

Frank Lloyd Wright: the Prairie Home

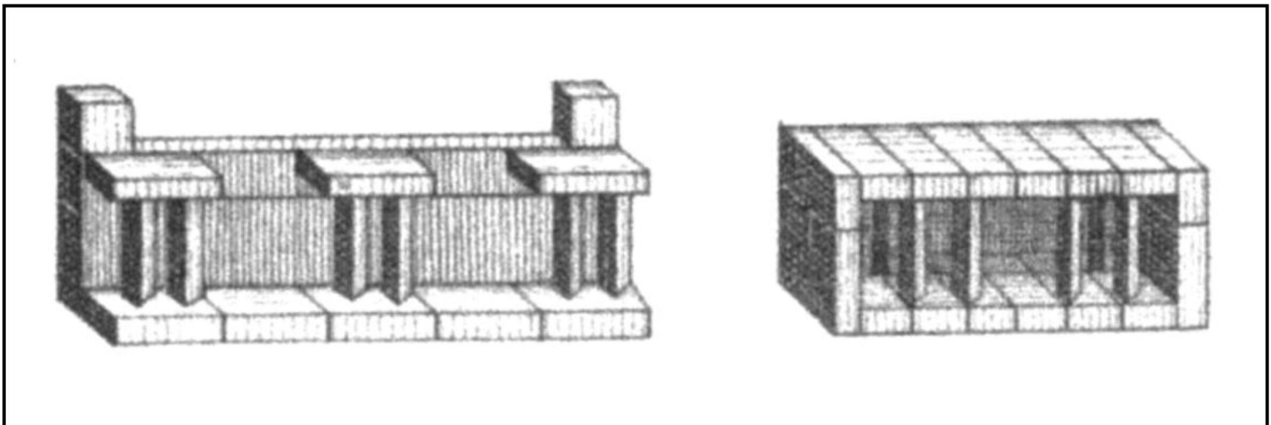
Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) was one of the great forces in modern architecture. In the early years of the 20th Century, he designed many beautiful houses in a characteristic style that later defined the Prairie School of Architecture. This post comments on some of these houses.

Early Life

Frank Lloyd Wright was born in rural Wisconsin with the baptismal name of Frank Lincoln Wright. His mother Anna (1838-1923) was the daughter of Richard Lloyd Jones who had emigrated with his family from Wales in 1844 when Anna was 6 years old. She was trained as a teacher and, in 1866, married William Cary Wright (1825-1904), an itinerant musician and preacher from Massachusetts. The couple had three children: Frank, Jane and Mary-Ellen. The marriage was not a happy one, and Wright divorced his wife in 1885. After this Frank changed his name to Frank Lloyd Wright in honor of his mother's family. He later occasionally used the initials FLLW, but it is not clear if this referred to two middle names or simply to the Welsh double-L at the beginning of Lloyd.

In his autobiography, Wright attributed his love of architecture to his mother's influence. She bought her young son a selection of Froebel's blocks. Friedrich Froebel (1774-1852) was a German pedagogue who initiated the idea of Kindergarten (Brosterman, 1997). He designed various collections (*Gabe* or gift) of simple blocks that could be used by young children to build different structures (Stiny, 1980). The following illustrations shows one of the collections (from Brosterman, 1997, p 53) and some structures that could be

built (from Adams, 2022, p 107).



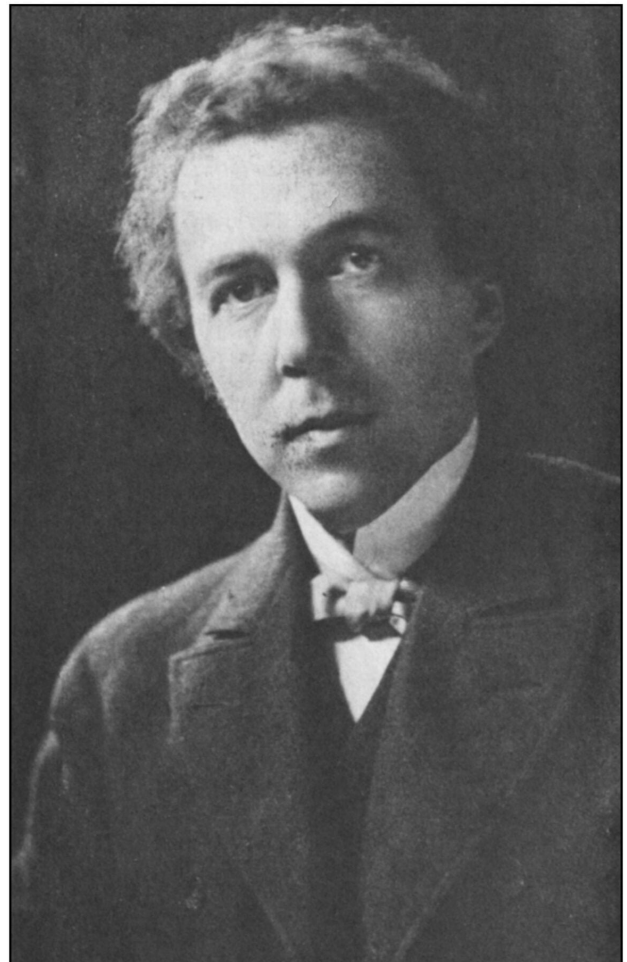
Wright later remembered:

The smooth, shapely maple blocks with which to build, the sense of which never afterward leaves the fingers: *form*

becoming *feeling*. (Wright, 1977, p 34).

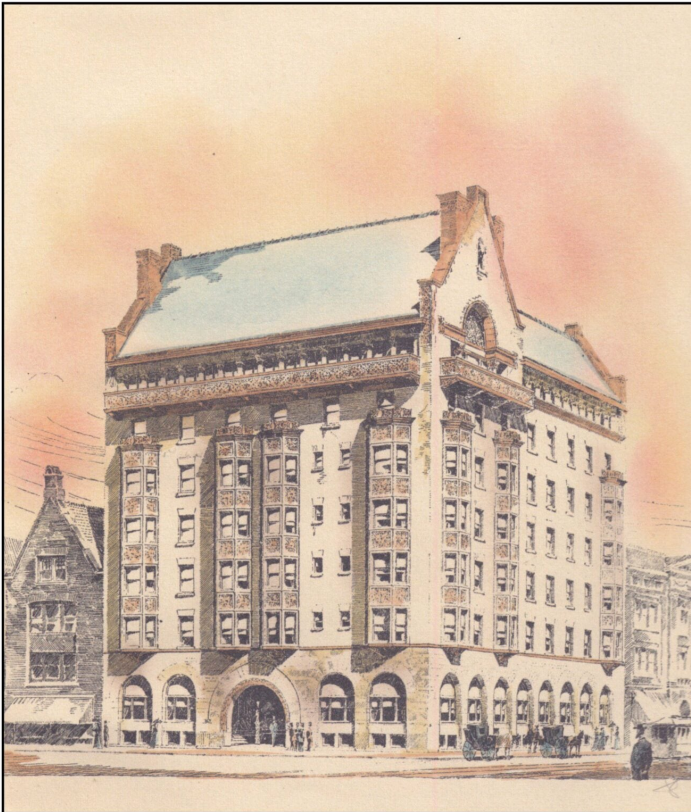
Apprenticeship

Wright studied civil engineering at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, but left in 1887 before finishing his degree. He then worked for various architects in Chicago before becoming an apprentice in 1888 with Louis Sullivan (1856-1924) of the firm Adler and Sullivan. The following illustration shows photographs of Sullivan and Wright taken around 1890.



Sullivan used steel girders to provide the skeleton for tall buildings (Twombly, 1986, pp 281-332). Before the advent of steel, the height of buildings was limited since the weight of the building had to be completely supported by the walls.

Sullivan did not, however, simply build tall. He insisted on ornamentation, which he considered essential to the visual appeal of the buildings. The following illustration shows the St. Nicholas Hotel in Saint Louis (1894) and the Chicago Stock Exchange Building (1893). Both buildings have been demolished, although the arch of the main door to the stock exchange has been preserved.



The following illustration shows a skylight from the Saint Nicholas Hotel, a harbinger of Wright's later windows.



Sullivan's ideas of form had lasting effects on the thinking of Wright. In an article entitled "The tall office building artistically considered" (1896), he proposed

It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things super-human, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function. This is the law.

The following are comments by Timothy Samuelson (Samuelson & Ware, 2021):

Shortened to "form follows function," the phrase was used by Sullivan throughout his life and was frequently cited in reference to him. He protected its simple, universal message by not offering concrete definitions of its meaning. As applied to architecture, it described how a building's form and its function evolve harmoniously. But the word "follows" soon led to the belief that Sullivan meant that the functional aspects of a building should take precedence in determining its form. As a result, many came to criticize

the creatively abstracted forms and rich ornamental details of Sullivan's buildings as violations of his own words. After Sullivan's death, practitioners of functionalist design increasingly adopted this interpretation, making it seem as though Sullivan were a prophet of a philosophy he never actually advocated.

Frank Lloyd Wright proposed the rephrasing to "Form and function are one." Although Wright was the most perceptive inheritor of Sullivan's philosophy, he, too, missed the point. For Sullivan, form and function were among the infinite parts that combined and interacted to create a single, vibrant whole.

Wright left Sullivan & Adler to open his own architectural practice in 1893. Wright always revered Sullivan, considering him his *lieber Meister* (beloved teacher).

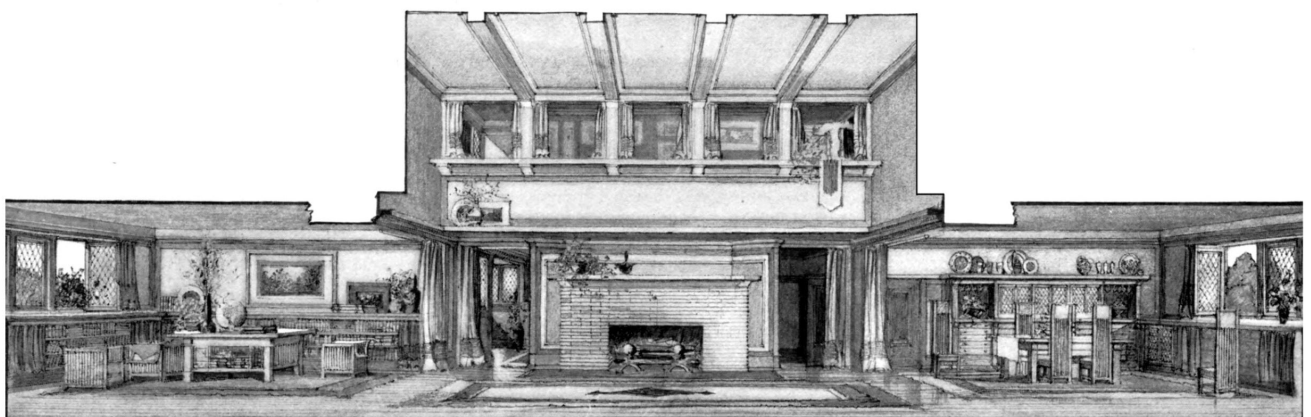
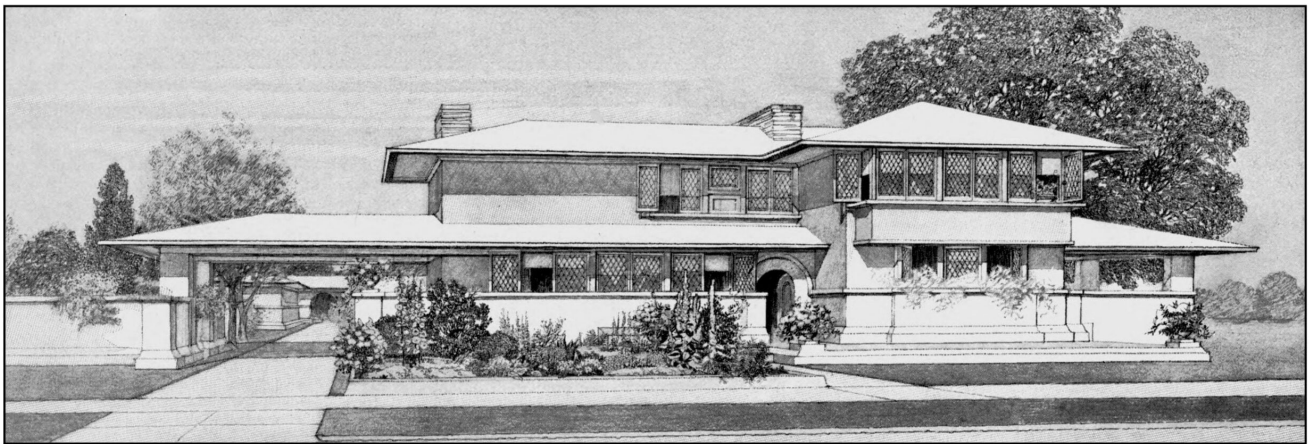
A Home in a Prairie Town

Over the 1890s, Wright evolved a new style for family homes. Instead of starting with an outer building and then fitting the necessary rooms into it, he worked from the central fireplace outward. He added the required spaces in much the same way as he might have put Froebel blocks together (Stiny, 1980). One room led into another with little if any separation. The rooms were provided with long bands of vertically oriented windows to allow free entry of light. The second storey was separated from the ground floor by a long, low-hipped belt roof, which extended beyond the walls to provide covered porches and terraces. The roof of the second story then paralleled the lower roof. The result was a building that was characterized by long horizontal lines, fitting organically into the flat landscape of the prairie. Ornament was minimal: an easy interplay of texture and geometry. The windows used stained glass, with simple

geometric designs, to provide light, color and shadow (Heinz, 2000). These ideas became the principles of the Prairie School of Architecture (Brooks, 1972).

Wright described this type of home in an article in the *Ladies' Home Journal* entitled "A home in a prairie town" (1901). The following illustrations are from that article. The lower shows the sequence of interior spaces along the long axis of the building: a library, a two-story living room with a gallery above, a dining room. Everything flows together

to offer the least resistance to a simple mode of living, in keeping with a high ideal of the family life together



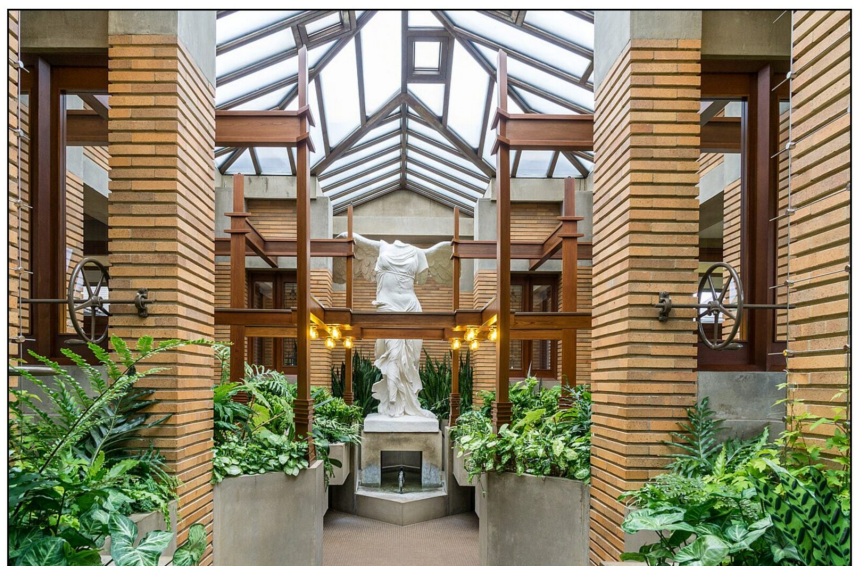
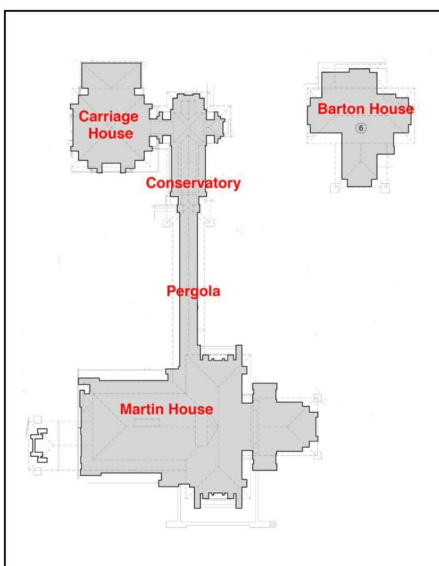
Wright estimated that such a building would cost about \$7000, which would be about \$260,000 today: a very reasonable price. Though no one took him up on the particular design published in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, Wright was soon building multiple

homes using the principles proposed in his article.

Wright's Prairie homes follow a definite spatial grammar (Koning & Eizenberg, 1981). The following diagrams illustrate the two main patterns of Wright's prairie homes. The main spatial structure is the living area centered around the hearth. To this is added the service areas (kitchen, servant's quarters, etc). The sleeping areas for the family are then added in a second storey.

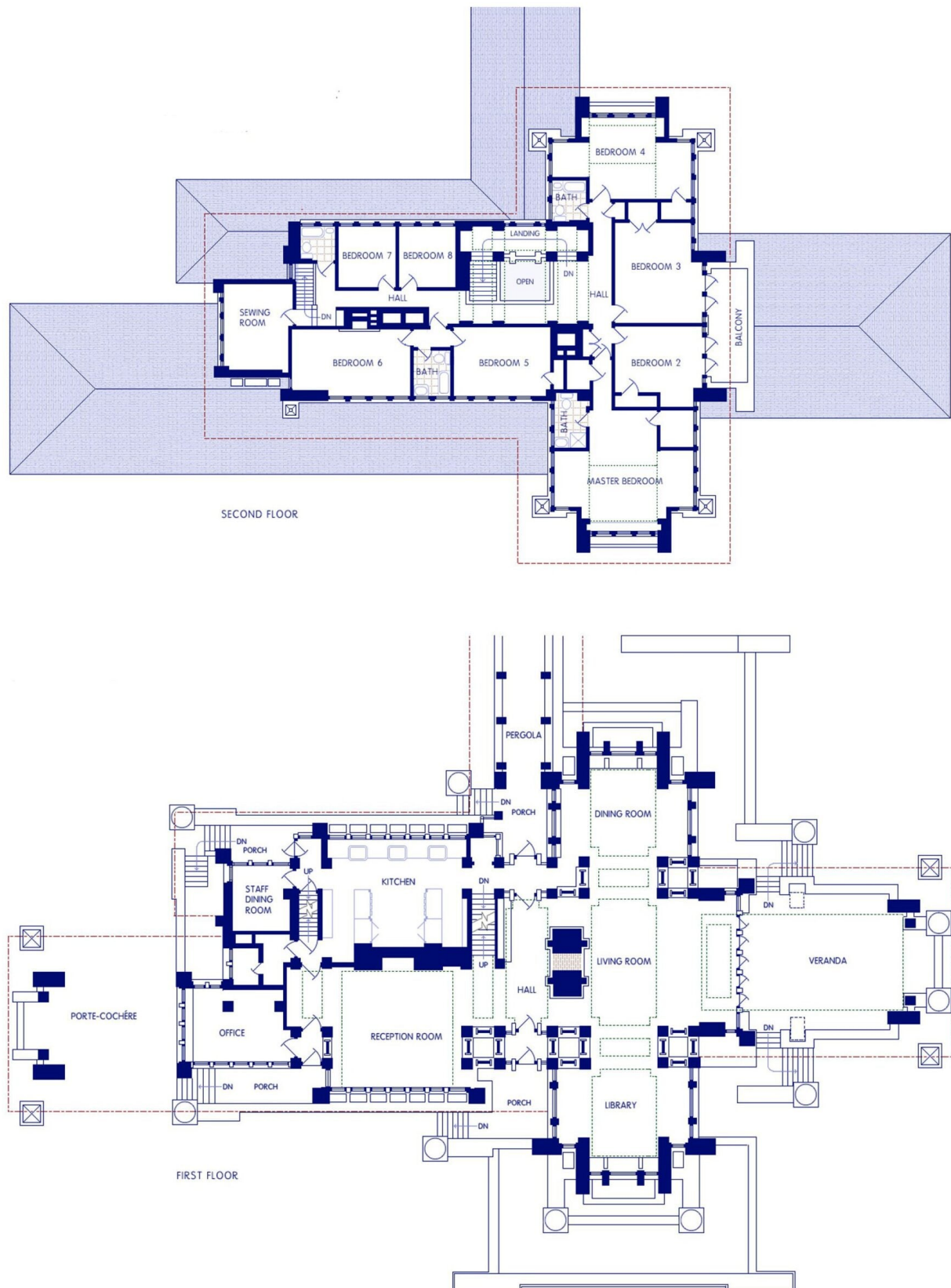
The Darwin D. Martin House, Buffalo

An important early example of the Prairie style was the Martin House finished in 1905 (Hess et al. 2006; Bayer et al., 2015)



The house, situated on a large site with extensive landscaping, was connected to a conservatory by a long glass-roofed pergola. Within the conservatory, Wright placed a full-scale replica of the *Nike of Samothrace*, a Greek statue from the 2nd Century BCE, now in the Louvre. An additional home – the Barton house – for Martin's sister and her husband was also included on the site.

The plan of the Robie house was very similar to that proposed in Wright's article on the Prairie home. However, the overall size was larger, and the second storey was expanded to be as large as the ground floor.



The following photographs by Mike Shriver show the interior of the house: the areas noted on the plan as the library and the

dining room:

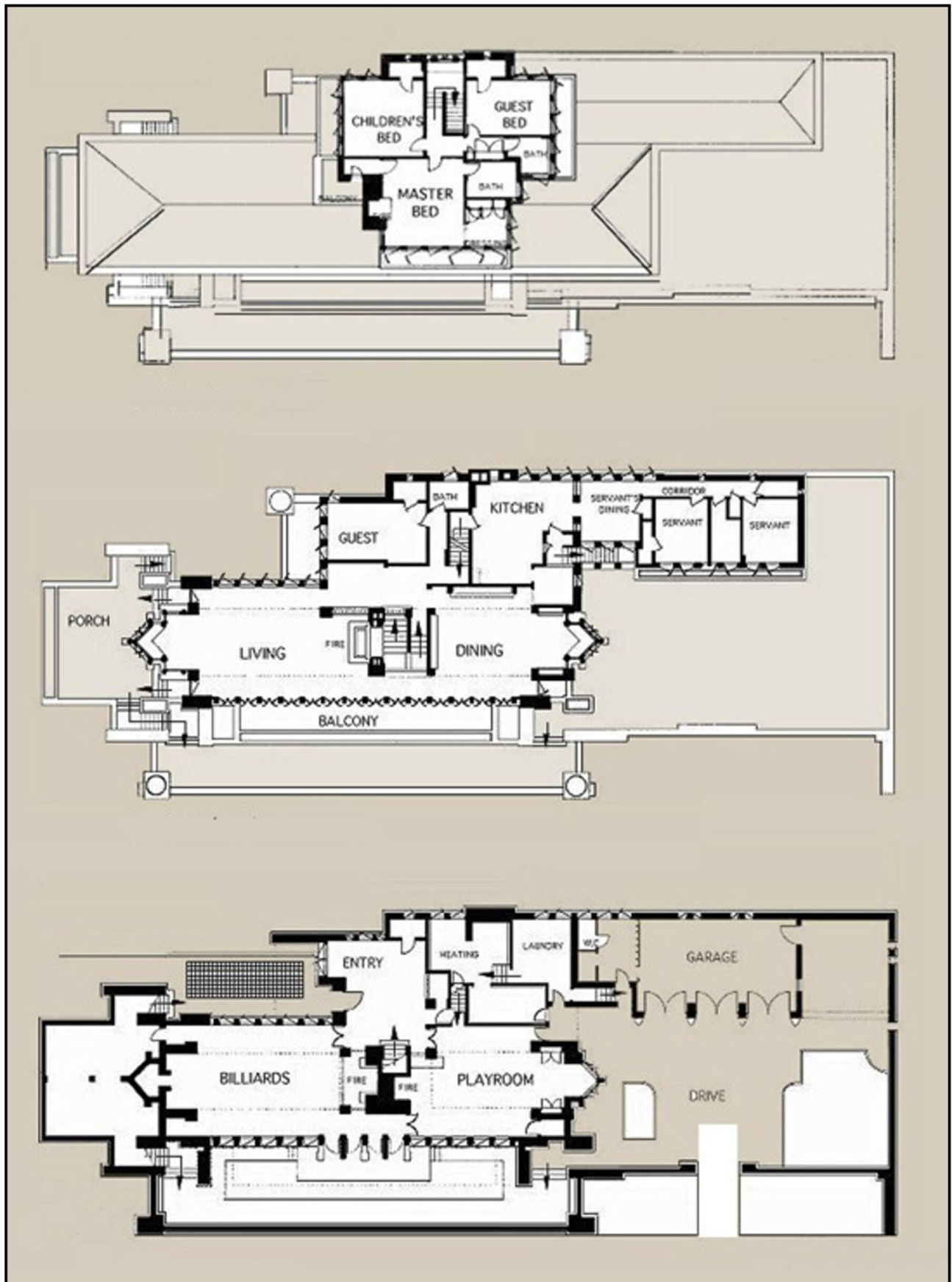


The Darwin Martin House ultimately cost about 40 times the amount quoted in the article about the Prairie home. Wright later worried about the fact that he was building houses only

for the rich; in the 1930s he designed a more affordable set of Usonian houses (“Usonia” comes from “United States of North Independent America”) (Seargeant, 1976). The first of these – the Herbert and Katherine Jacobs First House in Madison, Wisconsin – was constructed on a budget of \$5500 in 1937 (equivalent to \$120,000 today).

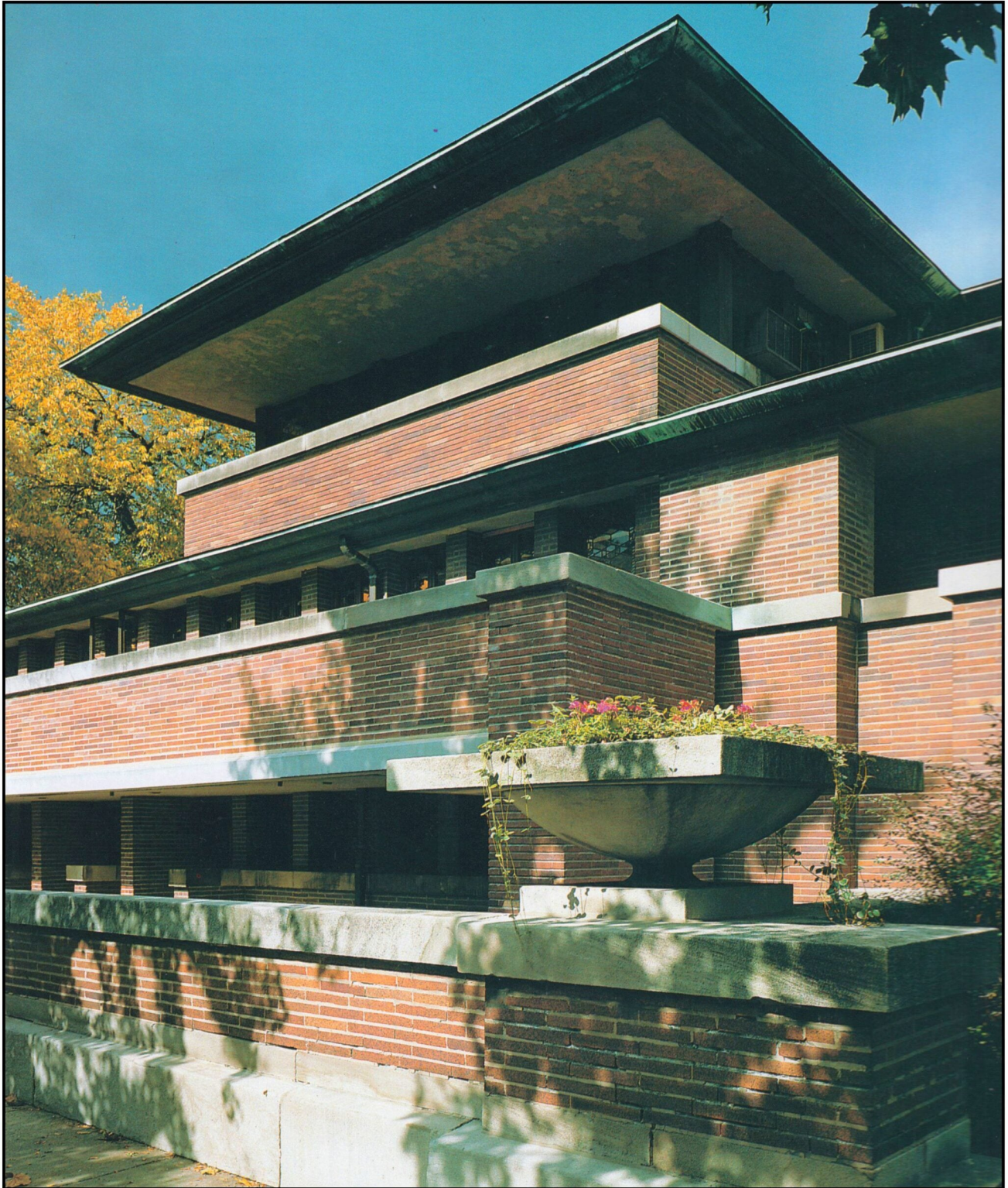
The Frederick C. Robie House, Chicago

The Robie House, built on a relatively narrow piece of land in Chicago, was finished in 1910 (Hoffman, 1984; Larkin & Pfeiffer, 1993; Hess et al., 1996):



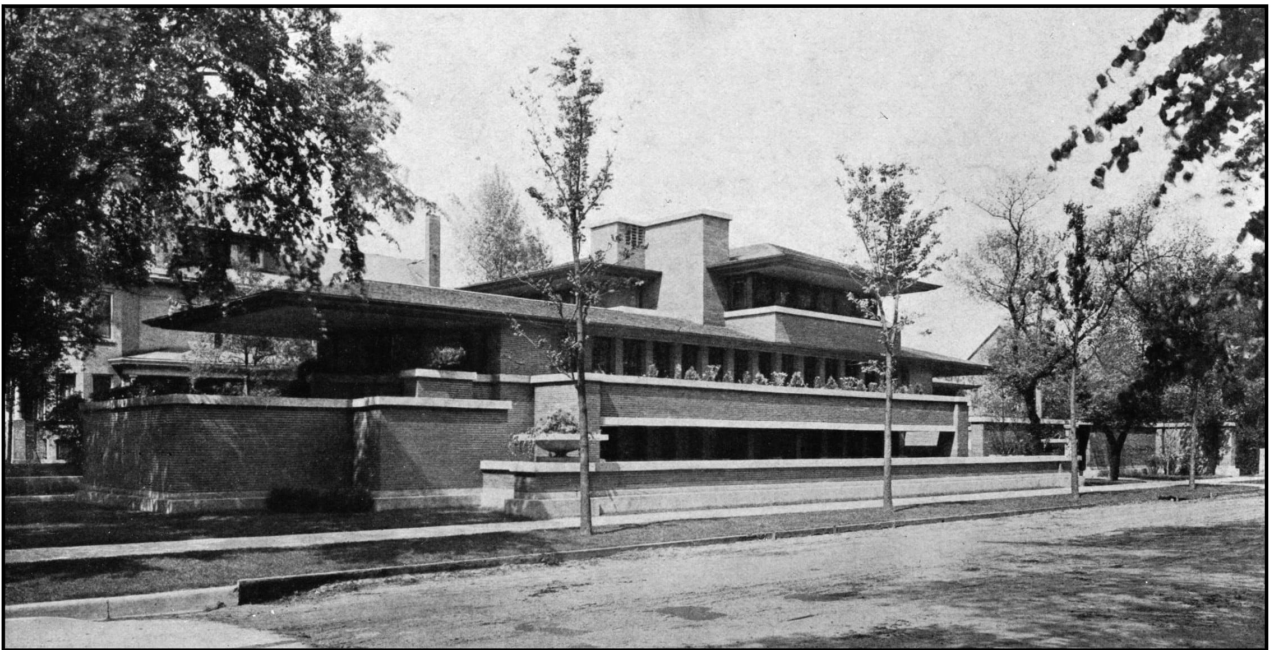
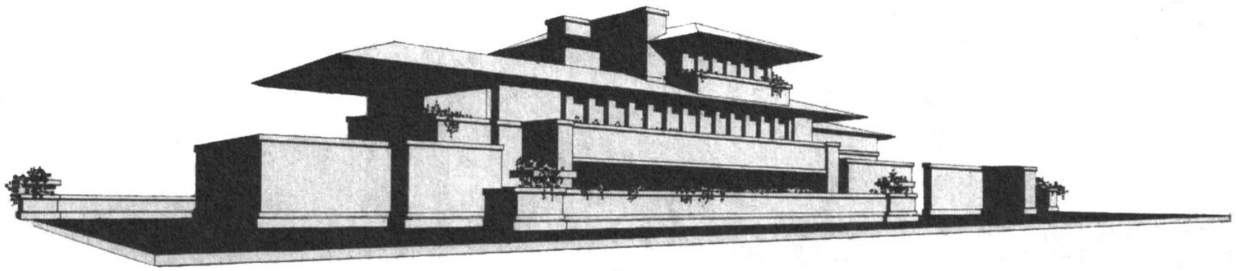
The following photograph of the terrace and belvedere (Larkin

& Pfeiffer, 1993) shows the marvelous concatenation of horizontal levels:



The following illustration shows a photograph from 1911

together with Wright's graphic rendition of the house.



The following are the windows onto the porch:



The Francis W. Little House, Wayzata, Wisconsin.

The Little House in Wayzata was built in 1916, one of the last of the Wright's Prairie homes (Jordy, 1983; Kaufmann, 1992). Having earlier had Wright design their house in Chicago, the Littles commissioned a new home when they moved to Wayzata, a suburb of Madison. The site overlooked the length of Lake Minnetonka. The house contained the largest living room of all Wright's Prairie Houses. When the house was demolished in 1972, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York recreated the living room in its new American Wing. The following are photographs of the two ends of the room:



On the table at one end of the room is a replica of the Nike of Samothrace, smaller than in the Martin house, but still striking in how it accentuates the lightness of the space.

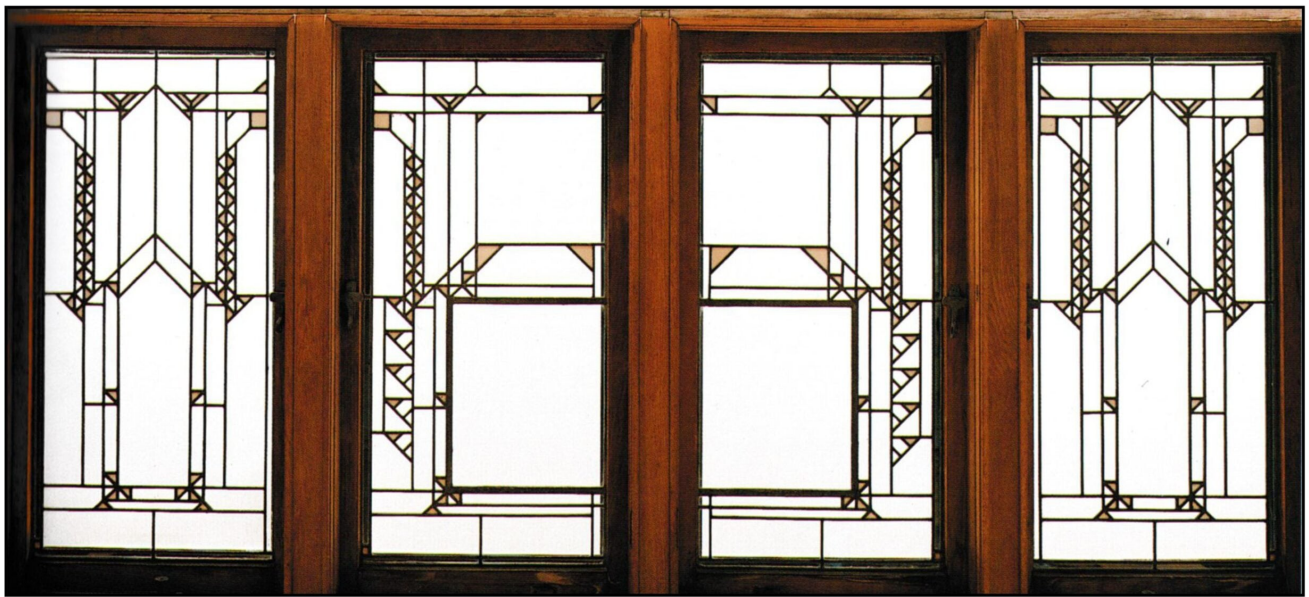
Jory (1983) describes the room:

Here is the huge, pier-like fireplace at one end, with the fireplace opening forced low. Long bands of casement windows run the length of the room, sixteen of them on either side, set under deep, shelf like planes with transom windows

above. The marked horizontals of the shelving—"banding lines," Wright termed them—underscore the basic rectangular shape of the space, against which recessions (alcoves) and projections (piers) can move back and forth. Hence the basic shape is always resonantly present; yet the shifts add peripheral resiliency, ambiguity, and mystery to the space. The banding shelf also intensifies the horizontality of the space, giving "spread" to it, thus striking the keynote of Wright's feeling for the restfulness of "prairie" horizontals. It scales down the spaciousness to human height by marking a perimeter just a bit over head height, and it provides long "roofed" alcoves at the windows—mini-chambers the length of the room—inviting one in toward the windows with their long, cushioned benches from which one takes in the view, not through the staring eye of a plate glass "picture window," but in a cinematic manner, through a series of frames in which the same image shifts ever so slightly as one scans the reel.

Over the windows Wright spun a geometrical web of stained glass. It provides color. It completes the hierarchy of interior ornament with glinting intricacy at the perimeter. It creates a gossamer planar reference in space against which outside distances can be gauged. ... The Little house glass is spare compared to the splendid patterns found in that of some other Wright houses ... Undoubtedly, more spectacular glass would have been desirable for this period room, as a demonstration of what Wright could do. But Little wanted a minimal linear pattern with only the tiniest glints of color in his windows. He rejected a more elaborate scheme suggested by Wright. He feared it would interfere with the view of the lake.

The following illustration shows the windows:



Organic Architecture

The Prairie Home was the first of Wright's great architectural achievements. It provided the basis for his "organic architecture" (Wright, 1930/2008; Wright & Meehan, 1987). Wright used this term to stress the close relationships between the building and the land, and between the building and the materials used in its construction. He also used it to distinguish his approach from that of Corbusier, who was proposing that a home was a "machine for living." The following are the principles of organic architecture as applied to the family home (Wright, 1930/2008, pp 73-75):

1. To reduce the number of necessary parts of the house and the separate rooms to a minimum, and make all come together as enclosed space—so divided that light, air and vista permeated the whole with a sense of unity.
2. To associate the building as a whole with its site by extension and emphasis of the planes parallel to the ground, but keeping the floors off the best part of the site, thus leaving that better part for use in connection with the life of the house. Extended level planes were found useful in this connection.
3. To eliminate the room as a box and the house as another

by making all walls enclosing screens—the ceilings and floors and enclosing screens to flow into each other as one large enclosure of space, with minor subdivisions only. Make all house proportions more liberally human, with less wasted space in structure, and structure more appropriate to material, and so the whole more livable. Liberal is the best word. Extended straight lines or stream-lines were useful in this.

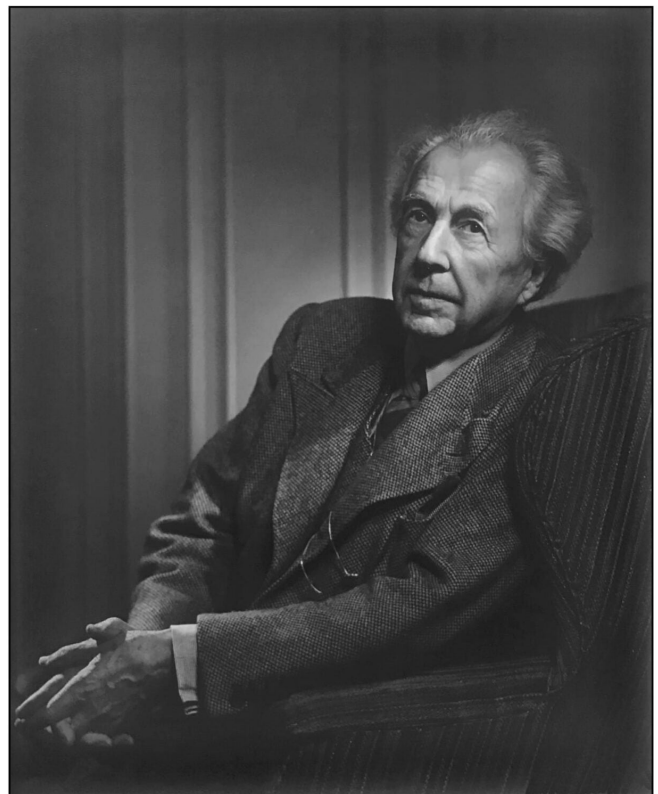
4. To get the unwholesome basement up out of the ground, entirely above it, as a low pedestal for the living-portion of the home, making the foundation itself visible as a low masonry plat-form on which the building should stand.
5. To harmonize all necessary openings to “outside” or to “inside” with good human proportions and make them occur naturally—singly or as a series in the scheme of the whole building. Usually they appeared as “light-screens” instead of walls, because all the “Architecture” of the house was chiefly the way these openings came in such walls as were grouped about the rooms as enclosing screens. The room as such was now the essential architectural expression, and there were to be no holes cut in walls as holes are cut in a box, because this was not in keeping with the ideal of “plastic.” Cutting holes was violent.
6. To eliminate combinations of different materials in favor of mono-material so far as possible; to use no ornament that did not come out of the nature of materials to make the whole building clearer and more expressive as a place to live in, and give the conception of the building appropriate revealing emphasis. Geometrical or straight lines were natural to the machinery at work in the building trades then, so the interiors took on this character naturally.
7. To incorporate all heating, lighting, plumbing so that these systems became constituent parts of the building itself. These service features became architectural and

in this attempt the ideal of an organic architecture was at work.

8. To incorporate as organic Architecture—so far as possible—furnishings, making them all one with the building and designing them in simple terms for machine work. Again straight lines and rectilinear forms.
9. Eliminate the Decorator. He was all curves and all efflorescence, if not all “period.”

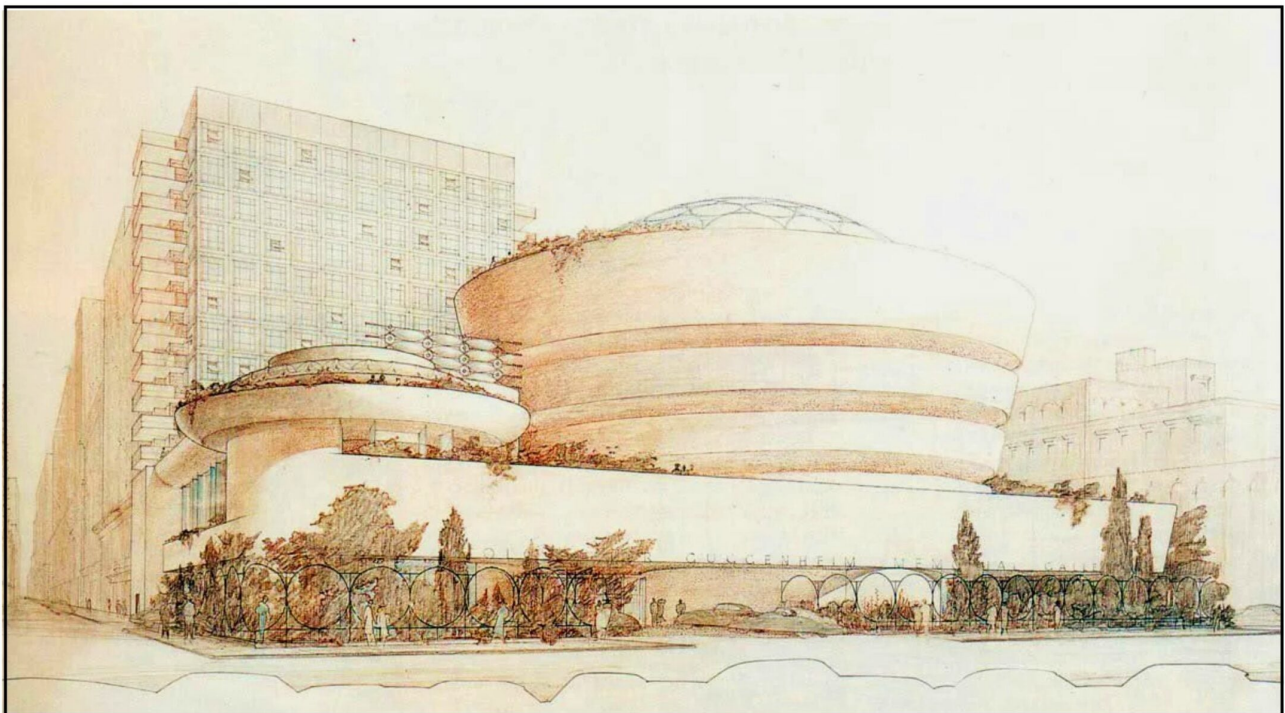
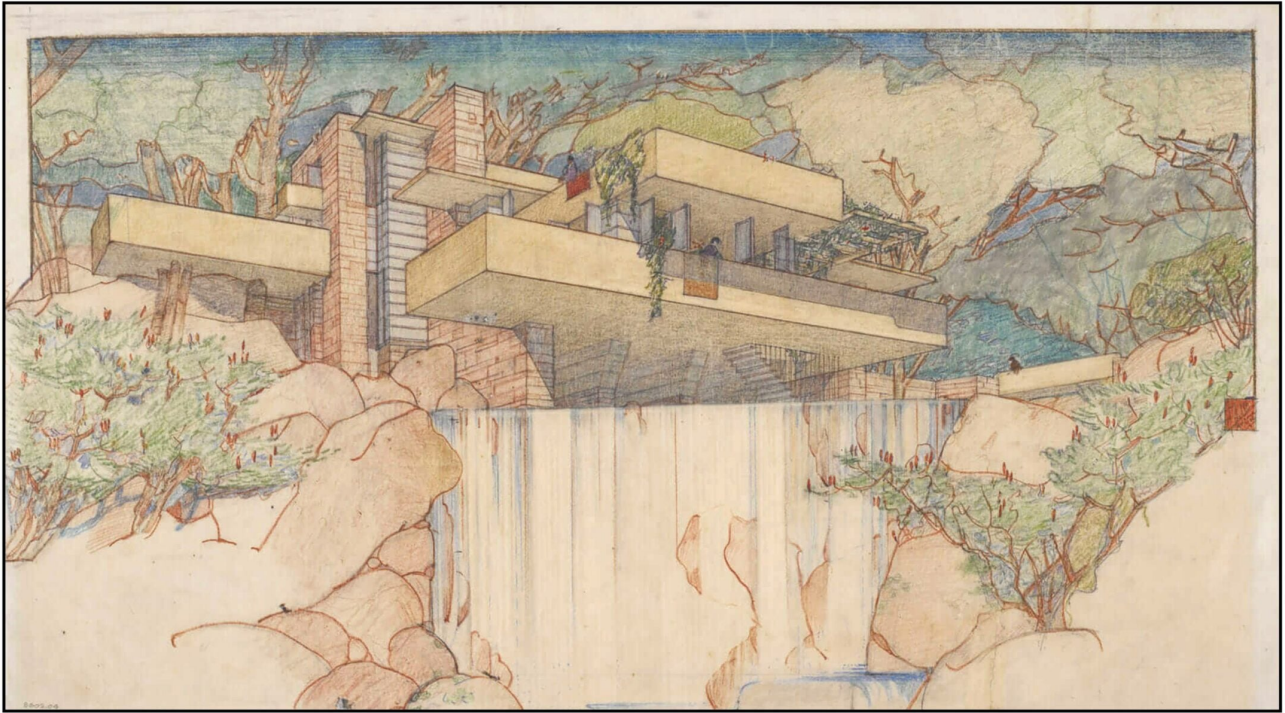
Wright and Modernism

In later years Wright contributed glorious new buildings to our heritage, becoming an acknowledged master in all areas of architecture. The following are two photographs of Wright; one in the stance of a prophet, taken in 1915; and one by Yousuf Karsh from the height of his fame in 1954:



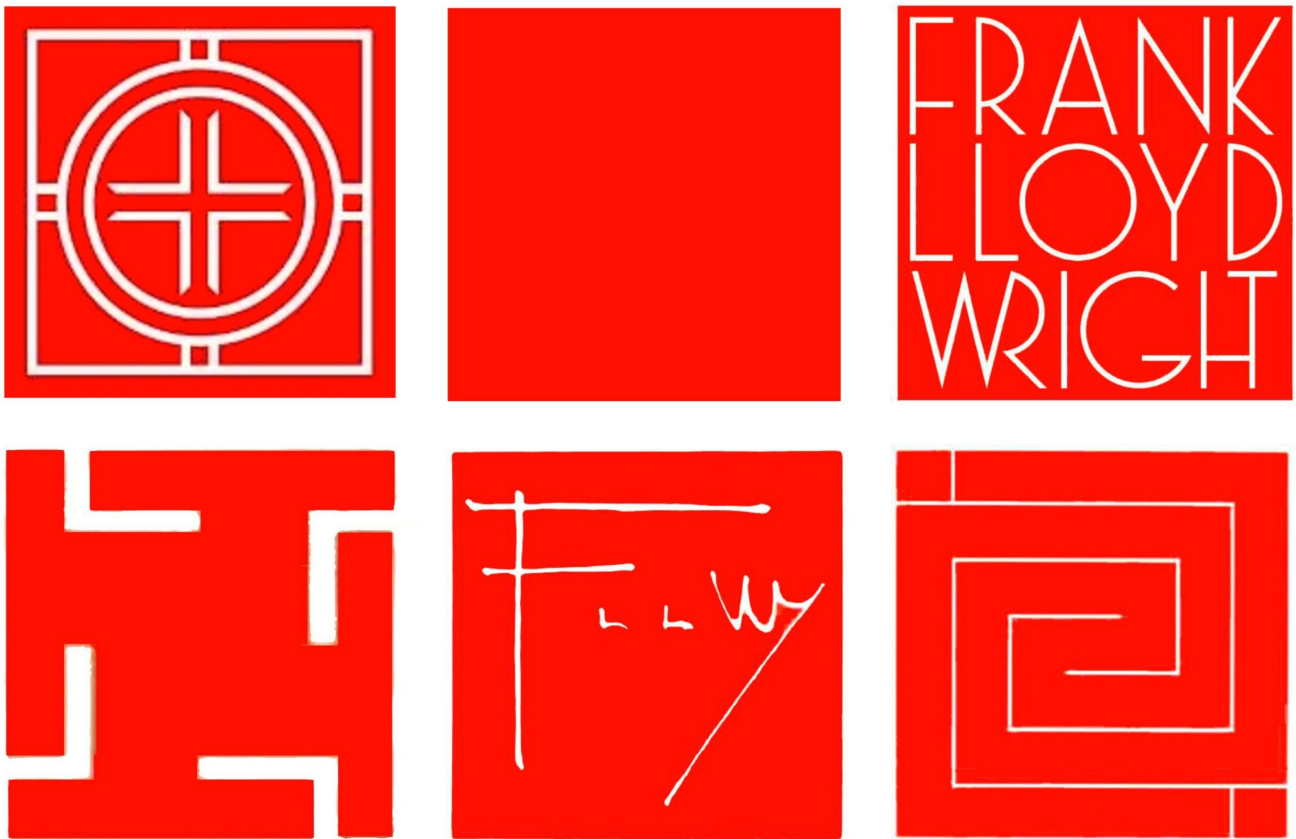
Below are architectural sketches for two of his most famous

buildings: Fallingwater, the Edgar J. Kaufmann house near Mill Run, Pennsylvania, completed in 1937 (see Levine, 1996, Chapter VIII); and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, completed in 1959 (Levine, 1996, Chapter X). These and six other buildings are listed on UNESCO's World Heritage List, among them the Frederick C. Robie House.



Envoi

We can perhaps best conclude our comments on the early work of Frank Lloyd Wright by acknowledging the brand that he created in those early years (de Monchaux, 2018). The red square and its many variants became his signature, and the logo for his two studio/teaching-communities: Taliesin, in Wisconsin, and Taliesin West, in Arizona.



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