platforms extend outwards from a central core of stone and glass, hovering over the rocks and the waterfall, seemingly defying gravity.

The interior of the house is a continued statement about the relationship between the house and nature. Natural stone walls and flagstone floors create an impression that the house was carved out of the bedrock. A transparent glass wall separates the outside from the inside blurring the boundary between them. Glazing details enhance this effect. Mullions are minimal and slender. In critical places, such as the corner, the glass is mitred at a 45 degree angle and joined so that no opaque mullion or structural support would obstruct the view.

Fallingwater renewed Wright's architectural practice and reestablished his pre-eminence at age seventy.

### Johnson Wax Company Research and Development Center, 1949

Wright was in his seventies when he designed Johnson Wax. The centre consists of the administrative headquarters and the laboratory tower. The 14-storey tower is linked to the central administrative building by a covered walkway lined with reflecting pools.

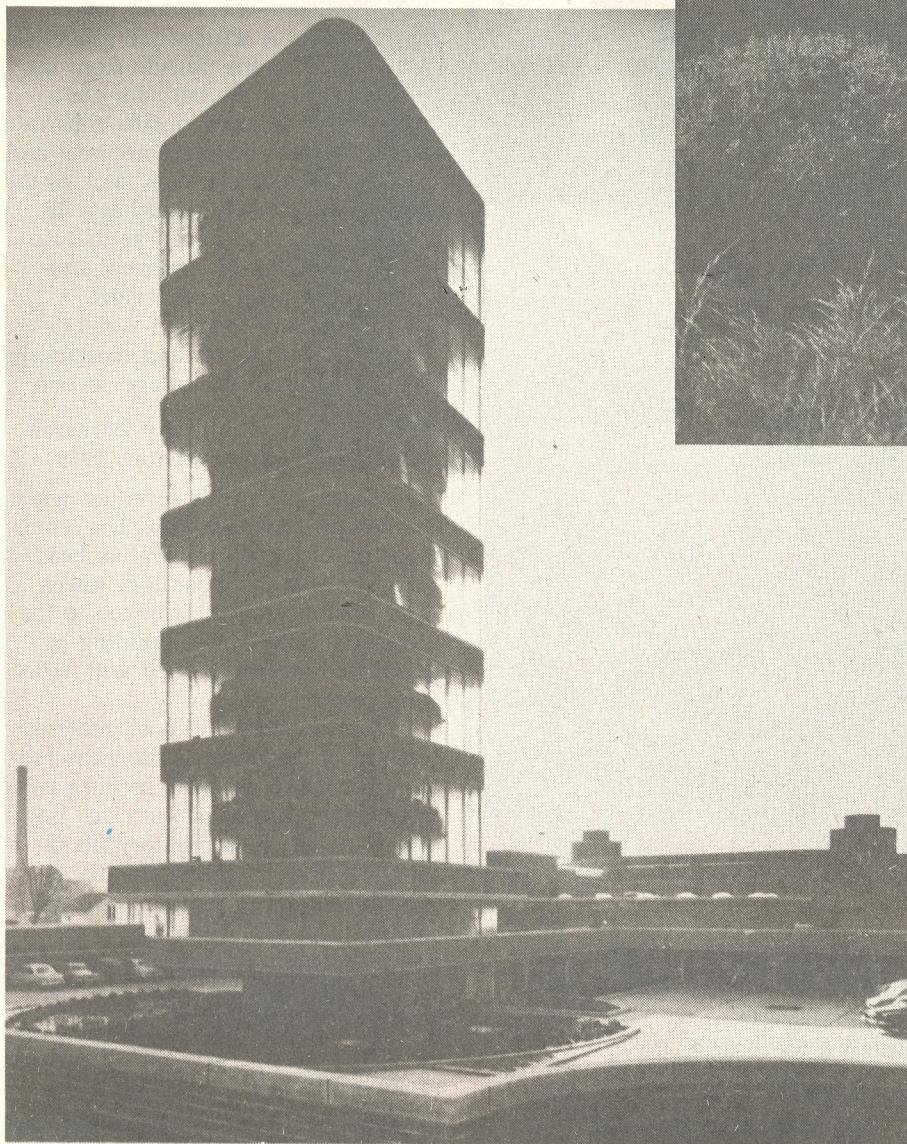
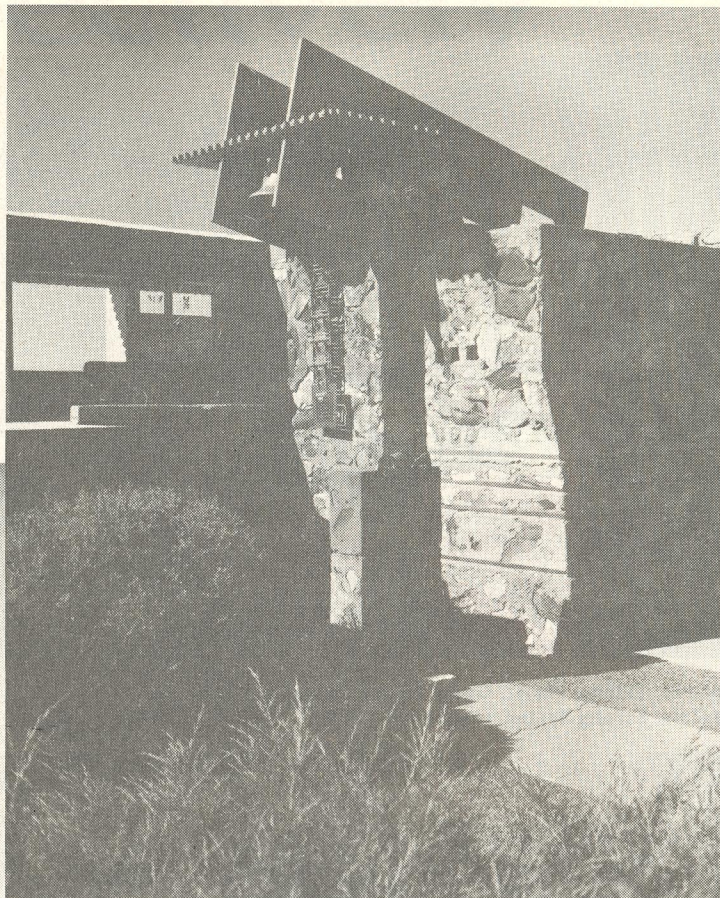
From outside, the most interesting feature of the tower is the glass tubing that forms the wall sections two-story high, banded in warm red brick. From inside, the laboratory floors are two floor modules; the main floor is square in plan and the mezzanine is round. These floors are cantilevered from a central core containing the elevator, stair, and the mechanical equipment.

The administrative building is a windowless brick rectangle; the intention was to seal out the ugliness of a blighted industrial area.

The structure is lit by skylights and two strips of translucent pyrex just below the cornice level. Symbolic to the hierarchy of labour-management relations, also found in the Larkin building, the executive offices are located at the top of the structure; below them, on the mezzanine overlooking the large main area, are the officers, and the main floor is for the clerical staff. Wright believed that neither the work nor the workplace

**Right: Bell Tower, Taliesin West**  
(Photograph: Pedro Guerrero, Collection: The FLW Foundation)

**Below: S C Johnson & Son Inc. Research Laboratory Tower, Wisconsin.**  
(Photograph: Ezra Stoller, Collection: The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, New York).



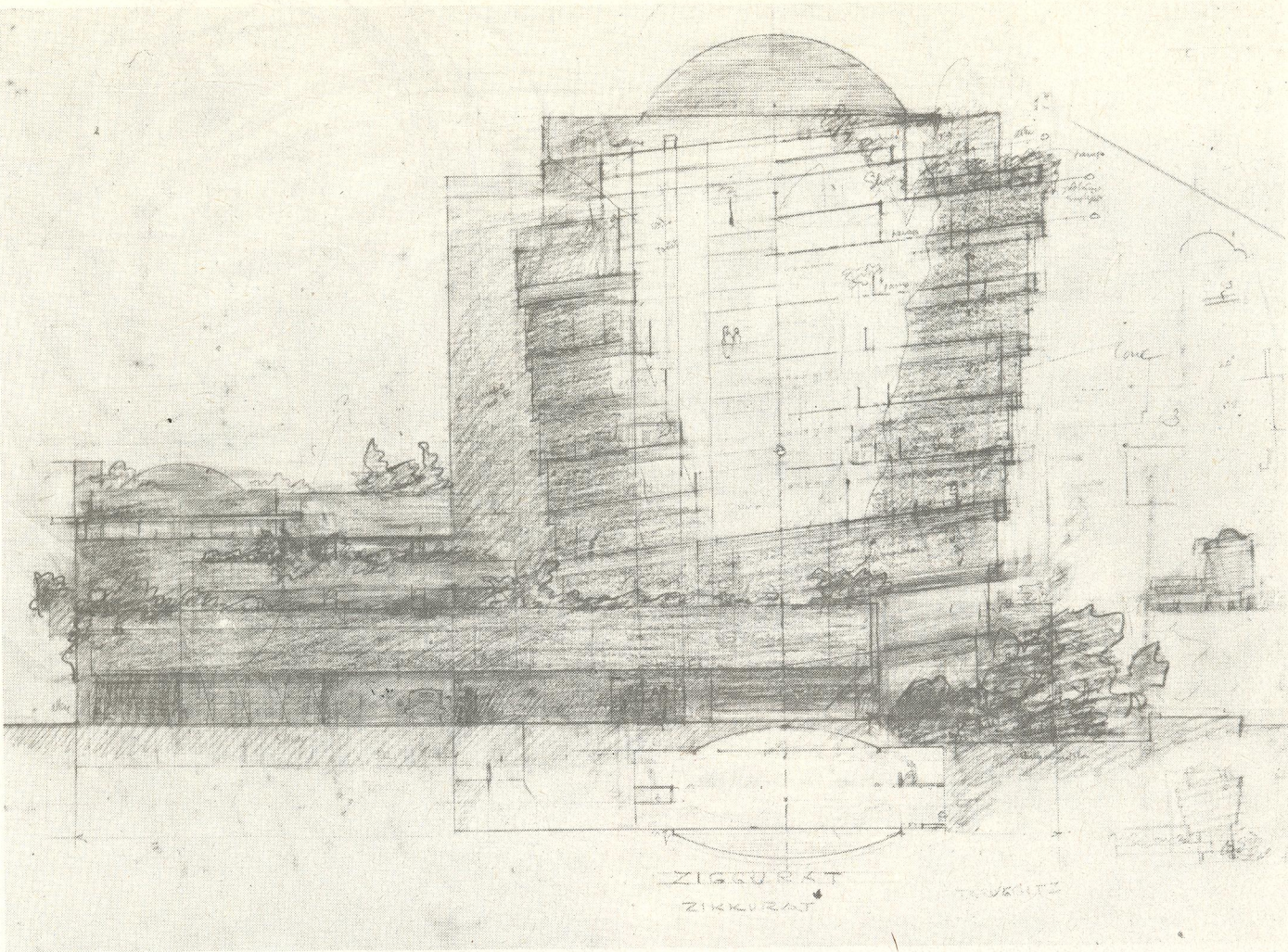
needs to be mundane. He elevated the spirits of the clerical staff by providing them 'as inspiring a place to work in as any cathedral ever was, in which to worship.'

'... if you make men and women proud of their environment and happy to be where they are and give them some dignity and pride in their environment, it all comes out to the good where the product is concerned.'

**Guggenheim Museum, 1959**

This unorthodox museum design called for a spiral ramp that carries the visitor from the top to the bottom with ever-changing views of the interior. Instead of isolating the artefacts from the central rotunda, Wright placed them in niches along the main ramp. The visitors would





Photograph Courtesy The FLW Foundation

**Above: Sketch section of the Guggenheim Museum.**

take an elevator to the top of the museum and slowly work their way down the ramp looking at art with a minimum of fatigue. The walls of the ramp that form the exterior shell of the building slant outward creating what Wright was a surface similar to a continuous easel, perhaps providing a more accurate presentation of the paintings.

**End of an Era**

In the postwar economic boom of the 1950's, Wright's career flourished. He enjoyed unprecedented

public acclaim. The expanding suburbs around the country involved Wright in new community development: civic centres, places of workshop, schools and homes.

Ever imagining, ever inventing, Frank Lloyd Wright continued to seek new forms of expression until his death at age ninety-one. In all he built over 400 buildings, having designed twice as many during his 72 year career.

What has been Wright's influence on the Indian sub-continent? Although Wright's work and writings

are seldom talked about in the architectural classrooms, within the profession, Wright's influence is evident in the projects and writings of contemporary architects like B V Doshi, Charles Correa, Raj Rewal and Anant Raje. Their body of work represents a search that fuses the modern architectural principles with an architecture that is indigenous of the soil, the time, the place, and the human being - the underlying principle of Organic Architecture.

Photographs Courtesy the Author