

WRIGHT - ORGANIC ARCHITECTURE

Frank Lloyd Wright first used the term 'organic architecture' in an article for *Architectural Record* in August 1914. He wrote that "the ideal of an organic architecture... is a sentient, rational building that would owe its 'style' to the integrity with which it was individually fashioned to serve its particular purpose—a 'thinking' as well as 'feeling' process."¹

In this article and many more up to his death, Wright continued to try, not always with much success, to explain what organic architecture was and was not to him. His buildings spoke far more succinctly than his writings. He wanted organic architecture to be more than his own work, more than his own 'style'. He wanted to generate a philosophy of building that could inspire and guide architects and laymen long into the future.

While it is not easy to define organic architecture, there are principles at work in Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings that transcend his personal expression. It is important to note that Wright was not the first architect to use the term organic architecture, nor was he the last. The concept of an organic style meant different things to different architects and manifested itself in a variety of ways. Below are some of the principles of Wright's organic architecture.

Building and Site

The two have a very special relationship in organic architecture. The site should be enhanced by the building, and the building derives its form partially from the nature of the site. Sometimes this is done by similarity (prairie house and prairie landscape), sometimes by contrast (Fallingwater and a forest glen). In natural settings, the buildings may open out (Usonian houses), and in urban settings, turn inward (the Larkin and Johnson Wax Buildings). The building grows out of the landscape as naturally as any plant; its relationship to the site is so unique that it would be out of place elsewhere.

Materials

These are used simply in a way that enhances their innate character and optimizes their individual color, texture, and strength. One material is not disguised as another. The way a building comes together, how one material joins another; the very form of the building should be an expression of the nature of the materials used. In organic architecture, only a few materials are used, both inside and outside.

Shelter

A building should convey a sense of shelter, refuge, or protection against the elements. Its inhabitants should never lack privacy or feel exposed and unprotected.

Space

"The reality of the building does not consist of the roof and the walls but the space within to be lived in", said Wright. The interior space determines exterior form (as in Unity Temple). Interior space is not packed in boxes called rooms; rather, space should flow freely from interior area to interior area. Rooms are never simple rectangles but are broken up vertically and horizontally (alcoves, L-shapes, lowered ceilings, and decks) to give the eye and mind something delightful and sometimes something mysterious to enjoy. An area is

never fully comprehended when viewed from one point but must be slowly experienced as one moves through the space. One space can introduce another, heightening the effect, or function as part of a series, such as the playroom hallway and the playroom in the home.

Proportion and Scale

The human body should be the measure of a building and its furnishings. Wright spoke of the “integral harmony of proportion to the human figure—to have all details so designed as to make the human relationship to architecture not only convenient but charming.”

Nature

Nature is an architect’s school. The creative possibilities of form, color, pattern, texture, proportion, rhythm, and growth are all demonstrated in nature. Organic architecture does not imitate nature but is concerned with natural materials, the site, and the people who will occupy the buildings.

Repose

Quiet, serene, tranquil space is a fitting environment for human growth. It is achieved by simple architectural masses that reflect the uncluttered spaces within and that are carefully related to the site.

Grammar

Each building has its own *grammar*, its distinct vocabulary of pattern and form. All parts of the building from the smallest detail to the overall form thus speak the same language. The grammar may be completely different for two buildings, although both are organically designed (the Johnson Wax Building versus Taliesin West).

Ornament

Not all organic architecture has ornament, but when used, it is developed as an integral part of the material, not applied. Examples are patterns cast in concrete or carved in stone, leaded glass panels, and tile or glass mosaics.

Human Values

“All values are human values or else not valuable”, said Wright. “Human use and comfort should have intimate possession of every interior—should be felt in every exterior.”

Simplicity

Organic architecture is simple because its scheme and design are clear. “The highest form of simplicity is not simple in the sense that the infant intelligence is simple—nor, for that matter, the side of a barn. Simplicity in art is a synthetic positive quality in which we may see evidence of mind, breadth of scheme, wealth of detail and withal a sense of completeness found in a tree or flower.”²

Mechanical Systems and Furnishings

These are an integral part of the building: they are not added on, stuck in or unduly exposed. Sculpture and painting have to become elements of the total design. Furniture should be built-in as much as possible.

Although these are not all of the principles of Wright's organic architecture, they outline his general philosophy. Organic design aims to include them, but not even Frank Lloyd Wright achieved them totally in each of his buildings. As Wright himself wrote, "The complete goal of the ideal of organic architecture is never reached. Nor need be. What worthwhile ideal is ever reached?"³

¹ Frank Lloyd Wright, Frederick Gutheim, Editor. *In the Cause of Architecture: Essays by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Architectural Record, 1908-1952*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), page unavailable.

² Edgar Kaufman and Bea Raeburn, *Frank Lloyd Wright: Writings and Buildings* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1969), page unavailable.

³ Op cit., *Essays*, page unavailable.

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