

ONE: WRIGHT, INFLUENCE, AND THE WORLD AT LARGE

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Frank Lloyd Wright and his work are icons of modern American architecture. Few Americans have not heard of the Guggenheim Museum or Fallingwater. Wright's portrait has appeared on a U.S. postage stamp; his personal life reads like a novel and has been made into an opera. But despite his fame and his status as America's most celebrated architect, we are only beginning to understand how his ideas were dispersed and the impact his architecture made throughout an active practice that spanned from 1896 to 1959.

Although the culturally adept may know of the revolution in domestic architecture associated with Wright's early work around Chicago and Oak Park in his Prairie period, they often overlook the use of Wright's design ideas in the housing boom and the expansion of the American suburb after World War II, to cite just one example of our incomplete grasp of his impact. During the most productive period of his architectural practice, beginning in the mid-1940s, Wright's organic architecture infiltrated the ranch style house; his idiom informed the split-level houses of the 1950s and 1960s; and his ideas intertwined with those of other American architects who tried to define modern life through architecture.

The popular press contributed to the powerful impact of Wright's architecture in the 1950s. Articles on Wright in *Time* and *Life* magazines and in the mass-market home design magazines, such as *House Beautiful* and *House and Garden*, disseminated Wright's ideas to the very heart of the American public, far beyond the limits of the architectural press that had often featured his work.¹ As a child in the 1950s I saw my parents studying Wright's latest work in *House Beautiful*, and I remember their search in our hometown of Memphis for the architects most sympathetic to Wright's ideas. His work seemed to me as natural and appropriate as the Eames furniture in our house seemed normal; the pioneering roles of these masters of modern design escaped me until my college years. Af-

ter Wright's death in 1959 his reputation took one of its cyclical dips, but by the mid 1980s, as postmodernism in architecture waned, Wright became a subject of interest again, as evident not only in the scholarly reconsideration of his life and work but also in the virtual industry of picture books and artifacts ranging from key rings to calendars. His furniture, art glass windows, and some four hundred buildings that remain have steadily increased in commercial value despite market fluctuations.² This revival returns us to the problematic question of Wright's impact on American culture. Does the legacy of his work represent a new source of merchandising or a call back to the basic issues of architecture and democracy? If he was such a towering genius, why did he not make an even greater mark on American architecture?

The penetration of Wright's ideas into American architecture constitutes what we casually consider to be his influence. Influence, however, normally entails three basic processes: imitation, transformation, and parallelism. Imitation implies some attempt to copy, usually relying on the external appearances of objects. Transformation suggests an effort to move beyond making copies to altering either appearance or the meanings underlying forms. Parallelism occurs when objects that appear similar have independent origins. Although the processes of influence can be conscious, most often they are unconscious and open to misinterpretation.

These three modes of influence played out through Wright's work not only in his homeland but also around the globe. In some ways his work is so well known in the United States that familiarity blinds us to a deeper insight into his impact on American life; the effects are so broad that they have simply been ignored. Wright's role in American architecture is so large that decades of study may be required to fully grasp its complexity. Moreover, the impact of his apprentices and students who went on to set up their own practices remains incompletely explored.

This collection of essays looks not at the United States—the context usually associated with Wright—but around the globe, from Japan to Great Britain and from France to Chile, as well as to Mexico, Russia, and the Middle East. Interwoven in these essays are stories of champions and critics, of books and exhibitions, and of the transmission and transformation of ideas through which Wright's work came to the world.

Historians and critics have traditionally pointed to Wright's impact in Germany around 1910 as a key factor in the evolution of the Modern Movement. The canonical view used to be that Wright's famous publications of 1910–1911, printed in Berlin by the Wasmuth Verlag, had an immediate and dramatic influence on German architects and the rest of the European avant-garde. Every standard architectural history credits these publications—the *Ausgeführte Bauten und Entwürfe von Frank Lloyd Wright*, a two-folio monograph of Wright's buildings and designs; and the similarly titled *Frank Lloyd Wright: Ausgeführte Bauten*, a small picture book

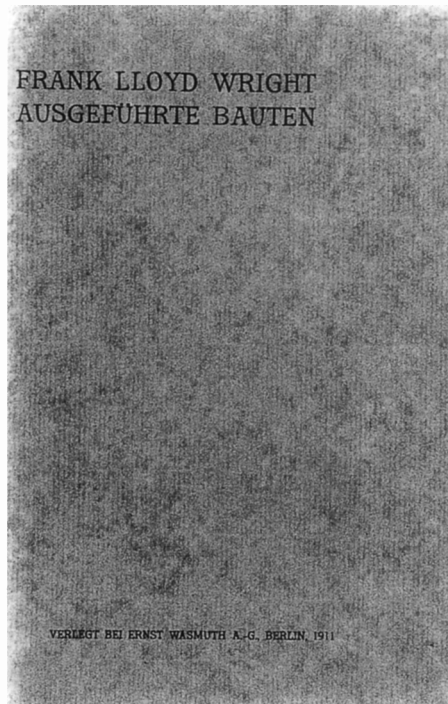


Figure 1.1
Cover of *Frank Lloyd Wright: Ausgeführte Bauten*
(Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1911), published for American
distribution.

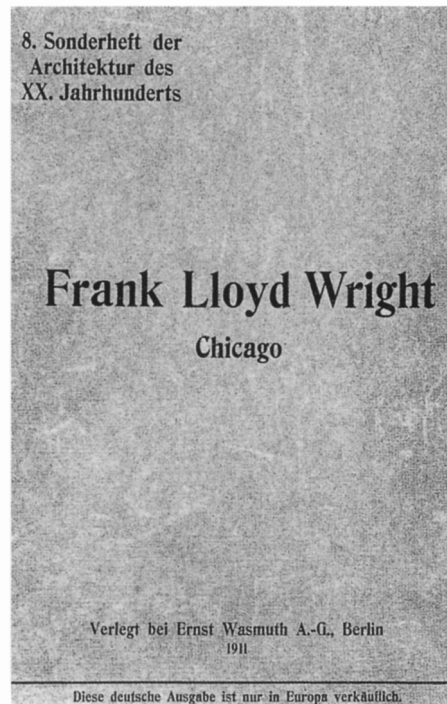


Figure 1.2
Cover of *Frank Lloyd Wright, Chicago: 8. Sonderheft
der Architektur des XX. Jahrhunderts* [8th special
edition of architecture of the twentieth century]
(Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1911), published exclusively
for European distribution.

of executed work—with this seminal role, particularly vis-à-vis Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.³ Kuno Francke, a professor at Harvard, is said to have been the impetus for these publications, and their impact was supposedly reinforced by an exhibition of Wright’s work held in Berlin.

These standard views nicely demonstrate the complexities of influence. Our notion of Wright’s influence in Germany came about by one historian repeating the accounts of another without bothering to check if they had any factual basis. Indeed, archival and documentary research has shown them to be a series of myths.⁴ The widespread impact of the Wasmuth publications, particularly the folios, is dubious in light of their limited distribution in Europe; they were a vanity printing, paid for by Wright, with only 100 copies of the folios and 3,900 copies of an inferior edition of the picture book (or *Sonderheft*, as Wright called it then) reserved for a European audience, while Wright retained another 900 and 5,100 copies respectively for his American audience (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2). More-



Figure 1.3
Studio of Frank Lloyd Wright,
Oak Park, Illinois, 1898. From
Volné Směry 4 (1900): 178.

over, Kuno Francke was not the key player in the Wasmuth affair; Wright's connection appears to have been Bruno Möhring, the eminent architect, city planner, and Wasmuth editor who had visited Wright's office in 1904 but missed Wright. Nor is there any evidence of an exhibition open to the general public; Möhring simply lectured on Wright's work and showed a small selection of drawings one evening in February 1910 to an architectural club in Berlin. Decades later Mies and Gropius would recall an "exhibition," but this lecture is the only documented showing of Wright's work in Germany at that time.

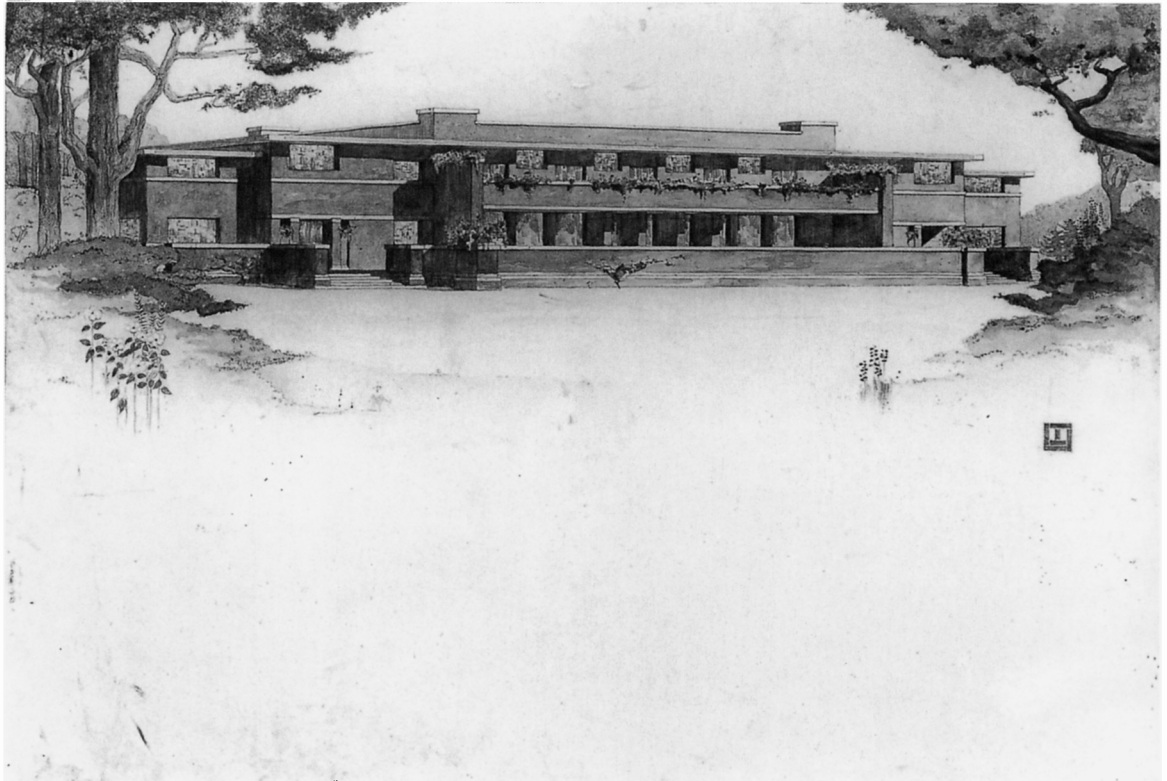
The realities of the Wasmuth affair do not contradict the view that Wright's work began to be disseminated in Europe after 1910. Otto Wagner showed a copy of the folio monograph to his students in Vienna in 1911 and proclaimed Wright a paragon worthy of study. Although Le Corbusier would deny that he knew of Wright at the time, he had obtained a copy of the *Sonderheft* for his mentor Auguste Perret during World War I. Others who saw the publications, including the young Austrians Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra, would work for Wright in the late 1910s and 1920s. To understand the influence of the publications on these and other figures, however, we need to look more closely at how the images were transmitted, assimilated, and finally interpreted (or misinterpreted) in terms of both intellectual response and built works. Rather than looking closely, many historians have tended to rely on simple visual analogies that reduce the phenomenon of making architecture to a crude transitivity: if A looks like B, then B has influenced A.



Figure 1.4

Detail of stork relief and floor plan,
studio of Frank Lloyd Wright, Oak Park,
Illinois, 1898. From *Volné Směry* 4
(1900): 177.

Europeans learned about Wright by other means as well, and these also set the stage for his influence. One unexpected source is the avant-garde Czech journal *Volné Směry*, published in Prague, whose editors included Jan Kotěra, a former student of Wagner's and a young leader of the Czech modern movement. In 1900, the journal featured an article on architecture in America by a member of the avant-garde Mánes Group who had traveled in the United States; he reported that Louis Sullivan was the emerging modernist, and although he did not mention Wright, the article included two images of his studio in Oak Park (Figs. 1.3 and 1.4).⁵ Reproduced from the *Architectural Review* (Boston), these may be the first images of Wright's work to appear anywhere in Europe. In 1904 the noted Viennese critic Max Dvořák referred to *Volné Směry's* illustrations of Wright's work, also pointing out that American architecture had been exhibited at the Prague Modern Gallery.⁶



Far more significant than this early reference was the dissemination of Wright's ideas through Dutch architects in the 1910s. Hendrik Petrus Berlage was Wright's first and most important early champion. A major pioneer of the Dutch modern movement, Berlage visited America in 1911 and saw several of Wright's buildings but missed meeting the architect. Returning to Europe, he gave three lectures in Zurich on American architecture in which Wright's Larkin Company Administration Building and the Darwin Martin House, both in Buffalo, figured prominently. The lectures, which immediately appeared in Dutch and in German-language Swiss publications, stimulated the interest of young Europeans, establishing a critically important "Dutch Connection" between Wright and Holland and sensitizing Swiss architects and engineers to Wright's ideas.⁷ Several young Dutch architects even studied Berlage's copy of Wright's Wasmuth folios; chief among them was Jan Wils, who learned presentation techniques by copying the folio's rendered trees and perspectives (Fig. 1.5).⁸

While the Dutch initiated the critical discourse about Wright in the 1910s, his work and ideas were ignored in Germany until the 1920s, when they would play an important role in German debates about modernism. In the years leading up to these debates a series of young European architects sought Wright out, and



Figure 1.5 (opposite)

Design for a pavilion in the municipal park, Groningen, 1917. Jan Wils, architect. (NAI 012212)

Figure 1.6

Kameki Tsuchiura (left), Richard Neutra (center), and Wright at Taliesin, 1924.

From Heinrich de Fries, *Frank Lloyd Wright: Aus dem Lebenswerke eines Architekten* (Berlin: Ernst Pollak, 1926).

several came to work with him at Taliesin, in Wisconsin. The European invasion of Wright's office began with the arrival of the Czech Antonin Raymond, who went to work for Wright in 1916. He had studied at the Technical College of Prague, where Kotěra held a position similar to that of Otto Wagner in Vienna, training a generation of modern architects. Although Kotěra had seen buildings by Wright in 1904, when he came to America for the St. Louis World's Fair, Raymond appears to have learned of Wright's work only after arriving in the United States. In 1919 he went with Wright to work on the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo and then remained in Japan to establish his own office in 1920.⁹

The Austrian Rudolph Schindler worked for Wright from 1918 through 1921.¹⁰ In December 1919, while in Japan, Wright sent Schindler to California to oversee his practice there and to work on the Barnsdall House. After Schindler's departure from Wright's domestic office, his Austrian friend Richard Neutra arrived. Neutra had met Schindler in 1912 and knew of Wright's work through the *Was-muth folios*, which he saw in Vienna (Fig. 1.6). In 1923 Werner M. Moser, a member of a famous family of Swiss architects, came to work for Wright at Taliesin; upon his return to Switzerland five years later he became a founding member of the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM).