

Frank Lloyd Wright

"The one on my board right now" - What Frank Lloyd Wright said when asked which of his buildings was the most beautiful

If people can name a famous architect, they usually name Frank Lloyd Wright. Misunderstood in his day by mainstream designers, criticized for an unconventional lifestyle, Frank was an innovator years ahead of his time. The designer of homes, business buildings, hotels and college campuses is also the creator of concepts like track lighting, hidden/recessed lighting, open plan homes, flow-through ventilation, acoustical design and many other concepts we take for granted. He had a leadership style that helped new architects in his studio learn to become professionals faster (a plan that many executives should learn from today).

Frank Lloyd Wright was born Frank Lincoln Wright in Richland Center, Wisconsin two years after the death of Abraham Lincoln. He changed his name after his parents divorced to honor his mother's maiden name. His family moved to Madison, Wisconsin when he was 12 years old. He spent summers on his uncle's farm in rural Wisconsin. During those summers, Wright first began to realize his dream of becoming an architect. At the age of 18, he left Madison without finishing high school to work for the Dean of the University of Wisconsin's Engineering department. While at the University, Wright spent two semesters studying civil engineering before moving to Chicago two years later.

In Chicago, Frank drafted the construction of his first building, the Lloyd-Jones family chapel, also known as Unity Chapel. One year later, he went to work directly under Louis Sullivan, a concept he carried later into his own leadership style. Wright adapted Sullivan's maxim "Form Follows Function" to his own revised theory of "Form and Function Are One." It was Sullivan's belief that American Architecture should be based on American, not European, traditions; a theory which Wright later developed further. As a child, Frank spent a great deal of time playing with kindergarten educational blocks. These consisted of geometrically-shaped blocks that could be assembled in various combinations to form three-dimensional structures. Wright wrote in his autobiography about this influence. Many of his buildings are known for the geometrical clarity they exhibit.

The idea of working directly under the master influenced Frank to adopt the same style in mentoring his own protégés. Most leaders turn the new young apprentices over to a lower level trainer, but Wright believed the best way to teach a new employee was to put his table next to his own to teach him his style directly. Executives today could learn much from this method of training. Wright met and fell in love with Catherine Tobin in Chicago. The two moved to Oak Park, Illinois and built a home where they eventually raised their five children and where Frank opened his own studio.

Wright's life was not without turmoil. He designed a home for a couple and fell in love with the wife. They eloped to Europe without decrees of divorce, leaving their children behind. Frank settled in Italy for one year, but returned to the United States and

purchased land in Spring Green, Wisconsin. He named the home "Taliesin." It contained his famous open plan prairie design style. When he was finally granted a divorce from Catherine he married Maude "Miriam" Noel. The marriage didn't last more than a year because of her addiction to Morphine. He met Olgivanna while still married to Miriam and they had a child together. He was finally granted a divorce from Miriam and after waiting a year married "Olga." During this time Taliesin burned twice, once because of a disgruntled worker and the other time due to faulty wiring. The third rebuild of the home was nicknamed Taliesin III. It later became a design studio fellowship where he trained young architects.

During the 1920's Wright designed many structures that made his mark on American design. He used organic style designs, water designs, stone fireplaces, low overhangs and entry ways. He felt that a home should welcome the owner, not overwhelm them when coming in the front door. He observed people's habits to design walkways. At one university, he didn't design the sidewalks until he saw where the students were traveling, then put the walkways where they had worn tracks on the grounds; an example of Function becoming Form. In the 1930's, with Frank's career moving along, he and Olga felt the Wisconsin winters were too cold for them. In 1937, Wright moved his family and fellowship to Phoenix, Arizona where he built Taliesin West and where he spent the last twenty years of his life.

At Taliesin West, because of the comfortable year-round climate, Wright was able to integrate the outdoors with his indoor spaces. He designed high sloping roofs, translucent ceilings, and large, open doors and windows that combined the home and the environment. Both Taliesin and Taliesin West were continuous living experiences for Wright as they constantly remained under construction. As his fellowship grew and the need for a larger facility became necessary, Wright continued to create additions and expansions on both homes.

Wright designed over 400 built structures of which about 300 survive today. He influenced the design of the campus of Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona outside of Phoenix. One of his projects, Monona Terrace, originally designed in 1937 as municipal offices for Madison, Wisconsin, was completed in 1997, using a variation of Wright's final design for the exterior with the interior design altered by its new purpose as a convention center. A lesser known project that never came to fruition was Wright's plan for Emerald Bay, Lake Tahoe. Few Tahoe locals are even aware of the iconic American architect's plan for their natural treasure. Most recently a design he promoted in 1959 was begun in Ireland.

Ever attended a theater and used the lighting along the floor to find your way to your seat? Frank Lloyd Wright came up with this idea when he got frustrated with ushers shining lights in his face to help late-comers find their seats after the film had begun. When Thomas Edison, a friend, produced the incandescent light bulb, Wright thought it looked ugly and designed the concept of recessed and inset lighting. He designed acoustically friendly theaters and performing arts centers so audiences could hear better and performers weren't required to be as loud.

He left a legacy of design and architecture both physically and through his family when he died in 1959. By the time of his death, he had become internationally recognized for his innovative building style and contemporary designs. He had created 1,141 designs, of which 532 were completed - a very high percentage for an architect.

By his death his name had become synonymous with great design, not only because of the form of his designs, but also because of the function. A son and architect, John Lloyd Wright, invented Lincoln Logs in 1918. John's daughter, Elizabeth Ingraham, is an architect in Colorado. She is the mother of Christine, an interior designer in Connecticut, and Catherine, an architecture professor. The Oscar-winning actress Anne Baxter was another granddaughter. Anne was the daughter of Catherine Baxter, from Wright's first marriage. Anne's daughter, Melissa Galt, currently lives and works in Atlanta as an interior designer.

Frank Lloyd Wright showed us not just what to live in, but more importantly he influenced the very nature of how we live today.

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