

Mumford and Wright: The Power of the Critic

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the relationship of Lewis Mumford and Frank Lloyd Wright, focusing on the nature of Mumford's criticism of Wright and his design work. Mumford and Wright's relationship can be divided into three periods. The first period occurred prior to World War Two, from the early 1920's through the 1930's. In this period the two men enjoyed a mutually supportive relationship. The second period lasted through the 1940's. During this time any relationship they had was hostile. The third period occurred after the War, when they resumed an apparently friendly relationship for the final ten years of Wright's life. By considering the nature of their relationship in each of these three periods, a clear view of Mumford as a critic of Wright and his architecture emerges. The paper argues that Mumford's personal relationship with Wright in each of these periods unduly influenced the nature of his commentary. Indeed, it is possible that some of today's negative, often apocryphal, notions of Wright originated with Mumford.

PRE-WAR RELATIONSHIP

In the late 1910's, Mumford began to write about architecture. It was not until the 1920's, however, that architectural issues became one of his prime interests. In his early writings, issues emerge which would concern him throughout his life. One of these early works, *Reading With A Purpose - Architecture*, provides an excellent synopsis of what he felt to be essential to "great" design. He spoke against the "isms" of architecture when he said;

Beauty, unfortunately, cannot be captured by taking refuge in a "style." Beauty is not something that can be aimed at directly: It is rather what follows when the architect's skill and taste and understanding are devoted to fulfilling the immediate purposes of a building.'

Mumford also discussed the proper use of building materials. His ideas closely aligned with those which Wright had promoted throughout his career. While it is not possible to

know if Mumford's beliefs originated with Wright, it is probable that he was at least partially influenced by Wright. In the course of the book he spoke well of Wright, noting him to be one of the then current architects who had the correct approach to architecture. In the same period Mumford made numerous references to Wright as being an architect of substance.

Wright noted Mumford's ideas, compliments, and endorsements and wrote to thank him in April 1928. Wright even invited Mumford to write and describe "the real course of ideas in the Architecture of (America)." In the same way that Mumford, through his writing embraced Wright, Wright too embraced Mumford, believing him to be a kindred spirit who shared his vision of what architecture could and should be in America. Their rate of correspondence grew with their friendship.

In January 1929 Wright wrote Mumford, discussing his views both on current architectural issues, and on his philosophy of life. Far from being a business letter, this was correspondence between friends. In one section of the letter Wright consoled Mumford about a critic who had attacked Mumford's book, *Sticks and Stones*. Wright also spoke well of Mumford in public. In a letter from 1930 Wright described an incident from one of his lectures at Princeton, saying;

At Princeton I was asked on several different occasions - what do you think of Lewis Mumford... My answer was, "The most valuable critic our country has - a mind of Emersonian quality - with true creative power." Said my hostess one evening, "But don't you think the young man too "cock sure?" "Not of anything he doesn't actually grasp," I said.²

Obviously Wright held Mumford in high esteem and was willing to help him both as a friend in private correspondence, and as an ally in public.

In 1933 Mumford published *The Brown Decades*. In this book, which contained an enthusiastic review of Wright's architecture, Mumford described what he viewed as characteristic of "great" architecture. He spoke of the importance of meeting the human condition and human needs. He

stressed that Wright was the leading example of this type of architect, saying;

On Richardson's solid foundations (Sullivan) laid the cornerstone of the new organic architecture. Sullivan was the link between two great masters, Richardson and Frank Lloyd Wright; and with the development of Wright's architecture the last stage in the transition was born: modern architecture in America was born.'

Mumford continued, adding that Wright made excellent use of the machine and possessed a proper understanding of how materials should be used.

One might be tempted to think that Wright was enthusiastic about Mumford only because Mumford was first enthusiastic about him. However, not all of Mumford's articles about Wright were completely positive. In one of his "Skyline" columns⁴ which appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1935, Mumford questioned aspects of Broadacre City, Wright's grand urban planning scheme. His prime concern focused on Wright's design for low-income housing. Mumford argued that Wright should look to other examples of European and American housing. After reading the article, Wright wrote Mumford and discussed in more detail his thoughts on Broadacre's low-income housing units. Wright argued that "the German tenement and slum solution" was not as good as the individual units of Broadacre. Wright said that his low-income units were "no less slightly and dignified in quality" than nearby homes of greater expense. He concluded, saying;

When you have time... please explain (your thoughts on the design of the city.) Will you? You might teach me something I ought to know.⁵

Mumford responded that he found it inappropriate for Wright to "lump" all of the good and bad things done in European housing into "slum solutions." He also felt that Wright's budget for these low-income houses was unrealistic. He concluded, saying,

Perhaps you'll see better what I am driving at - and in the meanwhile I'll try zealously to understand better what you are driving at...⁶

During this pre-war period Wright and Mumford developed a strong friendship and a mutual respect for each other's work. They freely exchanged and questioned one another's ideas, and in many ways became almost like family. It was soon common for Wright and his wife to visit Mumford and his wife in New York City. The nature of their relationship and correspondence throughout this pre-war period was, in Mumford's words, "affectionate," as they became increasingly aligned. As Mumford discussed his forthcoming book, *The Culture of Cities*, he wrote,

In the act of writing the final sections on the forms of the future, I have found myself closer to you in thought and outlook than perhaps ever before...⁸

As a critic Mumford provided thoughtful insight into Wright's organic architecture, the nature of materials, and human aspects of architecture. When Mumford questioned aspects of Wright's work, he did so without undue bias: his criticism was never of the man. Certainly had Mumford wanted to critique Wright's personal life he would have had ample opportunity.

DIVISION AND THE WAR

As World War Two was being fought overseas, Mumford became very concerned about its possible outcome and advocated the United States's involvement at the earliest possible date. Wright felt that no person who was truly cultured and in possession of a strong sense of social consciousness could condone war. From 1938 to 1941 Mumford wrote an increasing number of articles in support of the war,⁹ and tensions between the two men grew. Recognizing this tension, but wanting to maintain the friendship, Wright wrote Mumford in April 1941 saying;

It is a real pain to me to find ourselves in disagreement. I know little of politics. What opinions I hold are based only upon principles I apprehend. So I am sure we have no quarrel outside what expedients to employ.¹⁰

Exchanges between the two men, however, grew increasingly hostile with Wright arguing for peace and Mumford for war. In one letter Mumford accused Wright of being,

...ready to accept a world order based on totalitarian corruption and slavery and terrorism...

...In short: you have become a living corpse: a spreader of active corruption. You dishonor all the generous impulses you once ennobled. Be silent! lest you bring upon yourself some greater shame."

The situation reached its peak when Mumford wrote a scathing letter about Wright for *The New Leader*, a pro-war paper. Upset with Wright's position on the war, Mumford referred to him as a hypocrite. Devastated, Wright wrote Mumford describing the pain he felt from the attack by his trusted friend, and once again advanced his idea of democracy and peace. He concluded the letter, saying,

Goodbye, Lewis, I shall read your "brief" in the New Yorker with shame. I shall read it knowing your real opinion is worthless whatever you may write.¹²

Although Wright continued to send yearly greetings to Mumford, it would be over ten years before they resumed correspondence together.

Following their bitter exchange and through the 1940's, Mumford made few, if any, references to Wright and his architecture. This is surprising given the increased activity in Wright's work during the mid 1930's. Indeed, from the mid 30's forward Wright entered his "second career," completing such significant projects as the Johnson Wax Administration Building and Research Tower (1936, 1944). For

Mumford, differences over the war and the split between them socially obviously meant there was to be a split between them professionally.

POST-WAR RELATIONSHIP

In 1951 Wright inscribed a catalog from an exhibition of his work in Florence with the words, "In spite of all, your old F. Ll. W.," and sent it to Mumford. After a decade of silence Mumford wrote back, discussing, among other things, the death of his son in the war. He also discussed a chapter entitled "Love" from his forthcoming book, *The Conduct of Life*. He said that love was,

the only force capable of saving our loveless and death-seeking civilization - and it is high time, in our relations, that I exhibited a little of that quality myself..."

He went on to say that he hoped each had forgiven differences from the past.

Mumford's political philosophy had changed in the years since he had last spoken with Wright. He would soon write harshly against the atom bomb and later the Vietnam War. Wright immediately dismissed past problems, writing Mumford in the same affectionate manner he had used before the war. He discussed his feelings on architecture and invited Mumford and his wife to visit Taliesin. Wright evidently hoped to reestablish the pre-war relationship the two had shared.

With their relationship apparently mended, Mumford once again began to discuss Wright. In late 1953 he visited "Sixty Years of Living Architecture," a show of Wright's work located on the site of the future Guggenheim Museum. To commemorate the occasion, Mumford wrote two articles entitled "A Phoenix Too Infrequent" for *The New Yorker*. Prior to their publication, he wrote Wright telling him that he owed it both to Wright and to future generations to say all that needed to be said, and that differences between the two men's philosophies would come up. Still, he asked Wright to let their friendship absorb the shock.

Upon first reading, the articles seem extremely complimentary to Wright; in many ways they are. Mumford described Wright as "one of the most creative architectural geniuses of all time." He also praised much of Wright's architecture. After approximately two thirds of the first article, however, Mumford's tone shifted. Saying that it was difficult to critique Wright's work because the personality and the architecture were so closely tied together, he implied that he wanted to be critical of the architecture and not the man. In the remainder of the first, and bulk of the second, article, however, Mumford attacked the man as much as the architecture. This represents a major change in both the content and style of Mumford's criticism of Wright. He no longer limited his thoughts to the architecture, but now included the creator.

Mumford's major problem centered on his perception of

Wright's ego and the "willfulness" of his designs. For example, he said;

...Wright's dwelling houses sometimes put me off by persuading me that he is thinking not of the client's needs but of the architect's own desires and delights.¹⁴

There are several issues which arise from this statement. First, why did Mumford suddenly feel this to be a problem from which Wright suffered? From early in his career, Wright's ego was a well known aspect of his personality. Why had the issue not come up in the past? Did Wright's relationships with his clients change in the period before and after the war, or did Mumford's attitudes about Wright change?

A question also arises about the validity of Mumford's claim. Where did he get his information? Did he speak with a number of Wright's clients before writing the piece? In a letter to Wright about the article, Mumford said that his claim was based on,

...the reports of (clients) and above all, on the evidence of your buildings themselves. What you say there is more unmistakable than any conversations, or even than your own well-considered words.¹⁵

It is curious that Mumford's attack was based primarily on built evidence. How could he know if the building was suited to its occupants without speaking with them and discovering the ways they lived?

Consider reports from two of Wright's clients. Edgar Kaufmann Jr., the son of the client for Fallingwater, recalled working with Wright to be a pleasure. He noted that prior to beginning his design work, Wright spent a great deal of time with the family in an effort to understand their needs. Kaufmann noted that when disagreements occurred between the architect and the client, Wright would always allow the client to prevail, even when he clearly disagreed.

The client for the Hanna House also reported a positive experience with Wright. Ms. Hanna said;

The day the first sketches arrived was a memorable one - memorable on two counts: delight and disappointment. The house sketched was so dramatically elegant we were overwhelmed. It took hours before we came down off cloud nine and took a hard, cold look. Regretfully we returned the plans to Mr. Wright with the explanation that we simply couldn't afford such a magnificent dwelling and that much as we admired the beauty of the structure, we must have a modest, one-story house. He was not at all perturbed by our response to his drawing. He graciously accepted our explanation and went to work on a new concept...(Later when the new plans were presented) I protested that there was nothing in the kitchen plan. Mr. Wright's response was: "Well, you must know what you want. I've given you the proper shell, now you get busy and fill it in."¹⁶

These comments reveal Wright to be an architect who

welcomed input from his clients as he worked to satisfy their needs. Even when a client's input required a complete re-design of the project, Wright was cooperative. There are numerous other examples of satisfied clients in this regard.

A critic of Mumford's abilities should not have relied primarily on built evidence as the basis for his claim that Wright disregarded clients' needs. It is probable that had Mumford contacted representative clients, he would naturally have spoken with at least one of the above people as each was then living in one of Wright's more noteworthy residences.

This is not to say that all of Wright's clients were completely satisfied with their association with Wright. No architect could design the many projects that Wright did and not have some dissatisfied clients. It indicates, however, that Mumford's critique of Wright may not have been as objective as possible. Thus a question arises: Did Mumford, as his writing would imply, truly believe that Wright ignored the client's needs, or did Mumford present this view knowing he was being manipulative and presenting a negative image of Wright? Neither option presents a positive view of Mumford. If the former case were true, then he would have to plead ignorance of some easily researched facts. If the later case were true he would have been admitting that he was being deceitful.

In the same article Mumford attacked Wright for a self-professed arrogance. Mumford said;

...arrogance is not necessarily better than real humility, the kind that learns, through self-examination, from its errors, that wrestles with its opponent instead of scornfully dismissing him and so becomes stronger...¹⁷

Mumford provided the reader with an image of Wright as an architect who was unwilling to discuss his views with others.

While Wright had a large ego, his fondness for lively discussion was common knowledge among critics and architects of the day. Mumford knew about Wright's relationship with noted critic Russell Hitchcock. Among the many debates between Hitchcock and Wright was the meaning of "organic" architecture. In a letter to Hitchcock, Wright suggested that they meet for conversation. He said;

...I've always felt you were not sure of what organic architecture meant. But the argument is still interesting and worth a man's good time...¹⁸

Wright was noted for similar discussions with Philip Johnson, then of the Museum of Modern Art.

Another paradox in Mumford's critique is the many invitations he never accepted from Wright to discuss architecture at Taliesin. On numerous occasions Wright indicated that he valued Mumford's views. The previously mentioned invitation to discuss Broadacre City is one of numerous possible examples. Again, the question arises: Did Mumford's personal feelings about Wright unduly influence this criticism?

In the second article, while Mumford continued to praise Wright's work, he escalated his attack on Wright's ego and his willfulness. These attacks, however, are often inconsistent with Mumford's other writings. For example, Mumford attacked Wright for his emphasis on the "nature of materials," arguing that it overrode more important human-oriented issues. Mumford said,

To respect "the nature of materials" - a phrase on (Wright's) lips - and to create original forms in harmony with the mechanical processes that shape them are perhaps his main concerns. These preoccupations override any regard for the varied natures of men whenever they are not in harmony with this effort... This aspect of his strength partly accounts for a human failing that goes with it: the client he seeks above all to satisfy is himself.¹⁹

It is curious that Mumford elected to criticize Wright's emphasis on the nature of materials at this time rather than earlier in his career. Perhaps more interesting is the fact that writing in the 1920's Mumford had promoted an understanding of the nature materials very similar to Wright's, and that he had mentioned Wright at that time as being one of the architects who understood this important concept.

In the course of the second article Mumford discussed some of Wright's work completed early in his career. Among the buildings considered was the Larkin Building in New York. While he said that it was one of Wright's most consummate achievements, he also argued that its,

...monumentality was at odds with the quiet, direct treatment of its interior... Despite its commercial purpose it had the acoustic properties of a cathedral and the sober austerity of a vast law court, and who could have guessed, on approaching it, that soap coupons were sorted there? ...Wright's basic plan for the Larkin Building was so sound that it might have shown the way, but his fresh contribution was hidden behind an irrelevant monumentality.²⁰

Mumford felt that the Larkin Building's mass was inappropriate for its "dreary site," and that it gave no indication of the business which it housed. He argued that Wright misplaced his creativity and design efforts in such buildings because he had no appropriate outlet for his talents. In short, he once again accused Wright of ignoring the needs of the client, site, and program.

Mumford's criticism is paradoxical when considered against his prior comments on the Larkin Building. Twenty years earlier Mumford had praised this building as an example for other architects to follow. What made him change his mind? Perhaps the building's destruction several years earlier had encouraged a new reading. Perhaps he just changed his mind. In any event, one is left with serious questions about Mumford's intent.

In the second article Mumford also criticized Wright for his understanding and use of the machine. He said;

As for the machine, Wright's approach to it has been ambivalent, not to say paradoxical (sic). Though he was possibly the first modern architect to freely accept the machine, in ornament as well as construction, he has little use for its indigenous forms - the impersonal, the typical, the anonymous. Le Corbusier gave a fresh impetus to the modern movement by showing how much good form had already been produced by the machine, in ordinary drinking glasses, pipes, bentwood chairs, and office equipment; Wright, on the other hand, saw machine production as a way of producing new forms that would bear his unmistakable mark.²¹

Compare the above excerpt with Mumford's writing from two weeks earlier, where he said,

Failing to find in the market either furniture or fittings that were in harmony with his new houses, Wright insisted upon designing these accessories, from chairs and tables to china and cutlery. A great number of these houses were boldly Cubist a decade before Cubism, and they are much better demonstrations of the new aesthetics that derived from Cubism and the machine than is the thin two-dimensionalism of Le Corbusier's designs in the nineteen-twenties.²²

One week Mumford insists that Wright's use of the machine is much better than that of Le Corbusier. Two weeks later Le Corbusier is presented as the more masterful of the two in his understanding and use of the machine. Of course, it is also possible to return to *The Brown Decades* where Mumford praised Wright's use of the machine.

Such immediate and obvious conflicts in Mumford's arguments raise serious questions about his method and the content of his critique. Again, why did he choose to write in this way? A reader would, at best, be confused, and at worst assume that once again, Wright's willfulness and ego impaired his designs.

After reading Mumford's "A Phoenix Too Infrequent" articles, I suspect many readers were left with an impression of Wright as a brilliant, but egomaniacal architect; the kind of designer you might admire from afar as opposed to one you would trust with your budgetary, physical, and psychological needs.

Mumford claimed that he considered these articles to be extremely positive commentaries on Wright's work. Still, as this brief analysis has shown, Mumford's criticism, while often positive, left a dubious, if not negative impression of Wright as a human and an architect.

CONCLUSION

This brief paper has analyzed three periods in the relationship of Frank Lloyd Wright and Lewis Mumford. The first period is characterized by their mutually supportive relationship. Mumford's critiques of Wright's work focused on the built form, not the man. The two corresponded frequently, and affectionately, developing a strong camaraderie.

In contrast to the first period, the second period is one of bitter, almost hateful relations. Due to differences over World War Two, their relationship eventually ended, and correspondence between them did not resume for over ten years. During this period Mumford made few, if any, references to Wright and his work.

In the third period, the two men resumed an apparently friendly relationship. As shown, however, the nature of Mumford's criticism of Wright changed substantially in this period. No longer confining himself to comments on the buildings, Mumford criticized the man. Also, Mumford's criticism in this period was simultaneously praising and damning. At best, Mumford misrepresented aspects of Wright's method and his architecture.

I propose that in each of these periods, but particularly in the third, Mumford allowed his personal relationship with Wright to unduly influence the character of his criticism. There is little doubt that during the second period, Mumford's refusal to discuss Wright's work in what became one of Wright's important periods, was strongly tied to personal differences stemming from opposing views about the war.

Less obvious, but possibly more damaging, are Mumford's discussions of Wright in the third period. As noted, while in many ways these discussions provide extremely positive commentary about Wright, in other subtle, but strong ways they are damning. Mumford's Wright is the brilliant genius who, once "he finds a client willing to play with him," designs the building that Wright himself wants, "regardless of economic limitations or functional requirements."²³ Whether Mumford intended a veiled negativity or whether it was unknown to him, the result of some submerged urge, cannot be known. I propose, however, that Mumford never completely forgave Wright for their differences over the war, and that his criticism, intentionally or not, was negatively colored by the affair. Moreover, his commentary had a broad impact.

The powerful range of Mumford's influence cannot be overstated. As the author of *The New Yorker's* "Skyline" column, he had a very large audience and was arguably America's foremost critic of architecture and urban planning. Interestingly, many people have an understanding of Wright which is similar to that forwarded by Mumford in his later "Skyline" columns. To this day many see Wright as a brilliant, but uncompromising egotist who cared little if any about his client's wishes. He is often considered a self-centered man whose only concern was getting his own way, regardless of budget, schedule, or other people. I propose that this understanding is at least partially due to Mumford's critiques of Wright. Again, intentional or not, the effect remains.

Finally, there is a larger issue regarding Mumford's criticism of others. Had the correspondence between the two men not been preserved, much of this paper's argument could not have been established. In view of this correspondence and other available material, Mumford's criticism is seen to be overly biased. Recognizing this gaping hole in the

fabric of Mumford's criticism of Wright leaves me wondering where similar holes might exist in his other works.

NOTES

- ¹ Mumford, L. *Reading With A Purpose - Architecture*, American Library Association, 1926: pg. 12.
- ² Wright, F. L., Letter to Lewis Mumford, Undated 1930, The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.
- ³ Mumford, L. *The Brown Decades*, Harcourt Brace, 1933: pg. 165.
- ⁴ Mumford, L. "The Skyline: Mr. Wright's City - Downtown Dignity," *The New Yorker*, April 27, 1935: pg. 63-65.
- ⁵ Wright, F. L., Letter to Lewis Mumford, 27 April 1935, The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.
- ⁶ Mumford, L., Letter to F. L. Wright, 25 June 1935, The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.
- ⁷ Mumford, L., *Sketches from Life*, Dial Press, 1982: pg. 435.
- ⁸ Mumford, L., Letter to F. L. Wright, 28 August 1937, The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.
- ⁹ Mumford's position on the war can be read in, Mumford, L., "Call to Arms," *New Republic*, May 18, 1938: pg. 39-42. Also see, Mumford, L., "The Corruption of Liberalism," *New Republic*, April 29, 1940: pg. 568-573.
- ¹⁰ Wright, F. L., Letter to Lewis Mumford, 29 April 1941, The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.
- ¹¹ Mumford, L., Letter to F. L. Wright, 30 May 1941, The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.
- ¹² Wright, F. L., Letter to Lewis Mumford, 3 June 1941, The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.
- ¹³ Mumford, L., Letter to F. L. Wright, 28 June 1951, The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.
- ¹⁴ Mumford, L. "The Skyline: A Phoenix Too Infrequent-One," *The New Yorker*, Nov. 28, 1953: pg. 85-86.
- ¹⁵ Mumford, L., Letter to F. L. Wright, 3 December 1953, The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.
- ¹⁶ "How A Wright House Came To Be Built," *House Beautiful*, Jan. 1963: pg. 57.
- ¹⁷ Mumford, L. "The Skyline: A Phoenix Too Infrequent-One," *The New Yorker*, Dec. 12, 1953: pg. 86-87.
- ¹⁸ Wright, F. L., Letter to Russell Hitchcock, 8 March 1958, The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.
- ¹⁹ Mumford, L. "The Skyline: A Phoenix Too Infrequent-Two," *The New Yorker*, Dec. 12, 1953: pg. 105.
- ²⁰ Mumford, L. "The Skyline: A Phoenix Too Infrequent-Two," *The New Yorker*, Dec. 12, 1953: pg. 106.
- ²¹ Mumford, L. "The Skyline: A Phoenix Too Infrequent-Two," *The New Yorker*, Dec. 12, 1953: pg. 110.
- ²² Mumford, L. "The Skyline: A Phoenix Too Infrequent-One," *The New Yorker*, Nov. 28, 1953: pg. 81.
- ²³ Mumford, L. "The Skyline: A Phoenix Too Infrequent-Two," *The New Yorker*, Dec. 12, 1953: pg. 106.