

Allen Memorial Art Museum

Teacher Resource Packet – Frank Lloyd Wright House, 1947



Frank Lloyd Wright
(American, 1867 – 1959)
Welzheimer/Johnson House,
1947-9
Redwood, brick, glass,
concrete

American architect Frank Lloyd Wright is regarded as one of the greatest modern architects, with a career spanning over fifty years. He is best known for his Prairie Style homes, which emphasized

a long, horizontal line and organic incorporation into the surroundings, inspired by the prairie of the Midwest. Through the course of his life, Wright became equally well known for his personal life as his architecture.



Wright in 1947, the same year construction began on the W/J House

Biography

Frank Lloyd Wright was born in 1867 in rural Wisconsin, the son of a lawyer and a teacher. Dying in 1959 at the age of 91, he was regarded as one of the most prolific and acclaimed architects of all time. His early childhood was marked by his parents' divorce in 1885, after which his mother lavished the young Wright with affection. He left his home to attend the University of Wisconsin, Madison for two terms

before leaving for Chicago to try his luck with architecture. His earliest experience once there was with the architect Joseph Lyman Silsbee, an architect of religious buildings. Perhaps one of Wright's most influential early working experiences was with Adler and Sullivan firm. Louis Sullivan was one of the most respected architects of the day, known for his mysticism and towering steel skyscrapers. Terming the phrase, "form follows

function,” Sullivan was a direct influence on Wright’s development of his famous Prairie Style.

Wright was deeply dedicated to the idea of an ‘[organic](#)’ architecture which would integrate nature, man, and design into a unified and interrelated final product. Wright purchased land for a home in Oak Park, Illinois in 1889, leaving Sullivan’s practice four years later after a dispute over side commissions taken by Wright to supplement his income. Less than ten years later, the architect had produced over 50 built projects, many in Oak Park. It was at this point that Wright’s distinctive Prairie style was developed, the style for which he is now probably best known. Built between 1900 and 1917, Wright’s Prairie Houses were designed to echo the landscape around Chicago. The homes featured low, horizontal lines, flat or hipped roofs, integration with the landscape, and open floor plans.

After leaving Oak Park due to personal complications, Wright settled back in Wisconsin to build Taliesin, which he envisioned as a self-sustaining utopian community. It would later become the center of the Frank Lloyd Wright school where his apprentices were trained and sent to his various building projects throughout the country. After another series of personal tragedies, Wright became a wandering architect, moving between the USA and Japan, where he was deeply intrigued by Japanese prints and traditional Japanese architectural methods. Fallingwater, perhaps Wright’s most famous architectural accomplishment, was built between 1935 and 1939 in Bear Run, Pennsylvania. Designed with a waterfall running under part of the building, it remains a byword when discussing Wright’s career. The 1930s also saw the development of Wright’s [Usonian](#) homes. The word Usonian was developed to refer to Wright’s utopian vision of life in the United States. .

He continued working in the Usonian style and ultimately completed over 500 built works. Wright passed away in April of 1959, soon after the completion of his last major project- the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

Function, Form/Style:

Wright’s design for the Weltzheimer/Johnson House largely adheres to his overall schema for the Usonian home. Perhaps best known for the prevalent Prairie Style in the first half of his career, Wright’s Usonian homes were built with similar dominant ideas articulated in new forms. The Usonian home grew out of Frank Lloyd Wright’s imagining of an ideal society, or utopia that would govern the way people lived through design. This imagining, called Broadacre City, called for affordable homes that were easily built and would suit themselves to the middle class lifestyle of America. This idea grew into the Usonian home. The name Usonian is popularly believed to be a combination of USA and utopia, although the origins may have come from a number of different writers popular in the 1800s as a way to refer to the US.

The homes themselves were predominantly small, single story homes with carports. The L-shape was common, as was the use of locally produced materials. Likewise, solar



heating, radiant-floor heating, and clerestory windows were all typical features of these homes. In this way, the Weltzheimer/Johnson house is a stereotypical Usonian home. The compression and expansion of space is a feature of almost all of Wright's designs, and was intentional on the part of the architect. Wright, as an artist, was very concerned with using design to elucidate and encourage what he viewed as the proper way to live. By

regulating the movement through the home, he was able to guide residents into the spaces he wanted them to live in. Spaces like the hallway and entryway were judged as less important, and were not meant to be viable gathering places. The living room was intended to be the dominant living space, and was therefore designed to be the largest and most welcoming room. By creating moveable furniture, opening the space between kitchen and living room, and adding social elements such as the patio and piano, Wright sought to create a room built for socializing. It was here that the family would spend time, which would in turn encourage them to grow closer as a family unit. The Oberlin home, however, is not without its unique characteristics. Two elements in particular mark the home as unusual. The first is a feature of the [cantilevered](#) roof. The entire roof is ringed by attached spheres. In relation to the overall [horizontality](#) of the design, the spheres soften the strictness of the roofline. In the rain, they add an additional layer of transparency between the interior and exterior spaces, as the rain creates a 'curtain.'



The second unique element is the design of the [clerestory](#) windows. Likely designed by the apprentice sent to oversee the project, the windows feature an unusually sinuous and curvilinear pattern for a Wright home. These windows, especially when placed in the hallway, serve to break up a bit of the continuous horizontality and sense of compressive space that Wright relied on for movement through the home. Rather than detract, however, these quirks give

the home a unique quality when compared to other Usonian designs.

Cultural and Historical Importance:

As a design concept, the Usonian home represented Wright's dedication to creating an architecture suitable for a truly modern way of living. In his control of space, it is possible to perceive Wright's own moral values. Despite his tumultuous personal life, the importance and prominence of public living displayed his dedication to ideas of togetherness and comprehensive family units. His overall desire to create a utopian and complete living space is a theme echoed throughout his career- self evident in structures like Taliesin where he sought to create a totalized and independently sustainable living space through his design of Broadacre City and the eventual design of the Usonian home.

The Weltzheimer/Johnson house itself is important in the cultural and historical narrative of Oberlin. The home was built on commission for Charles and Margaret Weltzheimer in 1947. Wright himself never visited the location, and communicated with Mrs. Weltzheimer through letters and studied maps of the area to create the design. The project, like many of Wright's houses, overshot the original budget by as much as three times. Margaret Weltzheimer lived in the home until 1962, even after her divorce from Charles. The 1960s saw drastic changes for the home, some of which are still evident. The new owner in this era made few changes; however, the house was bought in 1966 by a local developer, who sold off much of the three acres of land on either side of the home, and created the housing development behind the home. Wright's original vision was drastically altered at this time. The developer altered the kitchen and bathrooms, built an additional door to the side of the kitchen, and whitewashed the brick of the main room.

The home was then acquired by Professor of Art History Ellen Johnson in 1969. Extremely well connected in the modern art world, she sought to restore as much of the original home as possible. She offered students extra credit for removing the white wash, and went so far as to hunt down an original bathtub that had been used as a watering trough in a local farmer's field. On her death in 1992, Ellen Johnson donated the home to Oberlin College with the understanding that the home would be used as a space for public and college tours, performances, and guest residencies for visiting academics. The house is fundamentally woven in to the history of Oberlin. Its original creation represents Oberlin's dedication to modern architecture and the sophistication which is to be found here. The changes it underwent in the 1960s parallel the overall changeability of architecture in Oberlin over time. Furthermore, its current ownership by the College and use as a teaching tool reflects much of the history of the College and one of its renowned professors.

Visual Analysis:



The home is approached along a gravel path, which Wright designed as the original driveway of the home. The angularity of the façade and the walls of sheer glass that make up the windows are

immediately striking. Set deeply back in the lot and flanked by trees, the home's exterior reliance on glass creates the illusion of a continuation of the environment into the house itself. The original driveway leads to a sheltered overhang directly above the entrance of the home. The roof is low and cantilevered over the space, and feels disproportionately low to the ground. Standing in the space, one is struck by the cave-like, dark atmosphere of the entryway. Walking through the front door, the sense of compression continues due to the low ceiling and a closet and wall that flank the visitor. The front entry space feels functional, almost to the point of being utilitarian, and extends no invitation to linger.

Looking to the left from the entryway, the home transforms itself. Cloistered and compressed spaces open themselves into a room filled with light and air. The main living space feels warm and inviting, reinforced by the colors of the materials in the room itself. One is struck immediately by the warmth of the red in the concrete floor, the red of the brick, and the warm wood tones of the redwood ceiling. The lines of the floor are cleanly incised into the concrete, and lead the visitor's gaze across the room. These lines are taken up in the ceiling of the room- the vertical lines of the ceiling extending from the main entrance into the room across the living space until they meet the horizontal lines that run across the back of the room, drawing the eye to the built in bench and shelves that adorn the back wall. The left wall is punctuated by columns of brick, visually separating the space from the kitchen. The eye is drawn from the columns to the back wall. The horizontal lines of the home are echoed by the low bench built into the wall. The sandy yellow of the cushions reinforce the earth tones of the room. Along with the bench, Wright created low shelves that run across the back wall. These broad, open-faced shelves are crowned by a clerestory window. The pattern of the clerestory is an arabesque of line, smoothly curving into spherical designs. When placed on top of the strict horizontality of the bench and shelves, the circular design of the clerestory offers a modicum of visual relief. The rhythm of the back wall is interrupted by a door that was installed in the 1960s.

The main focus of the living room is certainly the glass doors that run across the southwest wall. They stretch from ceiling to floor and create a dramatic link between the interior of the home and its exterior environment. Visual repetition is the critical element here, in addition to the visual openness allowed by the glass, the red concrete of the floor continues out into the porch area. Likewise, the skylights cut into the overhanging roof are echoed in the lights installed in the ceiling, albeit in smaller form. The windows flood the room with light and are all able to open, letting the air into the room and creating the feeling of openness. The ease of access to the outdoors helps visually incorporate the surrounding environment and bring it into the home itself.

Walking into the back areas of the house, the hallway visually establishes its function. Like the entrance, the space entombs the visitor, surrounding them in a dark and constricted space. The tightness of the space emphasizes its length, and establishes a dramatic passage back into space. The three bedrooms of the home seem to organically flower off of the darkness of the hallway. Each features broad windows, large, low lying beds, and a sense of space after the constriction of the hallway. Privacy is all but obliterated with the large windows, and one has a sense of living in a completely open

arena, engineered to create public living spaces. The final bedroom has mitered windows in the southwest corner, which evoke a sense of infinite expansion into the surrounding environment. Coupled with the L-shape of the home, the design and placement of the rooms and windows further reinforces the organic openness of the design.

Classroom Resources

Language Arts: Write a story that takes place in the house, imagine a family living there. What kind of things would they do in the space?

Math (Elementary): count out the square footage of the home by calculating the area of the floor tiles.

Science (Middle School): use local materials to construct your own house design. talk about the use of local materials, sustainability.

Science (High School): model passive heating in the classroom. use glass to construct a mini greenhouse. explore loss of heat based on source.

Visual Arts: look at the landscape around you, how does it make you feel? What sort of house would look like the land? Find examples of the structures that incorporate their surroundings in your neighborhood.

For more information, visit:

The Frank Lloyd Wright Conservancy - <http://www.franklloydwright.org/Home.html>

Wright on the Web - <http://www.delmars.com/wright/index.html>

Vocabulary

Cantilever: In architecture, any rigid structural member projecting from a vertical support, so that the upper part is in tension and the lower in compression.

Clerestory: A clerestory is an upper wall in a structure that has a band of windows running across it, usually immediately below the ceiling to provide extra light to interior spaces.

Horizontality: Of or pertaining to the horizon, parallel to level ground. In architecture, a line that extends horizontally and emphasizes a long rather than tall profile.

Organic: In architecture, a structure and a plan that fulfill perfectly the functional requirements for the building and that form in themselves an intellectually lucid, integrated whole.

Usonian: A word derived from 'the United States of North America' and 'utopian.' Created by Frank Lloyd Wright to describe an affordable middle class home design that would result in the ideal living situation.

Ohio Academic Content Standards – Benchmarks

Language Arts

Acquisition of Vocabulary; Informational, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Writing Applications; Research Standard; Communications: Oral and Visual Standard

Mathematics

Measurement; Geometry and Spatial Sense; Patterns, Functions, and Algebra

Science

Physical Sciences; Science and Technology

Social Studies

History; People in Societies; Geography; Economics; Skills and Methods

Visual Art

Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Creative Expression and Communication; Analyzing and Responding; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection; Connections, Relationships and Applications