

# FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

Biography

## FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT (1867-1959) CHILDHOOD

Wright's childhood experiences colored both his often tumultuous, sometimes tragic personal life and his seven-decade career as an architect. Born Frank Lincoln Wright to an itinerant minister/musician and a schoolteacher, the boy's early years were spent on the family farm in Wisconsin. There, he enjoyed working and playing amid nature, the object of a lifelong passion and a major influence on his structural and decorative designs.

Both of Wright's parents, William and Anna, were eccentric and willful. Wright's autobiography reports that his mother began grooming him for an architectural career while he was yet in her womb. The pregnant Anna declared that her first child would grow up to create beautiful buildings, and she decorated his nursery with images of cathedrals to inspire interest.

Anna never lost her vision for her son's career. While visiting the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876, she saw an exhibit of wooden blocks developed by Friedrich Froebel, a German educator and the originator of kindergarten. Froebel blocks, as they were called, were intended for children's educational play and development. Anna bought a set. Young Frank spent many hours playing with the geometric blocks, assembling them to create three-dimensional forms. In his autobiography, Wright described the influence of Froebel blocks on his work: "For several years I sat at the little kindergarten table-top . . . and played . . . with the cube, the sphere and the triangle—these smooth wooden maple blocks . . . All are in my fingers to this day . . ." (Wright, 1932).

After moving their family across the country and back again amid economic hardship, the Wrights separated. Frank was just a teen. They eventually divorced and William departed Wisconsin, leaving Frank to support his mother and two sisters. Wright never saw his father again. Out of loyalty to his mother's family, the Lloyd Joneses, he changed his middle name from Lincoln to Lloyd. Anna lived with or near her son for the remainder of her life.

The Lloyd Joneses were a tight-knit clan of Welsh immigrant farmers whose valley in the rolling hills of Wisconsin Wright returned to all his life. The growing seasons, the weather, the plants, and the rhythms of planting and harvesting all played roles in Wright's philosophy of how humans should live. Even when he built urban structures, Wright considered the natural setting an important factor in design.

## PERSONAL LIFE

Trouble seemed to follow Wright throughout his life. Some say he invited it. Aware of his genius, Wright didn't hesitate to praise himself and his talents to others. He consistently refused to credit others (except Louis Henri Sullivan) as having influenced his work, claiming to be the pure source of original ideas. This tendency may not have won him many friends, but his obvious gifts and charm drew people to him anyway.

As an adult, Wright had a record of tumultuous, sometimes scandalous relationships. He was married three times, and he lived with his mistress, Martha "Mamah" Borthwick Cheney, in the original Taliesin, a home he built for them in Wisconsin. Wright's first wife, Catherine "Kitty" Tobin, to whom he was married for 33 years, refused Frank a divorce while he lived with Mamah, who was an Oak Park neighbor and architectural client. In 1914,

Mamah was murdered along with two of her children and four others by a servant who set Taliesin on fire and then attacked them with an axe as they tried to escape. Wright immediately rebuilt the house, and Tobin granted him a divorce. He soon married Maude Miriam Noel, an emotionally unstable sculptor, whose erratic behavior brought about his second divorce just four years later. In his early sixties, Wright married his third wife, Olga “Olgivanna” Ivanovna Lazovich Milanoff, thirty-one years his junior. They remained married for the rest of Wright’s life.

Wright’s children numbered eight: Six were born to Catherine and one to Olgivanna. He also adopted Olgivanna’s daughter from a previous marriage. Most of Wright’s offspring grew up to have careers in architecture and the arts.

## **EARLY CAREER**

Wright was not highly educated in a formal sense. He studied civil engineering briefly at the University of Wisconsin before moving to Chicago to work for architect Joseph Lyman Silsbee. While working for Silsbee, Wright designed his first building, the Lloyd-Jones family chapel, or Unity Chapel, located in Oak Park, Illinois. Wright was later hired as a draftsman by Louis Henri Sullivan, the first American modernist architect and inventor of the skyscraper. Wright became his prize pupil. Sullivan believed that American architecture should reflect the particular functions of structures rather than Old World traditions, a theory later expanded by Wright.

## **PRAIRIE STYLE**

In 1893, Wright left Sullivan to establish his own firm, where he began developing his Prairie Style concept. Prairie Style houses are horizontal buildings made of wood, brick, and plaster designed to blend with their prairie setting. Indoor and outdoor spaces are separated by large panels of leaded glass with intricate patterns abstracted from nature. A centrally located fireplace provided both a visual focus and a cozy gathering place. In all homes, Wright preferred open areas to enclosed rooms. Wright knew that a feeling of spaciousness could be achieved without vast amounts of actual space, and his gift was knowing how to organize interiors to create this feeling. He strove to bring two things to his house designs — a sense of comforting shelter and a sense of uncluttered spaciousness. He met these objectives by defining zones with partial walls and variations in ceiling height, and by using the same wall treatments, usually wood, brick, or stone, throughout the home. Stretches of Cherokee Red concrete floors and wood ceilings helped to create a visual sense of continuity. Wright carried out these basic principles in both his Prairie Style and Usonian homes.

While the two styles shared similarities, Prairie Style homes were larger and more expensive. One of the most famous is the Robie House, built in 1909 in Wright’s Chicago neighborhood. The house comprised three floors. The first contained a garage and children’s play space, and third floor bedrooms. The second floor held the main living area, at the core of which were a huge fireplace and staircase. Open living and dining space was arranged around this core, and verandas extended from two sides. The second floor’s huge cantilevered roof sheltered the windows from excessive sunlight. Wright’s signature was on every detail of the home’s furnishings; he even designed clothing for Mrs. Robie to wear on special occasions so that she herself would blend with the architecture.

## **LATE CAREER**

Wright published his autobiography in 1932 at age 65. The book inspired readers to seek his help in designing their family homes, and the demand was so great that Wright took on apprentices to assist him. In 1936, Wright created one of his best-known works, Fallingwater, a Pennsylvania summer home incorporating a waterfall. He also built Taliesin West in the Arizona desert as a combined winter home and architecture school.

Wright's most productive years were from the end of World War II until his death in 1959. During this time he received 270 residential commissions, many of which were for Usonian homes, including Samara. The last decade of his life yielded some of Wright's most striking work — The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City; the Beth Shalom Synagogue in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; and his only skyscraper, the Price Tower in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, are but a few examples. Wright died in Arizona at the age of ninety-two, having never retired. He was recognized posthumously in 1991 by the American Institute of Architects as “the greatest American architect of all time.”

## **USONIAN VISION**

The Great Depression altered Wright's career. As commissions for large-scale houses slowed, he turned his attention to the needs of middle-income Americans. Wright endeavored to create a democratic, distinctly North American single-family dwelling for ordinary people. From his ideas emerged the Usonian home.

The concept grew out of Wright's Prairie Style. Both used natural — usually local — building materials: brick, wood, and stone. Both were oriented horizontally with low roofs and few interior walls, lending them a feeling of spaciousness absent from conventional houses of the same size. Both were integrated with the natural setting. But the Usonian home, modestly priced at around \$5,000 — possessed a character all its own. It was a compact gem designed to serve the lives of its occupants.

Floor plans delineated three main areas: living space, with a fireplace at its center; small bedrooms and baths; and a dining/kitchen area between the first two areas. Wright designed much of the furniture himself; some was built into the space and other was freestanding — banquette sofas and other seating, shelves, tables, and beds.

To make these structures affordable, Wright removed such elements as basements, attics, or garages. Walls constituted of thin “sandwiches” of brick and insulating material minimized the need for structural studs. Wright's use of natural finishing materials eliminated the cost of paint and wallpaper. Carports (a term coined by Wright) replaced garages. Built-in furnishings, made of inexpensive plywood or veneers, streamlined and integrated interior spaces. Verandas expanded these houses, providing outdoor living space and direct contact with nature. Wright's preferred palette of warm colors for interior furnishings echoed those found right outside the door. Many construction features were also environmentally friendly, foreshadowing contemporary sustainable architecture. For example, pipes were installed beneath foundation slabs to carry steam to warm the incised, red concrete floors above, and flat, overhanging roofs shaded homes from heat in summer.

Simple but not Spartan, the Usonian structure's minimal ornamentation, combined with its use of natural materials and earth-hugging orientation, brings to mind the elegance and simplicity of Japanese design.

Wright's vision embraced more than the creation of small, cost-efficient dwellings; it was also about serving individual needs and preferences. For example, Usonian homes sought to honor their inhabitants' privacy needs. Large casement windows on one side of

the house invited the outdoors in, while high clerestory windows on the other admitted light but not the unwelcome gaze of outsiders.

Before Wright began planning a structure, his clients were encouraged to reflect on their lifestyles and to submit documents (such as the Christian's booklet) outlining their requirements. Wright didn't always honor requests he considered contrary to the Usonian ideal, but he was willing to listen. For example, the Christians, who frequently entertained large groups, lobbied for a separate dining space, and Wright agreed to make an exception for Samara.

After World War II, new determinants began to affect Wright's architectural vision. Although he held a life-long view of the male as "lord of the manor," he understood that American society was changing, and so, too, must his designs. Modern women, like Kay Christian in the 1950s, held jobs in increasing numbers. Many married women, in particular, worked during and after the war. Those who stayed at home no longer considered themselves mere housewives, but "homemakers" — overseers of day-to-day operations and managers of domestic concerns, including shopping, childcare, cleaning, and cooking. Manufacturers introduced a wave of new appliances and labor-saving devices that eased the burden of the busy homemaker and raised the importance of the kitchen as a locus of activity within the home.

The kitchen remained the domain of women, even those with jobs. Wright renamed it a "workspace" and moved it to the center of the Usonian plan to enable women to stay involved in family life while preparing meals and washing dishes. Wright sometimes made exceptions, of course: Samara's workspace, for example, was separated from the living area and dining room.

Family life changed along with gender roles. The overall plan of the Usonian, with its open living areas and small bedrooms, meant that families spent more time together. Separate activities — playing, cooking, paying bills, studying — could take place at the same time in the same space, forcing an intimacy unfamiliar to Americans living in conventional houses. How inhabitants fared in a Usonian home differed from family to family. Wright's first Usonian client, Herbert Jacobs, recalled on NBC radio in 1956, "The temptation is to be together much more. I think it does something to you subconsciously. I think it did something to my children . . . Living in that house was fantastically wonderful."<sup>1</sup> Others saw things differently. One Usonian father demurred, saying that family closeness could bring out the worst in him.

## **ORGANIC ARCHITECTURE**

The site of each Wright designed structure was critical to its design. Wright thought that every building should grow naturally from its environmental setting, a philosophical approach to building known as organic architecture. Usonian homes, like Wright's Prairie Style houses, were built close to the ground on concrete slabs, causing them to relate more directly to nature than more conventional houses do. By integrating the house with its natural setting, Wright brought a seamlessness and openness to bear.

Wright's notions about the relationship of nature and the built environment were based on the teachings of his mentor, Sullivan. Sullivan is remembered for the coinage, "Form follows function," a slogan that defined modern architecture in the mid-20th century. Wright's related phrase, "form and function are one" reflects his belief that the natural world best illustrates this integration. His designs do not mimic nature, but instead interpret natural forms and reside within them. One only needs to see an image of Fallingwater, the Pennsylvania house cantilevered over a waterfall, to understand this.

## THE 1950S

The decade of the fifties brought renewed hope and prosperity to middle-class North Americans, resulting in a building and baby boom. The G.I. Bill of the 1940s made it possible for soldiers returning from war to buy homes with little or no money down. Wartime developments in technology and materials helped to standardize building practices, further making first-time home buying a reality for many, and changes in the Federal Housing Act of 1949 gave builders profit incentives to construct suburban developments. The American landscape quickly sprang up with single-family dwellings.

American industry expanded to meet the needs of the growing middle class during peacetime. Many could now afford the goods and services denied or unavailable during World War II, and buying trends resulted in corporate expansion and jobs. Suburbanites furnished their new homes with televisions, dinette sets, and phonographs. Popular furniture included molded plastic chairs that could be wiped clean by busy housewives, and boxy davenports upholstered in durable fabrics that could withstand the wear by growing families. Tupperware, Melmac melamine dinnerware, electric ranges, and even dishwashers made their debuts in American kitchens, and more households than ever were equipped with washing machines. All in all, the decade was characterized by hope, energy, consumerism, and a focus on family life, even in the shadow of the Cold War.

### FRANK LLOYD QUOTES

“Form follows function — that has been misunderstood. Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union.”

— from BrainyQuote.com.

<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/f/franklloyd127722.html>.

“Architecture is life, or at least it is life itself taking form and therefore it is the truest record of life as it was lived in the world yesterday, as it is lived today or ever will be lived.”

— As quoted in *An Organic Architecture* (1970).

“I believe in God, only I spell it Nature.”

— As quoted in *Quote magazine* (14 August 1966).

“No house should ever be on a hill or on anything. It should be of the hill. Belonging to it. Hill and house should live together each the happier for the other.”

— FLW: *An Autobiography* (1932).

“Every great architect is — necessarily — a great poet. He must be a great original interpreter of his time, his day, his age.”

— FLW: *The Future of Architecture* (1953).

“Nature is all the body of God we mortals will ever see.”

— As quoted in *The Duality of Vision : Genius and Versatility in the Arts* (1970) by Walter Sorrell, p. 28.

“Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you.”

— As quoted in *The Wright Style* (1992) by Carla Lind, p. 3.

“God is the great mysterious motivator of what we call nature and it has been said often by philosophers, that nature is the will of God. And, I prefer to say that nature is the only body of God that we shall ever see. If we wish to know the truth concerning anything, we’ll find it in the nature of that thing.”

— As quoted in *Truth Against the World: Frank Lloyd Wright Speaks for an Organic Architecture*, Patrick J. Meehan, ed. (1987).

“Early in life I had to choose between honest arrogance and hypocritical humility. I chose honest arrogance and have seen no occasion to change.”

—As quoted in *The World’s Best Thoughts on Life & Living* (1981), compiled by Eugene Raudse.

“We can never make the living room big enough, the fireplace important enough, or the sense of relationship between exterior, interior and environment close enough, or get enough of these good things I’ve just mentioned. A Usonian house is always hungry for the ground, lives by it, becoming an integral feature of it.”

— “Frank Lloyd Wright”, *The Architectural Forum*, January, 1948, Vol 88, Number 1, p. 71.

“So here I stand before you preaching organic architecture: declaring organic architecture to be the modern ideal and the teaching so much needed if we are to see the whole of life, and to now serve the whole of life, holding no traditions essential to the great TRADITION. Not cherishing any preconceived form fixing upon us either past, present or future, but — instead — exalting the simple laws of common sense — or of superSense if you prefer — determining form by way of the nature of materials . . .”

— FLW, *An Organic Architecture*, 1939.