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The Political Wright

INTRODUCTION

Very few individuals in modern times have ever reached the lasting levels of recognition enjoyed by Frank Lloyd Wright. If you ask the average person to name an architect, they will inevitably utter Frank Lloyd Wright. Given that in our cultural era public attentions are almost overwhelmingly dominated by brief flares of insubstantial celebrity, say Paris Hilton or Balloon Boy, Mr. Wright has a remarkable popular persistence for a man who died fifty years ago. At last count, some 2,660 books have been published bearing directly on his buildings. The volumes where he is discussed in general, comparatively, or his writings are referenced exceed 6,700 according to Google Books. By these mundane measures of the marketplace alone, Frank Lloyd Wright still stands out as a potent marker in our communal awareness.

Frank Lloyd Wright was a man who practiced architecture. He produced designs for 1,141 buildings, including homes, offices, churches, schools, civic centers, bridges, and museums. 532 of these structures were built and 409 of them remain standing. Mr. Wright also delivered a continuous and varied stream of publications to set out and explain his cause. He had a message for his fellow Americans, and he stayed on point. By any professional measure for an architect, his contribution to American life was one of dedicated and sustained genius.

Frank Lloyd Wright unflinchingly pursued a vision for his country whose physical realization was a distinctive architecture that expressed the vitality and originality of American democracy. He took his view of democratic community directly from the principles of Founding Father and President Thomas Jefferson, who stated:

"What is true of every member of the society, individually, is true of them all collectively; since the rights of the whole can be no more than the sum of the rights of the individuals."

In the eyes of Mr. Wright, Jefferson described liberty as personal freedom, an unequivocal conviction that the happiness and fulfillment of the individual was not to be subservient to the state or proxy organizations dedicated to enforcing, or perhaps inflicting, standardized determinants.

In simple terms, Frank Lloyd Wright believed heartily that the accomplishments of life issued from the people up, not from the government down. At best, the function of the government was to facilitate the needs of the people in realizing their own personal ideals of self-betterment. The collective social union formed by those emergent strengths resulted in a more vigorous and productive society. In his view, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were not quaint decorative words, but a clarion call to action.

The position and practical values to which Frank Lloyd Wright was delivered came flavored, like most people, by the circumstances to which he was born. Although his Wisconsin childhood found him in an unhappy and ultimately broken home, he survived to absorb a strong dose of Unitarian religious outlook and develop a poetic love of nature. From there his family connections, particularly through his uncle Jenkin Lloyd Jones, exposed him to the heartland of progressive Midwestern society like Jane Addams, Susan B. Anthony, Edward Everett Hale, Booker T. Washington, William Jennings Bryan and a

host of others. In this company he was immersed in the dynamics of racial justice, education, women's rights, poverty relief, political reform, the humane treatment of animals, and, especially, pacifism. Binding together the ideals of Thomas Jefferson and the 19th century social movements surrounding him, his beliefs bore him toward a lifetime of focused endeavor.

Supporting the expression of American architecture along these lines was a spiritual calling to Frank Lloyd Wright, a sacred patriotic duty to secure the lasting wellbeing of a country he sincerely and wholeheartedly loved. This was his fundamental objective and over 70 years of professional practice as an architect he never deviated from that path. True enough, Mr. Wright spent much of his life embroiled in controversy of his own making; the emotional conflicts he brought on himself by abandoning his family for a married woman, awkward financial situations, or being judged arrogant for his outspoken opinion consequently rubbing people the wrong way. His extraordinary work often had to be heard over the noise of more ordinary human failings.

Yet, in his stand for an America of architectural excellence, for world peace, and for individual freedoms, he often found himself facing active opposition from the Washington establishment and other groups intent on maintaining their comfortable positions of privilege in the status quo, including his fellow architects. The deeply ironic nature of these countervailing forces is something that I feel has never been adequately addressed.

THE FBI

Against that introductory background, I would like to look at a series of historical moments that illustrate the adversity faced by Frank Lloyd Wright in his efforts to promote an indigenous, modern American architecture.

The earliest government documents that reveal the official antipathy to Mr. Wright date from the era of First World War. In 1918, the Bureau of Investigation, what we now call the FBI, wanted to determine whether Citizen Wright was making disloyal statements to threaten internal domestic security. Living in Wisconsin, his native state with its large German immigrant population, they mused, could he be undermining American war solidarity on behalf of the Kaiser? After all, wasn't a book about his work put out by a German publisher? Had he not, indeed, said publicly that he admired and enjoyed German composers? Taken together with his overtly expressed stance against war, did these obvious indicators likely prove disloyalty by Frank Lloyd Wright to his country?

Investigating agents questioned clients, professional colleagues, artists, and socialites known to be acquainted with the, and I quote, "suspect." Word spread of the enterprise, of course, which immediately chilled any potential business prospects at a time when anything other than government controlled war priority work was especially difficult to acquire.

Because this was the start of more than four decades of such harassment and the words reflect perfectly the ensuing government attitude toward Mr. Wright, it is interesting to quote in detail the concluding page of the first FBI report, starting with the response received from attorney Clarence Darrow, a friend of Frank Lloyd Wright:

"Mr. Darrow further states that in his opinion Wright is in no way disloyal to the United States.

"Jens Jensen, the well known landscape gardener says he is very friendly with Wright, having lunched with him a half a dozen times since January 1, 1918, and although frequent war discussions took place, Wright never expressed any opinions. Mr. Jensen further states that he understands two sons of Wright (John and Lloyd) are serving under U.S. colors, one of them being in the Aviation Section. "It is believed, however, that both of these boys are married and were more or less dependent on the father when in civilian life.

"Louis Sullivan, architect, and a personal friend of Wright's, states that he knows of no act or word of disloyalty on Wright's part."

Despite the absence of negative accounts concerning Mr. Wright after having, as the agent described it, "interviewed many prominent people," the report concludes with this chilling recommendation:

"The general consensus of opinion seems to be that because of Wright's prominence and his utter disregard of law and authority that if he is making disloyal statements, something should be done to, as Mr. Booth, his attorney, aptly expresses it, 'throw a scare into him.'"

So commences the journey of Frank Lloyd Wright in the annals of the United States Government with the prospect of intimidation and hindrance as the official policy toward him. And, by the nature of filing cabinets, bureaucrats may come and go but they never forget.

The first time government interest resulted in police action against Mr. Wright took place in 1926. While visiting Minnesota, Mr. Wright was charged with an alleged violation of the Mann Act, a Federal statute relating to the transportation of women across state lines for immoral purposes. As it happened, he had been accompanied on the trip to Minneapolis by his companion Olgivanna, whom he was about to marry and who remained his wife for the rest of his life. Inflammatory and self-serving accusations supplied by Olgivanna's ex-husband were used as the basis for detaining him. The Federal contingent with their hands on the controls of local law enforcement included a cadre of FBI agents, with supporting cast from the State Department intent on deporting Olgivanna as an undesirable alien. They alerted the local press to a pending photo opportunity at the distant lake house where Mr. Wright was to be arrested, ensuring that resulting images propagated throughout the country on the wire services.

In the end, of course, the charges were dropped for lack of substance. The State Department was fended off by the politically prominent Phillip Lafollette, who served as Mr. Wright's attorney. Reading the historical agency documents related to these events, one gets the sense that this was a political diversion with a good time had by all, except naturally Mr. Wright and his family.

Now that the FBI's 335-page file on Mr. Wright is available on the Internet, it is possible to see how the Bureau continued to pursue a quest of suspicion. Under the obsessed instructions of Director J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI made an unrelenting effort to accumulate information, much consisting of trite, superfluous, and outright false additions to the fattening file, and none of it ever legally damaging except in the desire of their own foregone bias. Mr. Wright simply had a view of what America meant in terms of personal freedom, a la Thomas Jefferson, and dared to speak his mind honestly. His exercise of the First Amendment to express calls of pacifism and liberty, especially, was painfully at odds with the evidence of another coming World War and an assortment of enflamed political hysterias that were soon to prevail on the evening news. Hoover was particularly incensed by Mr. Wright's sustained attempts to combat the dehumanization of the Japanese as a people and his vehement objections to the internment of Japanese on the West Coast, who were incidentally often second or third generation native born US citizens, in American concentration camps.

J. Edgar Hoover would twice attempt to get the Justice Department to prosecute Mr. Wright for sedition. Both times Hoover was told there was no credible evidence. Even when the Attorney General of the United States demanded that the FBI Director cease and desist, Hoover merely sequestered such investigations into secrecy and dropped the Attorney General from the memo circulation. Between 1937 and his death in 1959, the agency kept uninterrupted tabs not only on Frank Lloyd Wright but those associated with him, the causes he supported, and the places he traveled. If he perchance lost his calendar diary, I suspect, Mr. Wright could always inquire of his earlier schedule from the FBI.

The Second World War was round two between the government and Mr. Wright in more ways than one, only this time the agency could target a greater number of people who were associated with his practice and school in the community known as the Taliesin Fellowship. With war flaring again on the European horizon, Frank Lloyd Wright had not changed his mind on the subject and said so. His views were shared by some within the Taliesin Fellowship, who applied for non-combatant status. Aside from the court cases that scornfully prosecuted and imprisoned some members of the Fellowship, the public

brouhaha playing out in the press prompted the departure of more FBI agents from Washington. The FBI wondered whether Mr. Wright was a Fascist sympathizer, but eventually their own investigators concluded that Mr. Wright's opposition to American involvement in the coming conflict was based on a condemnation of failed British colonial policies. No joy there, but they were conveniently able to determine that Frank Lloyd Wright didn't employ a certified public accountant.

The Internal Revenue Service refused to recognize Taliesin, which is now fully accredited by national higher education authorities, as a learning institution. Starting in 1940 the IRS began harassing Mr. Wright for back taxes, penalties, and interest dating back at least a decade on sums they asserted he had received as taxable income. Mr. Wright didn't help himself by refusing to use banks out of bad personal experience. His checking account was whatever he had in his pants pocket, and the not too abundant proceeds of his studio were used to supplement the tuition paid by those who attended the school.

The debt alleged by the IRS could never be paid off and the situation haunted him for the rest of his life. Almost immediately after his death in 1959, the IRS audited the nonprofit Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, which was the main source of funding for the school and Taliesin Fellowship. As a result Mrs. Wright, no doubt with fearful memories of her near deportation in the 1920s, was forced to sell irreplaceable historic property, including original architectural drawings. To satisfy the Federal demands, Taliesin was practically denuded in order to keep the Fellowship and school operational.

FHA

The FBI and IRS weren't the only federal agencies obstructing his efforts. Never in his career would Frank Lloyd Wright win a commission for a government contract. Worse, Federal programs developed to support the building professions would disqualify his work. Most importantly, this happened with the critically significant Federal Housing Administration, or FHA.

In 1921, a nationwide nonprofit organization called the Architect's Small House Service Bureau operated under the control of the American Institute of Architects, with the approval and collaboration of the Federal Department of Commerce. While the organization acknowledged that standardization would be boring, their literature also warned that, "In considering the style of your home, remember that good design is always conservative." By example they particularly endorsed Colonial, Cape Cod, and Spanish Revival imagery, with the occasional mock Tudor. This tendency toward standardization through historical appliqué was thus inherited as an official policy furthered by the FHA when it came into existence in 1934.

By 1945, with nearly seventy percent of commercial lending resources in America now part of this program, the FHA had effective control over the design of postwar domestic housing. Opportunities for servicemen and women to qualify for a mortgage through the GI Bill set the stage for the greatest surge in residential construction up to that point in American history. The record burst of private home building created a vast matrix of new suburbs that reflected profound changes in the way people wanted to live. In turn, there were immense opportunities for architects to address those startlingly new social conditions with contemporary architectural design. That is, if the FHA approved of the architect.

What chance did an innovator like Frank Lloyd Wright have of getting a seat at the table? He produced an entirely new form of domestic architecture designed to house and efficiently integrate the activities of the modern family. These homes, which shared in common a number of characteristic elements, were termed 'Usonian,' a name derived from the words United States and intended to designate an architecture of democracy.

Variable in configuration according to circumstance and designed for the purse of moderate income families, they were made beautiful by their ingenious use of building materials to create spaces that functioned a modern way. Their components were meant to be mass produced through prefabrication, something that the FHA was already promoting. An influential home and garden

magazine, *House Beautiful*, editorialized in the November, 1955, issue, that these Usonian houses were "the quintessence of American life, the legacy of the Declaration of Independence."

FHA evaluators, however, were instructed to lower the rating score of these houses in the so-called "Adjusted for Conformity" category, which ensured the rejection of any conspicuously modern design. This resulted in Usonian structures being declared an unsound investment and, as such, disqualified them for an FHA mortgage. But that wasn't all, and the rest is more revealing of an agenda that targeted Frank Lloyd Wright in particular.

As part of their refusal to underwrite mortgages for the Usonian designs, the FHA stated that, among other things, Mr. Wright's designs represented a lending code violation. Here's some of the language from an actual FHA rejection letter:

"The walls will not support the roof; floor heating is impractical; the unusual design makes subsequent sales a hazard."

Such claims were not only patently false, the very objections leveled at the Usonian houses described perfectly the radiant slab heating, sliding patio doors, carports, and open floor plans that were being implemented in tract housing approved for construction by the FHA across the width of America. It was acknowledgement of the architect that was being rejected, not the composition of the architecture.

Dismayed, Frank Lloyd Wright wrote in his *Autobiography* that the Federal Government had "repudiated" his Usonian designs. In truth, it wasn't so much repudiation as unreserved economic sabotage. There's no better way to suppress the career of an architect, particularly one trying to revolutionize the housing of working class people, than to cut off client access to mortgages.

On one occasion, however, it appeared that Frank Lloyd Wright might possibly overcome the usual obstacles and get a large Usonian commission built. The Sun Top Homes project was proposed for a tract near Pittsfield, Massachusetts. This development was an attempt to increase single-family dwelling density in the suburbs, and was composed of a series of structures gathered in a pinwheel plan. Mr. Wright arranged this asymmetrical design so that no front door was beside any other, each quadrant building containing four family dwellings whose cross-ventilated rooms gave onto completely private gardens. Quite a contrast, at little or no additional expense, to the grid of average suburban houses whose matching window sets peered into the equivalent interior spaces next door.

The usual FHA difficulties, a change in housing authority administration, and complaints from local architects that local architects should be awarded the contract were overcome mostly because the project was eligible for private bank financing. This time, however, Mr. Wright withdrew on principle when the bank demanded a specific paragraph be inserted into the property deed. Inclusion of this clause was a standard practice. In blunt and precise language, sale of the property was restricted to Whites only. Anyone else, be they "Japanese, Chinese, Mexican, Hindu, or any person of the Ethiopian, Indian, or Mongolian races" could be there only and "strictly in the capacity of servants or employees..."

Not until 1948, did the U.S. Supreme Court determine that racially restricted covenants were non-enforceable, and only after the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and subsequent state bills were such restrictions rendered illegal. Mr. Wright, at substantial personal cost, had already gone on ahead.

McCARTHY

In 1946, after World War II, Senator Robert M. La Follette, Jr., a close friend of Mr. Wright was upset in a close Republican primary by the little-known challenger state judge Joseph R. McCarthy, Jr. Just after winning that race, Joseph McCarthy first began his long-time persecution of Frank Lloyd Wright.

As a consequence of the postwar coalition opposing the concepts of FDR's New Deal, McCarthy led the resistance against public housing. At the 1947 federal hearings on public housing directed by McCarthy, the senator essentially scuttled federally financed public housing by calling it a "breeding ground for Communists."

In the 1950s, the junior senator from Wisconsin used his position to publicly smear countless individuals, including his nemesis Frank Lloyd Wright, with false charges that they were Communists or sympathizers. We all know now that McCarthy's witch hunts, filled with errors of fact, misjudgments, and innuendoes disguised as evidence, were so outrageous and shameful his own party eventually turned on him. At the time, though, it was very dangerous to provoke the man. Frank Lloyd Wright had no reservations calling him a "political pervert."

McCarthy relentlessly continued his anti-Communist campaign into 1953, when he gained a new platform as chairman of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. He promptly redirected its focus from investigating fraud and waste in the executive branch to hunting Communists. McCarthy collaborated with a much wider coalition of anti-Communist forces, including the FBI, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, and the American Legion. These groups worked in concert to restrain employment opportunities and civil rights of individuals they deemed undesirable. Again, Frank Lloyd Wright found his name on a list of "subversive individuals." Many spears rose up to shake in the frenzy.

The American Legion, for example, could find a particular axe to grind with a dedicated pacifist accused by Senator McCarthy of being also a Communist. That such an architect should be one of two leading contenders for the design of the new US Air Force Academy in Colorado was unthinkable. Just before a required trip to Washington for the project, Mr. Wright announced he was removing himself from consideration. The August, 1955, issue of *Architectural Forum* reported:

"There was a threatened smear campaign by the American Legion against Wright for his pacifist attitudes and purported communist leanings if he did not withdraw."

Characteristically, Mr. Wright did not react to the allegation itself, but instead said:

"I do not know why the American Legion puts me on its blackened page unless because I hate war and openly oppose it. I equally hate American Legion opposition to the exercise by others of the same rights it takes to itself. I do not want to see our sovereignty of the individual sacrificed to fear, even fear of Communism--see ourselves reduced by the professional warrior to Communism's level."

Even now in the 21st century, these are hard and uneasy recollections. They are best handled simply as historical facts, without attaching emotional judgments. As always throughout his life, Mr. Wright believed strongly in the Jeffersonian tradition of liberty and justice for all. Prospering those American ideals through the service of good architecture was his chosen vocation, which he pursued uncompromisingly. Without delivering ourselves up to speculation and keeping strictly to the paper trail, we can justifiably observe that in many ways, over many years, and under many circumstances, vainglorious politicians and self-gratifying bureaucrats in his own government denied or deterred him whenever they could.

PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

While it is beyond the scope of the time remaining to detail the long and varied relationships that Frank Lloyd Wright had with his fellow American architects, and they were almost all men, it is worthwhile to undertake a quick review of why he often found himself at odds with the architectural establishment of his profession.

Frank Lloyd Wright opened his first architectural office in 1893, but he had first spent time with the key progressive Chicago firm of Adler & Sullivan. From architect Louis Sullivan Mr. Wright absorbed the idea that form should follow function in architecture, meaning that the design and materials of buildings should freely declare their purpose with integrity. Following Sullivan's lead in commercial buildings, Mr. Wright created for residential structures the entirely fresh dwelling forms that came to be called the Prairie School, horizontal houses with open plans and free flowing spatial relationships that responded to the native conditions of the surrounding countryside. Over subsequent decades Mr. Wright developed ceaselessly inventive buildings that brought fresh creative solutions to the ever more

dynamic qualities of American life. He remains America's greatest modernist, with his stubborn individualism and his insight that a building can be as utilitarian as a suspension bridge and simultaneously as elegant as a Whitman poem.

Not everyone viewed life as an egalitarian exercise in personal creativity. There were those in the architectural establishment, and they were in positions of vast social influence, who believed that everything beautiful that could be done in architecture had already been defined by ancient cultures. Who didn't see a Greek or Roman temple, for example, as the acme of perfection? They could be made into perfect banks, or train stations, while the sublime arches of a Gothic cathedral would do nicely for a storage warehouse or a college campus. We had only to observe, copy, and perhaps extrapolate here and there, but the outcome of reviving these old building forms was, in their view, a guarantee of not only a predictably beautiful result but also a steadying of the American frontier mentality with the hand of tradition.

Frank Lloyd Wright did not flinch from calling this proposition a deceitful hogwash that betrayed the hardy and inventive spirit of American achievement. He believed the choice was genuinely one between life and death, between the power of the living world and the shroud of the dead past. Against him were arrayed numerous professional interests that desired to install, one way or the other, a commonplace homogeneity that was, ultimately, a bid for cultural authority and thereby central control. Someone devoutly committed to the political principles of Thomas Jefferson and the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson was never going to go quietly along for the ride.

As always, Frank Lloyd Wright spoke his mind. In essays, books, and at public podiums, he often reprimanded the American Institute of Architects for its support of the status quo and lack of commitment towards what he considered a "truly American architecture." He wrote, "The mother art is architecture. Without an architecture of our own we have no soul of our own civilization". He once referred to the American Institute of Architects as the "American Institute of Appearances," and another time as the "Artificial Institute of Architects." This is not the Dale Carnegie approach!

Those on the receiving end of his criticisms found the path of least resistance was merely to disregard Frank Lloyd Wright. A new generation brought in a version of European derived modernism that did away with the historical arguments altogether, but Mr. Wright pointed out that their approach was a mirage which missed his point about human values—a view he punctuated with the design of a house called Fallingwater whose immediate fame reinvigorated his professional prestige more than ever in the eyes of the both architectural critics and the general public.

However, since we have come to the last part here it would be nice to have a happy ending. Frank Lloyd Wright's work was widely praised in Europe as early as 1910. In 1941, King George IV of England awarded him the Royal Institute of British Architects Gold Medal. Nearly a decade later, when he was 82 years old, Mr. Wright finally did receive recognition from the American Institute of Architects. Accepting the AIA Gold Medal at the Institute's national convention in Houston on March 17, 1949, he was the sixteenth recipient and is still the only non-member or non-honorary member to receive it other than, how fittingly, Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson had to wait 123 years after his death, so perhaps Mr. Wright got the better of the deal in this instance.

While much appreciating what he called "this token of esteem from the home boys," he could not refrain from chiding the AIA for tardiness. A total of 1,296 people were in attendance, and Mr. Wright had less than one word of thanks for each of them altogether. "It's been a long time coming," he said with tongue barely in cheek, "but here it is at last." He ended with "That's enough, isn't it?"

CONCLUSION

In 1991, some thirty-three years after his death, the American Institute of Architects recognized Frank Lloyd Wright as "the greatest American architect of all time." The organization has since designated seventeen American buildings designed by him to be permanently retained as exemplars of

his architectural contribution to American culture. Since the 1960s, the US Post Office has managed several stamps. Perhaps that's a nicely Shakespearean play on ending well.

Tonight we have been able to glance at only the barest outline of his life and the surrounding circumstances which he overcame to produce what is now hailed with such admiration. While he never spared anyone the blunt edge of his opinion and his burning genius did not pretend to suffer fools, he gave his heart early on and never wavered from the calling of his convictions. He made enemies, he made friends. Sometimes they changed places. But throughout it all, Frank Lloyd Wright held to the ideal that we all deserve the liberty to fulfill ourselves. In his mind architecture was a primary means to undertake the journey. Even if we never set foot in any of his buildings, though, his message is still a vital exhortation for us to carry onward in the highest tradition of the American spirit. He overcame the doubters, the deniers, and the dissemblers who would rob us of a better life and, with as much courage, so can we.

Thank you.

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