

A Way Through History With Frank Lloyd Wright

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Frank Lloyd Wright, a Romantic architect if there ever was one, never subscribed completely to either temptation offered by 19th century Romanticism: to embrace history as the inevitable unfolding of an organic whole, or, alternatively, to reject it as an increasingly burdensome accumulation of convention. Much like nature, history was not to be copied or taken straight; it was a resource to be interpreted. By this approach Wright avoided the dead ends that considered history as something to be gotten over, or as something to be curated.

Wright made use of history in his own architectural work, but history made use of him in its own way. He fit uncomfortably into the avant-garde predictions enshrined in Johnson and Hitchcock's Modern Architecture exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932. The curators included Wright even though they considered him "not quite modern."¹ He did not consider himself part of their "zeitgeist," of course, but did place his work and America in the 20th century within a long arc of cultural evolution outlined by Victor Hugo in *Notre Dame de Paris* which he had read as a teenager. A review of Wright's words and designs will show how an architect's desire to get on with the work of building treated history as one of several resources available for his use. Wright's suspicion of academic architects was fueled, in part, by their reliance on history. All too often, academic architects wore history as an emblem of connoisseurship and authority and used arcane citations and subtle distinctions to hide their lack of interpretive power. Wright's drive to make architecture carried him beyond such distractions and led him to interpret history both as a pattern of events and as a collection of evidence he could digest rather than precedents he could cite to gain repute. For him history was nutrient, not credential.

WRITTEN REFERENCES TO HISTORY

Wright made passing references to historical periods throughout his life, mostly to cast aspersions. Sometimes it is the actual architecture that is the problem; sometimes it is the way it has been represented by historians. Sometimes it was both. Palladio was one problem; Palladianism was another. In text on a panel along the stairs in the Hillside facilities for the School of Architecture at Taliesin, Wright exhorted: "Let us see or hear no more of Doric or Palladian; nor of any architecture of the Renaissance. . . Creation emulates, but never imitates."

Wright's favorite period to attack was the Renaissance. It was always bad. (Its early phases did get a kind of pass as Wright wrote, particularly about the painters, when a resident in Tuscany.) Having begun with the translation of texts and philological investigations, Renaissance scholars and aspiring architects would naturally approach design by using Roman buildings and ruins like texts. In 1914 Wright wrote: "The art of architecture has fallen from high estate –lower steadily since the Men of Florence patched together fragments of the art of Greece and Rome and, in vain endeavor to re-establish its eminence, manufactured the Renaissance."² The kind of "learning" required to design in that fashion was discredited in this acid observation from 1910: "Whence came corrupt styles like the Renaissance? From false education."³

His dismissal of the Renaissance was greatly encouraged by Victor Hugo's observation that it was "the setting sun all Europe mistook for dawn."⁴ Wright quoted Hugo his whole life.⁵ He extended his dismissal by observing that: "Any attempt to use form borrowed from other times and conditions must end as the Renaissance ends, with to-

tal loss of inherent relation of the soul of life of the people."⁶ When Victor Hugo linked the Renaissance with the invention of the printing press, he helped Wright to see how printing unnaturally prolonged that style, such as it was, through books, the very heart of academic education.

The Gothic elicited quite contradictory responses from Wright. "...[T]he Gothic towers of the builders of the thirteenth century tortured stone into forms that stone never should have." (1937)⁷ But in 1910 the Gothic had been cited positively for other reasons: "A revival of the Gothic spirit is needed in the art and architecture of modern life. . . Reviving the Gothic spirit does not mean using the forms of the Gothic . . ." ⁸ That crucial distinction, of course, is the result of interpretation, or "emulation" as he called it. It may be possible to extend the principles of the time as he observed in 1927: "Such harmony as we know in the Gothic of 'Le Moyen Age' is ours again."⁹ Referring to the period using the French term suggests that he does not mean "the Gothic" as represented by, say, the 19th century Gothic Revival, but some original Gothic. How would Wright come to know that? Maybe in much the same way Viollet-le-Duc did when restoring Notre Dame of Paris or Carcassonne; by "channeling" the medieval master builders. However, Wright had high praise for Viollet's Dictionnaire Raisonne as he did for Ruskin's Seven Lamps of Architecture.

Italy, where he spent part of a year in 1910 in Fiesole, outside Florence, offered lessons beyond the despised Renaissance, however. Rome supplied lessons in structure, but not architecture, as he observed in 1930: "Reflect that the ancient Romans at the height of their prosperity lied likewise to themselves no less shamefully when they pasted Greek architecture on their magnificent engineering invention of the masonry arch to cover it decently. Romans, too, were trying to make the kind of picture or the grand gesture demanded by culture."¹⁰

Wright intensified his rejection of Renaissance precedents, particularly the status Greek architecture had obtained in architectural histories by the 20th century: "It is time we realized that Grecian buildings have been universally overrated as Architecture: they are full of lies, pretence and stupidity." Gaining momentum, he goes on to Rome: " And Roman architecture, but for the no-

bility of the structural arch, a thing now dead – was a wholly debased version of the better Greek elements that preceded it."¹¹ The cardinal sin in every case was weak or absent interpretive effort that settled for tepid reuse and, to put a finer point on it, copying.

Italy also showed Wright a building tradition free of that direct appropriation of literary culture. The vernacular he admired around him in Tuscany demonstrated how one could build unencumbered by imported learning. As he wrote while in Italy: "Nevertheless, here as elsewhere, the true basis for any serious study of the art of architecture is in those indigenous structures, the more humble buildings everywhere, which are to architecture what folklore is to literature or folk songs are to music, and with which architects were seldom concerned."¹² Looking beyond the enshrined conventions of architectural history to humbler sources is a familiar move for artists, authors and architects in modern and even Classical times. Romantic artists and poets celebrated the authentic, the natural and the native as did Le Corbusier who admired the simpler, uncorrupted work of vernacular activity, even as he was urging further industrialization.¹³

Exotic architecture also provided an escape from privileged examples of the European cultural tradition. Wright's response to Japan is well known. It is noteworthy that an aspiring American architect would go to Japan before he ever got to Europe. Japan was important for more than the old, domestic buildings Wright admired. The wood block print drew the most intense interpretive focus from Wright as is evident in his long essay "The Japanese Print" from 1912.¹⁴ Five years later he placed that artifact in a larger historical context: "The Japanese print comes, a humble messenger from the Far East, to emphasize the futility of the Renaissance . . . These first prints had large share, I am sure, in vulgarizing the Renaissance even then for me."¹⁵

The preceding citations are not exhaustive of Wright's commentary on historical architecture; they do serve to indicate that his responses were not "consistent," but complex as he tried to make use of history without succumbing to it

DESIGNED REFERENCES TO HISTORY

Wright's interpretation of history appears in his architecture as well as his words. There were two contending historical categories Wright worked to interpret at the beginning of his career: classicism and the picturesque. His first job in Chicago was with Lyman Silsbee, a recognized architect in the picturesque style. The style permitted considerable freedom, but did not provide the framework for poise and repose, two characteristics Wright soon emphasized as critical for his architecture.

Wright was sensitive to any description of his work as picturesque. As an example he described that "The picture had now triumphed over architecture."¹⁶ That sensitivity may have been born from an early need to distinguish himself from his first employer's work or from a more serious desire to avoid the looseness of the style he was trying to overcome. There is no question that the degraded form the picturesque had acquired by the end of the 19th century with its more or less random collection of charming moments had no appeal to a young man intent on producing an architecture of "principle." His early houses in Oak Park do, however, exhibit an assembly of picturesque elements: conical turrets, high pitched roofs, rock piles next to doorways.

The discipline most at hand to connect and unify disparate parts of the picturesque was "classicism" in the broadest terms. Wright's relation of the classical tradition is the first powerful demonstration of his interpretive powers at work on historical material. Of course there is the infamous competition entry for the Milwaukee Library and Museum.¹⁷ The elevation drawing demonstrates a very competent understanding of the conventions of classical design for a major public building. This exercise shows how complete was his grasp of Beaux Arts principles and supports his apparently arrogant rejection of Daniel Burnham's offer to send him to Paris by saying that is was too late. He already knew what that system of formal development was all about.¹⁸

The presence in the plans drawn in the Oak Park Studio of clearly marked axes and sub-axes attest to his understanding of how the hierarchical system worked. The elevations of the Prairie houses are also interpretations of base/shaft/capital.

"Classicism" was the ordering system that Wright took up to give a disciplined armature to hang his, basically, picturesque effects. He used that order to achieve the poise and harmony he felt was missing from current practice.

Unity Temple is a powerful example of his grasp of axial planning, of primary and secondary volumes, of a "classical" elevation, but interpreted in the mono-material of concrete. The geometric clarification, the absence of classical ornament made the building seem radical, but its basis can be found in very traditional ordering systems. It may be that Wright reserved such vitriol for the classic to distance himself from any hint of appropriation that would distract from the real work he had accomplished with his interpretive powers.

More personal evidence of Wright's "sympathy" for classicism is found in his own home and studio in Oak Park. It is surprising to find a plaster reproduction of the sculptural frieze of the shrine in Pergamon and the Winged Victory of Samothrace. These two Hellenistic examples are important transition pieces where preceding stylistic discipline is animated by dramatic form. They may have represented to Wright how order could be made vital. Order was not the end; by itself it led to death. Animated by playful exuberance, its real purpose was made manifest.

These are only a few examples of Wright's interpretive activity in his architecture, but they show how historical architecture could be made the source for new life. Respecting history may be more effectively carried out by making more material for history than arriving at its end.

HISTORY INTERPRETED

A final example of what Wright was doing with history comes from his comments, not on a specifically architectural artifact, but an architectural ornament from Egypt.

"A work of Architecture is a great coordination with a distinct and vital organism, but it is in no sense naturalistic – it is the highest, most subjective, conventionalization of Nature known to man. . . . To go back to the lotus of the Egyptians (we may see in this mere detail of Art the whole principle), if Egypt had plucked the flower as it

grew and had given us merely an imitation of it in stone, it would have died with the original – but in turning it to stone, and fitting it to grace a column capital, the Egyptian artist put it through a rare and difficult process, wherein its natural character was really revealed and intensified in terms of stone, gaining for it an imperishable significance . . .” (1900)¹⁹

Wright is describing the Egyptian stone carver doing exactly what Wright strived to do, not only with nature, but with history. The flower is no good to the architect as it grows, just as history is no good as it is accumulated. A transformation, an interpretation, a conventionalization that raises it beyond the immediate circumstances is how both nature and history can be made useful to the architect.

As a source, history is appreciated, not from an “objective” perspective, but from the viewpoint of what use can be made of it. Does this mean it is treated badly, or unsympathetically? At least it is not considered an end in itself, but its end, or purpose is to engender the future. The “predatory” nature of Wright’s use of sources is worth noting because it is anything but respectful if that means representing rather than transforming. One imagines that Wright felt he was paying history the highest complement by using it to give new life rather than to embalm it.

Did Wright disdain those who save and catalog resources for him to use? He did “tease” Henry Russell Hitchcock when the architectural historian was working on his book on Wright *In The Nature Of Materials*. There are examples of Wright changing dates on projects to make the story of his career more to his liking, just as he had stretched the truth at one point by claiming that he was born two years later than was the case.

Born in the 19th century, Wright was part of a culture that was developing the discipline of history within the throes of Romantic idealism. Even though Ranke had made the careful collection of facts an important aspect of writing history, the narrative they supported focused on the high horizons of idealist philosophy, the kind being developed by Hegel, for instance, who saw history as the working out of Spirit through the time and space of men. The intent was to step beyond the

received patterns of written history that were largely concerned with contests for power, triumph and failure of leaders and peoples. A change of focus from battles and speeches to transcendent arcs of ideals working themselves out (a perception shared with the likes of Emerson in America) disregarded what might be called the “middle scale” where civic virtues were enacted. Civilization was constructed of pragmatic operations, useful conventions, even compromises explicitly avoiding the temptation of having the best drive out the good. For Wright, history had a foreground of specifics and a distant horizon of ideals, but he constructed his buildings in the middle ground of conventions, society, other people, i.e., clients.

As Mark Lilla has written in his essay “The Reckless Mind,” the desire for high ideals can have disastrous consequences when put into action in the social and political realms.²⁰ Those realms, the traditional content of history are thought only to obscure values that should guide inspired individual. Isaiah Berlin’s essay on “The Romantic Revolution” describes what a departure from previous categories of human activity this mode of thought produced.²¹ Following on from Rousseau, Romanticism valued actions not by their consequences but by the motives that initiated them. These motives are the authentic expression of values originating in the individual; they are unsullied by having interacted with the world of other people whose contribution can only be dilution, compromise, and distraction. Origin is primary. Once it is put in play with convention, representation, and accumulated categories, it can only suffer fatal injury. Like the recurrent dismissal of ritual, texts, or authority enforced by religious bureaucracies, Romanticism rejected all such impediments to individuals connecting, over the detritus of civilization, to transcendent values. Wright escaped such limitations simply by concentrating on making buildings that take place in history, whose narration can be constructed by Wright as well as by others.

CONCLUSION

History might have an end if making more material for future histories were not the point, as it clearly was for Wright. Because his practice united transcendent principles and circumstantial realities, Wright’s response to history avoided seek-

ing refuge in its authority, or an anxious dismissal frightened by its judgment.

To show how Wright's response to history fits into history, here is a quotation from Vitruvius (certainly not someone Wright admired, or rather someone whose subsequent flatterers by quotation earned his censure) in the preface to Book VII: "While [our predecessors, wisely and with advantage, proceeded by written records to hand down their ideas to after times, so that they would not perish], then, these men deserve our gratitude, on the other hand we must censure those who plunder their works and appropriate them to themselves; writers who do not depend upon their own ideas, but in their envy boast of other men's goods whom they have robbed with violence, should not only receive censure, but punishment for their impious manner of life."²²

ENDNOTES

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