

Designing in History at Taliesin

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At The Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture at Taliesin, history and design education are inextricably intertwined because the studio where students learn to design is also part of architectural history. This setting provides a unique opportunity to examine how design education contributes to architectural history.

The study of architectural history is usually considered something that contributes to design as a “support course” providing material that can be synthesized, or simply appropriated into a design project. To suggest that design can contribute to history is a surprising reversal, one fraught with potential difficulties. However, the study of architectural history can be approached as “design in reverse;” starting with the building and working back to the commission, rather than starting with the commission and concluding with the building.

From this perspective it is obvious that design has always had a significant impact on architectural history because new buildings continuously re-contextualize what constitutes history. Architecture’s design products change history by expanding its subject matter and altering its perspectives.

Historians particularly fear that designers distort the study of history, largely because they project contemporary values back on the past: the cardinal sin for historians. Most history professors worry that students sitting in history classes simply respond to images as raw material for the project they are working on in studio. That surely means design is affecting history, but not necessarily in a good way. When design engages historical examples, it can all too often simply consume them without consideration of what they mean beyond immediate satisfaction.

LEARNING DESIGN WITHIN FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT’S HISTORY

To sit in the drafting room at Taliesin or at Taliesin West is to experience history, to be sure. The field trips other architectural students take to see these historic sites prove they are part of history. (It is clearly historical if it was built before you were born and if you take pictures of it.)

When students design in a historical site, where the past and the present are experienced simultaneously, it has an effect on both their design projects and on their estimation of history. Actually learning to design at Taliesin, rather than visiting on a field trip, requires coming to terms with Frank Lloyd Wright’s architecture on a daily basis. A design studio *in* history affects both history and design. It is important to remember, however, that every building embodies what the past hoped would serve not only the present, but the future. Architecture is always a proposition about the future. Learning to design in an architect’s intense proposition about the future is at least a cautionary experience. The disparity between the proposed and the actual future can require adjustments both major and minor.

The history of Taliesin changes as time passes and perspectives change. As the generation who knew Wright is replaced by younger people for whom he and his work are historical facts, the buildings’ past and present change. The response of the Fellowship members to Taliesin is usually a prolonged sense of awe associated with their admission to the “presence” of Mr. Wright. Current students see the history of the place and the man as impinging much less on their work, resulting in a more take-it-or-leave-it response.

The designs produced by the two groups also contribute to history differently. For those who have aged-in-place at Taliesin, designing ratifies the master's message; their work is dedicated to keeping the recognizable evidence of Wright's work going. Current students actively undermine the significance of the history surrounding them by designing in response to fashions known, not through direct experience, but through internet images and magazines. It is no longer true that apprentices at Taliesin crank out work that is a pale replication of Wright's last work. Quite the contrary. And that departure is part of remaking the history of Frank Lloyd Wright through design.

Frank Lloyd Wright himself practiced design fully intending the work to be his contribution to history. He often said as much when he fulminated how he was righting the wrongs of American architecture. His response to past architecture is usually thought to be one of rejection, but it is much more complex than that. For Wright history was nutrient, not credential. History was changed by his use of it.

There is no question that Wright's visit to Japan in 1905, before he made the sanctioned pilgrimage to European sites, altered the "content" of architectural history. His complex interpretation of Japanese arts as sources for architectural design counterbalanced the more common responses that they were merely charming and exotic. By taking the Japanese print quite seriously as a profound lesson in the interpretation of nature, in conventionalization, and in art as a contributor to a "democratic" society, Wright expanded his aesthetic and cultural propositions.

For Wright, history was not the subject of research into what circumstances produce a building (an illusive, and some would say an illusory goal), or what values and constraints were represented by a building, in other words a building "in its own terms." The contexts that created his preferred periods of history, Gothic for example, were important as evidence of the proper relation between social and cultural values and the resulting architecture. A building was not significant for what it was, but what it could become in the estimation of a great architect either as a source or an example of error. Wright's "understanding" of historical architecture was not so much of the values uncovered by research into specific time, place, and people, but its

place in a broad arc of historical development. In that, Wright was a thoroughly Romantic figure who saw his designs as confirmation of a grand, unifying pattern.

Wright's sense of history as something to be created, as something design, in fact, created, came from his reading of Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame of Paris*. Just as Hugo was part of a 19th century movement to revalue history by calling attention to the neglected virtues of Gothic architecture, Wright arranged history to set himself up as the inevitable working out of historical processes. Victor Hugo's novel about the bell ringer and the gypsy girl is interrupted by a surprising presentation of Architecture's evolution from theocracy to democracy. Wright saw himself as the figure Hugo described at the end of the chapter "This Will Kill That:" "The great good fortune of possessing an architect of genius may befall the twentieth century. . . ." Fulfilling history by design is the clearest demonstration of how they interact.

Wright lived and worked in history as he altered, added to, and demolished parts of Taliesin. The experience the Fellowship members had of working "on" history created a fluid continuum of past, present and future. When Wright introduced his current design forms into his earlier work, as in the Theater at Hillside, the apprentices witnessed how the orthogonal convention of rural timber structures could be re-configured by the insertion of Wright's later fascination with the "reflex," 30-60 degree angles of the audience seating. Wright's history, should it have ended in, say 1910, with an accident on a Tuscan hillside road, would have been very different without his continued exploration of the "principles" on which his architecture was based. Sitting in the Hillside Theater one thinks about the 1904 school gymnasium quite differently when you can compare it to the alterations required after the fire in 1953.

The nearly continuous construction of Taliesin corrected the great fault Wright found in current culture: vicariousness. "Learning by doing" was the antidote employed at the Fellowship. Learning architectural history "by doing" is actually a very clear description of how design can contribute to history. Most often history is regarded from a distance, something at least removed from what is considered "the present." That relationship fosters a passive, vicarious response. For Wright that pas-

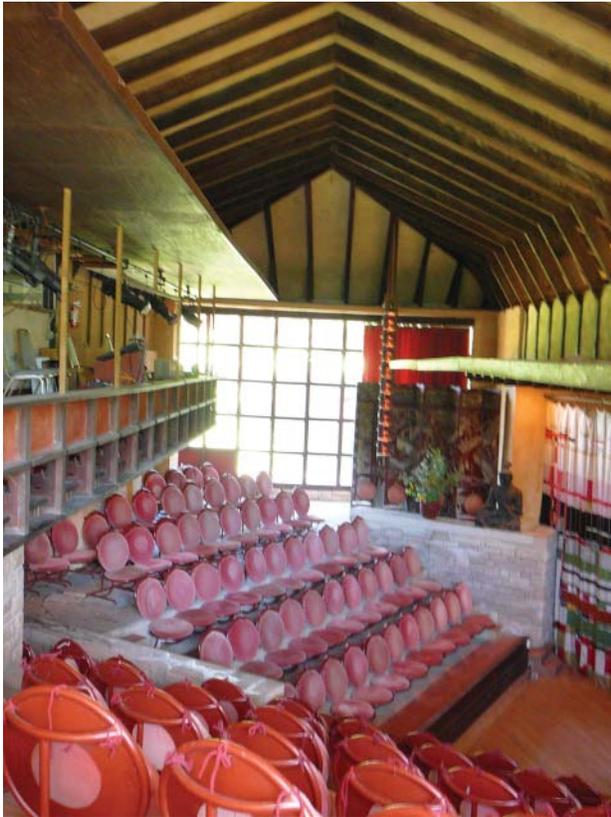


Figure 1. Taliesin Theater

sivity was explicitly the problem with academic education. The only way to avoid a vicarious relationship with history was to engage it through active designing. History was not something read about, not something viewed as images in a darkened room or even something to be visited as part of heritage tourism. The continual presence of tours coming through Taliesin sets up that contrast most vividly. We who are designing in here are not those consumers of culture over there. (But please come in, you are critical to paying the bills!)

ACTIVITIES AT TALIESIN UNITING DESIGN AND HISTORY

There are three activities pursued at Taliesin that directly relate design to history: the "Taliesin as Text" class, preservation efforts, and student design projects.

First is the continuing class called "Taliesin as Text," which introduces students to Taliesin: its present, its past and how the two are connected. Taliesin

is presented four ways in "Taliesin as Text:" as an experience, as an artifact in Wright's career, as a place that changes through time, and as a site for preservation. The initial walk-around introduces students to the specifics of Taliesin for orientation purposes, but also sensitizes them to site relations, materials and construction practices and formal patterns. Because Wright changed both places, showing how past stages are still evident and how they affected what came after is a major focus for the class. The obvious deterioration of the buildings brings up what is to be done for the future. Preservation is presented as one end of a continuum beginning with the request for a building, proceeding to design, construction, maintenance, alteration and preservation. Putting design in this sequence means the past, or previous stages, are not remote, but immediately present. That may be the most salient effect learning design can contribute to learning history.

As an extension of "Taliesin as Text," periodic projects are generated for students to work on the buildings. Preservation, presented as the management of change, is an important way that design contributes to history. In the summer of 2004, for example, a major focus for the students was the Hillside campus structures: what they were, what they could be, and how to stabilize and preserve them. A book was compiled of their efforts. The "Introduction" sets the direction of learning design through "operating" on history:

"The summer program of the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture at Taliesin focused on 'Frank Lloyd Wright Buildings as Textbook for Young Architects.' As part of what is envisioned as an ongoing project, the 2002 Wisconsin summer began with the Hillside portion of the Taliesin Estate. This starting point incorporated the 100-year celebration of Hillside and the conjunction of several stages: 1903, 1933, 1953 in the evolution of Frank Lloyd Wright's career.

The Hillside Project approached the subject from the history of the social and educational activities, the history of the buildings, the changes in Mr. Wright's architecture, and the aspects of preservation including structure and drainage. These various aspects provided important educational experiences.

This report brings together the efforts of the apprentices on these projects. The results are useful from several perspectives. The educational activity is clear to see. It includes an understanding of human ideals and their evolution; the operation of structure: how it works and how its failures can be

remedied; the course of water around and under a building; an appreciation of Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture and its relation to concepts of structure and spatial arrangement.

This report also serves as resource material for further research and programs for future action on the buildings. The preservation activity will gain from the information gathered here.

The story that this report tells is useful for those seeking to learn about Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture and those learning to be architects in this unique environment. It is hoped that the interest generated by this information will draw people to the work being done at Taliesin and encourage their support."

One major project recorded in this book was learning about structures imbedded in a historical context. That context displayed a serious structural failure at the joint between the 1904 classroom wing and the studio added in 1933 to house the recently formed Taliesin Fellowship. The addition interrupted the structure supporting the roof and the subsequent failure necessitated the insertion of temporary bracing. The design of a structural solution was unavoidably a comment on a historical condition and led to the realization that history is comprised of failures as well as successes. Drainage design was also investigated along with foundation conditions.

Another significant design project at Hillside in 2008 was the revision of one of the student bath rooms. This plan required thorough condition assessment, comparison of existing and previous layouts for the bathroom and design of a new facility within the



Figure 2. Hillside structural diagram

historical constraints. The estimation of the significance of historical facts and their contribution to a new design has generated considerable discussion as present design goals, educational outcomes and historical responsibility collide.

A further contribution design makes to history is the project of revitalizing the student shelters at Taliesin West. These desert constructions go back to Wright's time, although those have basically become "ruins." The ones from the last four decades are constantly being renewed and the new project is closer to rehabilitation as it engages present design students in understanding and operating on historical artifacts, some of which they actually live in. The decision to rehabilitate or alter the work done by previous apprentices involves understanding how present design includes historical material and how it changes that pre-existing work. Some of the contemporary proposals judge the concrete elements of previous shelters to be historically valuable. Of course the difficulty of removing them suggests that they be included in new designs purely for the constructional convenience. Such changes, of course, alter the record of what history is and demonstrates that "mere" convenience as well as grand historical eras can make history.

Two student projects are offered as different ways to interpret the history of Taliesin through designs. What makes these examples so fascinating is the unavoidable two-way street: history going to design and design going to history. The descriptions that follow are an amalgam of the students' intentions and the instructor's interpretation of them. The fact that it cannot be definitively said which way the argument is going on the path between design and history attests to a new relationship made explicit at Taliesin.

The first project, by Eric Lindstrom in 2003, produces a new way to understand Taliesin, particularly the drafting room at Hillside, by designing a studio for his instructor related to another architecturally significant structure, Bruce Goff's Ford house (1949). Both Wright from 1933 and Goff from 1949 are brought together in a design whose re-contextualization makes history adapt and adjust to its new configuration.

Mr. Lindstrom was challenged to add a building to the site of the Ford house without mimicking it.



Figure 3. Lindstrom student project

That directive was, in part, a way to insure that history would be interpreted and re-contextualized by design. The goal was to use the Goff house as a source for the design of the new studio, but rather than directly appropriating forms and materials, the designer selected principles of design, showing them by means of different forms and materials. The interpretation of the drafting room at Taliesin, where the student executed his design, brought a second architectural source into play. The support system of the design project clearly brings the Taliesin studio roof into the project.

The overlap on the basis of color brings three architectural entities into simultaneous relationship: two historical ones and the new, student project. Upon reflection at the end of the design studio, Mr. Lindstrom saw the room in which he had designed in a different light because he had used a similar structure in his own work and understood how learning within history was more integrative than just looking at it.

The potential of learning through comparison also contributed to his understanding of the historical setting where he worked. The circular geometry of the Ford house, unavailable to him by avoiding mimicry, was placed in the context of Taliesin through the immediate experience of the designer working in the drafting room.

Although Goff never worked at or attended Taliesin, he is generally considered part of American Organic architecture. By designing in response to both

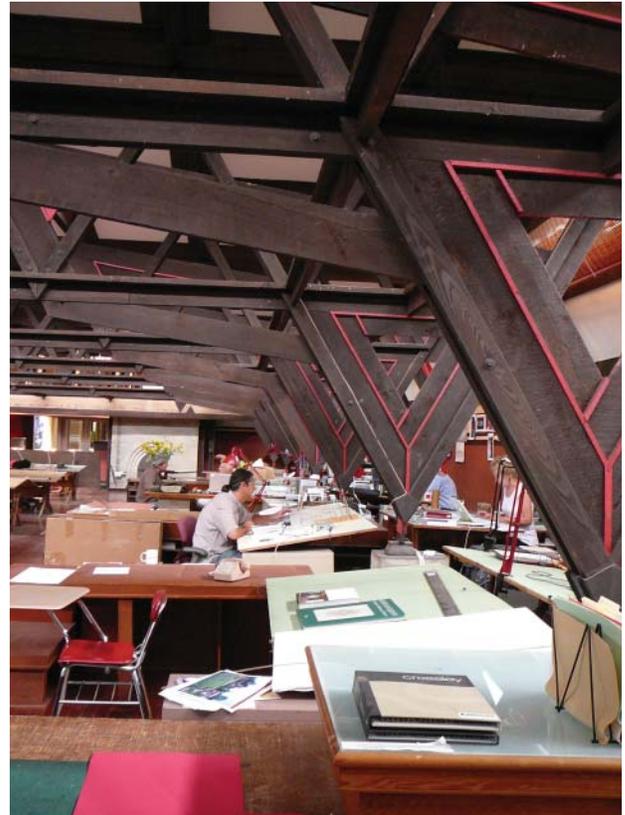


Figure 4. Hillside drafting room

these architectural examples, the student designer gained a new appreciation of the breadth of that architectural category and how aspects overlapped and yet remained distinct.

The second project, by James Underwood, 2004, prolongs history by a more interpretive approach. The design was based on investigating part of a Bach fugue for a music pavilion in which to practice guitar and have a couple of friends visit. Music and architecture are conventionally linked in architectural history and by Wright specifically. Trying to find architectural correlatives to the fugue directed attention to how, or if, one could find a correlation in the architecture at Taliesin, where musical performance was a strong tradition. The conclusion was reached by the student that the discipline of coordinating parts within a whole was a way that music could inform or direct architectural construction and form.

Choosing to use music as a source stimulated a new sensitivity to Taliesin as a lyrical, rather than a

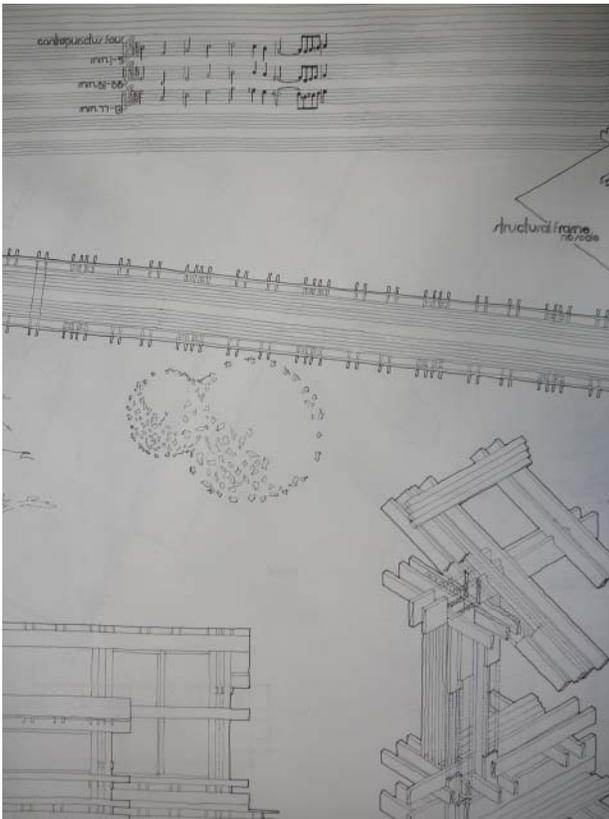


Figure 5. Underwood student project

fugal composition. The vain search for a continuous unit or module in Taliesin led to consideration of another way for music to appear. Color, materials, and their relationships that constituted Taliesin's more fluid continuity were set aside in the interest of exploring the structure of a Bach fugue, or the structure of dominant and subordinate parts in a Beethoven symphony, for example. The student's presentation drawings in black and white paralleled Bach's practice of leaving it open for different instruments to play the same composition. The colors of different instruments would be added to the abstract musical structure.

The student's project did not interpret the lyrical pattern of Taliesin, but explored the discipline of the fugue. What he learned from the exercise was how difficult that discipline was and, most importantly, where he was unable to successfully reach the goal of making a consistent correlation. Wright always employed his "unit system" with a certain amount of slippage. It was a guide, not a strait-jacket. The student's music pavilion tried to be as

disciplined as possible because the mastery that allows manipulation of a system without "injuring" or undermining it had not yet been reached. Comparing his own work to Wright's, or Bach's, gave the student a new appreciation of their mastery. The attempt to correlate music and architecture uncovered the different ways that it could be achieved by comparing Taliesin with the design project.

These activities that students at Taliesin pursue in their "learning by doing" education create a context and are created by a context where design and history cannot be separated. It could be a parallel condition in other architectural school settings that are considered historical. Taliesin may be unique because the way design is "learned" in its context is less passive, more intentionally "intrusive" than other places. This sets up continuous conflict between active learning and the passive consumption promoted by historic preservation. When history comes to a stop, learning takes a very different turn.

There remains the troubling possibility that the "use" of history encourages a kind of narcissism where a building's significance is determined by how it affects you. This self-absorption leads to the unfortunate conclusion that architecture begins with architects. Engaging architectural works of the past with at least a sense of humility is a powerful check on personal desire being the measure of all things. Picking over the remains of history may run the risk of making architecture merely the reassembly of existing materials, a practice that became the target of modernism's emphasis on originality. The implied opposition between originality and history reminds designers that the world did not come into being when they opened their eyes.

Following the road from design to history and back again is one way to avoid the hubris inherent on any one-way street. Knowing that design contributes to history by making history something more than curated objects pressed between pages or pixels insures its continued value. While history has a lot to gain from joining the flow of time instead of sitting it out, making things can only be helped by interpreting past achievements whose history is what our current efforts seek not to replace, but to augment.