

Masterwork in the Desert



Taliesin West Historic Core from the Prow. (Courtesy of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, photo credit: Andrew Pielage)

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By **BRIAN T. ALLEN**

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Frank Lloyd Wright's western wonder — his winter home and studio — is a tribute to the Arizona landscape.

Two or three weeks ago I wrote about the 300th anniversary of the death of Christopher Wren, the architect who rebuilt the chunk of medieval London destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666. *Wren300* was his effective and extensive yearlong fête.

He deserved it. That architects are artists is a discounted, even flouted concept. Great artists such as Dürer, Titian, Goya, Whistler, and Picasso do flat art that hangs on museum walls or, here and there still, in church chapels. Yes, Michelangelo's and Bernini's sculptures are sublime and icons of their time. Both were architects, too, and made Rome glorious enough for God and saints to call it a second home. Architecture's art on a big scale, as well as art that we enter and leave, experience on city streets, and live and work in. A great building's enigmatic, inviting, provocative, and poetic, as is a great painting. Its magic changes reality.



View of Taliesin West. ("Spring Break 2011 021.JPG" by Jwagg0309 is licensed under CC BY 3.0)

I was in Phoenix last week for a board meeting. I knew Taliesin West, Frank Lloyd Wright's winter residence in Scottsdale, was an essential visit but understood why as an abstraction and a hunch. Wright (1867–1959), like Wren, was an architect, designer, and educator and, like Wren, was a uniquely visionary and heroic artist. Unlike Wren, Wright was uniquely American. I visited the historic site, now owned and run by the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.



Wright at Taliesin West. (Courtesy of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives (The Museum of Modern Art | Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York), all rights reserved)

Taliesin West, designed by Wright in the late '30s, was his winter home and studio as well as an artist commune and school. Set in the brow of the McDowell Mountains and desert, its flat buildings, adobe, wood, and desert-rock walls mixed with concrete glide and drift over dozens of acres like a rattlesnake, here and there reaching to the blue sky like a saguaro, the cactuses that look like trees but also like abstract, angular sculptures — don't touch.



I went on Discovery Day, what the foundation calls its twice yearly community open house. It was serendipity in action. Taliesin West's open to the public and offers tours, but Discovery Day invites rambling through the campus and, for me, enjoying views that are positively lunar compared with what I see in Vermont. There was music, art from the archives on view, staff stationed for short presentations and questions, a scavenger hunt, and a primer on Wright's career, in itself a vast topic. By 1941, the compound's core buildings were up and running. Wright expanded and tweaked it well into the '50s.



View of Taliesin West. ("Scottsdale-Taliesin West-1931-7.JPG" by Marine 69-71 is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](#))

Taliesin West's unassuming. It complements the landscape of desert and mountains so well that it appears to flow organically from them. It deceives on this one point and isn't at all ostentatious. Wright was not without ego and was America's first "starchitect," but even his calling-card buildings, such as the Fallingwater and the Guggenheim Museum, take their cues from their settings, not a maker's lust for a monument to himself.

I've written over the years about the late work of artists who are also giants: Titian, Winslow Homer, Goya, Michelangelo, and Rembrandt — and I'd add Wright — had an end-of-life style. Old, and knowing death misses no one, they make their essential ideas, themes, and visions the total priority, supplanting the will of clients, critics, and public opinion.



Fallingwater in Pennsylvania, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1935. (Public domain/via Wikimedia)

After a few hours at Taliesin West, I decided I'd experienced Wright's end-of-life valedictory (or one of two or three along Fallingwater, completed in 1938, and the Guggenheim). His inverted ziggurat on Fifth Avenue opened in 1959, but Wright had conceived the look and designed most of it by the mid '40s. I'll toss Price Tower in Bartlesville, Okla., in the mix, too. Wright's only realized skyscraper, it looks back to his early days working for Louis Sullivan in Chicago. At the end of their careers, great artists often tip their hats to the giants of their young days.

And in Taliesin West, Wright designed and built for himself: for his home, family, studio, and think tank.

Wright designed more than a thousand buildings, many not built, but his conceptions and details are there, and his drawings are as revelatory as an Italian old master's. His career started at the end of the horse-and-buggy era and the dawn of the skyscraper's and ended in the space age.

First of all, who's Taliesin? It means "shining brow" and named, more to the point, a Welsh poet and shaman, possibly from the sixth century — a house bard to Welsh kings, possibly serving King Arthur — and writer of the *Book of Taliesin*, which seems to have been discovered after the siege and surrender of a castle belonging to Henry VI's wife, Margaret of Anjou, in 1467. Set in the Otherworld, the book's kings and queens rise and fall in bloody wars among heroes, villains, monks, prophets, and packs of wild dogs.

Wright was Welsh — hence the attraction to Welsh bards — and drawn to epics not only in lore but in his own life. In 1911, already famous for his Prairie style houses and Unity Temple, he began to develop farmland in Spring Green in rural Wisconsin, not far from where he was born and raised in a chaotic, impoverished home. This compound, which he called "Taliesin," was his home and studio and, over time, his school for budding architects from around 1911 until his death.

The name “Taliesin West” suggests a subsidiary, but it’s far from it. The Wisconsin site, today a historic site and house museum, isn’t called “Taliesin East.” Wright was peripatetic and, from the time he built Taliesin until well into the ’30s, lived wherever he had big projects. At 70, he had both Taliesin and Taliesin West. He lived and worked almost entirely at Taliesin during the spring, summer, and fall and, not too long after Thanksgiving, moved kit and kaboodle to Scottsdale until after Easter.

Of the two Taliesins, the manse out West seems to me to loom the largest in Wright’s mind and in his history as an artist. I vaguely knew Wright’s life was fraught, but I didn’t know how utterly or how salaciously snakebit a home Taliesin was. Fires in 1914 and 1925 nearly leveled it. Wright’s divorces and affairs unfolded there. Career-wise, Wright was broke as often as he was flush, in and out of sync with public taste. There were the cost overruns, leaky roofs, Mann Act prosecutions, bill collectors in hot pursuit, and then there’s the mass murder. In 1914, a lunatic staffer hacked seven people to death at Taliesin, among them Wright’s new mistress.

A pall must have hovered over Taliesin, though Wright always called it home. His last wife, Olgivanna, whom he met in 1924 and married in 1928, seemed to see Taliesin West as the built expression of their relationship. Taliesin is the Prairie style writ large: It’s spacious and snug, minimalist and elegant. Taliesin West’s enchanting. Its built spaces are human scale but as an indoor/outdoor place. Every room and every path seemed to Wright “60 miles wide, as long and tall as the universe.”

Taliesin West started as a winter camp in 1938, after he had bought the land and attracted apprentice architects to join him or to learn from him in exchange for food and lodging. It feels like a camp. Wright designed the place as he lived and worked there. The core buildings are arranged as a grid with paths oriented toward desert and mountain views, not only for the scenery but to absorb the ethnographic mystery of the place. There are a couple of modest towers. The overall look’s horizontal, in relationship to the land. Verticality is another form of aggression.



The paths are processional, too, leading us from Wright's studio and office to classrooms, drafting studios, an auditorium, apartments, gardens, loggias, a dining room, sunrises, and sunsets. The roofs were originally canvas until Wright, sick of rain, which happens in the desert, installed gutters and redwood boards. By 1941, the basic compound was mostly finished. Glass windows, the auditorium, and electricity came in the late '40s and early '50s. Wright placed stones marked by local, centuries-old petroglyphs here and there.



View of Taliesin West. ("Scottsdale-Taliesin West-1931-3.JPG" by Marine 69-71 is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Both exterior and interior walls are made of the desert-rock-and-concrete mix Wright developed. Seeing natural vertical grooves in the mountains, he told masons to put vertical blocks made of wood in the wet concrete. Voilà. When the blocks were removed, Wright had vertical grooves complementing what nature made.

Taliesin West is a total work of art like Olana, Frederic Church's house, Augustus Saint-Gaudens's house in Cornish, N.H., and Daniel Chester French's house. Wright designed it to create what he believed was the best environment for life, work, leisure, and learning. It's the best kind of house museum in that it feels like Wright and his crew just went away for a bit but would come back soon.

It's a museum that doesn't feel like a museum. Visitors jump into their milieu. That's both a treat and a trick. It's easy to wreck a milieu, a magic spell, with museological bells and whistles. The shop's nice and comprehensive and unobtrusive. There's a food wagon but no restaurant. The spaces and furnishings are evocatively retro. The vibe's easy. We're out West and in a place blessed with gorgeous weather that Wright insisted was a camp, though a damp one with high production value. Still, we can feel the spark and crackle of Wright's era.

Panels on easels described some of the projects that made Wright famous; one project per panel, so they aren't a distraction. It's best to keep the focus on the work of art Wright created for his own use. Unity Temple from 1905 looks very different from Taliesin West, but the two are philosophically and emotionally close. Transcendentalism unites them. Wright's father was a Unitarian preacher. His Welsh family was Unitarian. Uniting all things — human, animal, and natural — as one with a loving God was, irreligious as Wright seems, the essence of his architecture. The Guggenheim, Fallingwater, and a couple of the Prairie houses get panels, too. That's all we need.



American Icons exhibition at Taliesin West. (Courtesy of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, photo credit: Linda Brader)

There's a small exhibition on the parallel lives of Wright and Georgia O'Keeffe.

It's mostly biographical. Both were city slickers who went West to cleanse their moral and aesthetic palates. They were both artists and celebrities. Wright's a legend and genius, O'Keeffe merely famous and a painter who had her moments.

I think the exhibition is an experiment. Taliesin West is a work of art but not an art venue. The ceilings in the art space are very low. I'm a tall drink of water, but Wright was 5'7", though his trademark porkpie hat, snazzy suits, and capes made him seem taller.

The exhibition on Wright and O'Keeffe seemed homemade, as was a showing — not a show — of a group of woodblocks Wright collected to complement his impressive collection of Japanese prints. Members of the staff were there to answer questions about process and color. The experience was more archival than aesthetic, but that's fine. While walking through the campus on Discovery Day, I met the foundation's president, the curator, and the education director, each stationed to engage with visitors. Of course, they were well informed — they

run the place — but they were inviting and great teachers. They’ve absorbed Wright’s spirit and convey it.

At a press conference during the dedication of Price Tower, Wright said he was proud to “give the client what he wants.” His client, oil tycoon Harold Price, quipped, “What I wanted was a three-story building,” as he gestured to the 19-story tower. “Well,” Wright said, “you didn’t know what you wanted.”



Taliesin West Garden Room Main Room. (“Taliesen-Garden-room-jpg” by Steven C. Price is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](#))

At Taliesin West, Wright was his own client, and he got what he wanted, which was a built philosophy. The place is very American. It’s individualistic, boundary-pushing literally, and expansive. It’s straightforward, with clean lines, and ornament-free. During his winter stay, Wright met with new clients in his office and studio. It’s the ultimate rebuke to Victorian ostentation and to pretension on all fronts. Taliesin West’s prophetic, too. I think Wright intuited new frontiers and saw the Sun Belt — a location, aesthetic, and lifestyle — on the horizon.

Wright’s buried at Taliesin West, at an undisclosed location somewhere on the campus. At Olgivanna’s instructions, on her death in 1985, he was with some legal commotion exhumed at Taliesin in Wisconsin, cremated, and moved to Arizona to be buried with her. Wright’s got a cult following, so it’s thought best to keep his final resting place secret and undisturbed.

Wright lived long enough to know Philip Johnson well enough to see him less as an architect and more as a superficial sophist whose vision chills the soul. Johnson’s America is more *Four Seasons* and *Bonfire of the Vanities*, while Wright’s more Walt Whitman and “Go West, young man.” What I saw of Wright in Scottsdale is vastly to be preferred.

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brian_t_allen

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blpAthwart  48m

Very good article, as always. I have always admired Wright for his 'shelter style', with broad eaves and heavy walls. I also admire that he designed furniture to fit his buildings.

I do not understand why he allowed his structures to encounter engineering problems. Most architects are very comfortable working with engineers. The architect does the conceptual design, and perhaps many details. Then the qualified engineer realizes that design with practical, durable, and maintainable elements.

When we first visited the Robie House in Chicago, it was in sad repair. I have never been to Falling Water, but from photos and other accounts, I saw that it deteriorated badly. It is a puzzle to me that a brilliant architect could create beautiful things, without any regard for their durability.

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Reply React

WABill  4h

" . . . O'Keeffe merely famous and a painter who had her moments." Thank you for that.

Reply React  1

BestUsedCarSales  5h

Arizona is great. Thank you.

Reply React

allanvanderhart  5h

Best kept secret: Wright's Walter House near Quasqueton, Iowa

Reply React  1

chris_petersen  2h

Thank you for the tip. I had never heard of it, and I had to look it up.

Reply React

Hide replies

SaltySailor2  6h

What a great piece. Thank you!

Reply React

james_mcsweeney  6h

When I was in grad school at the University of Chicago, I worked in the alumni office, which was located in the Robie house at the time. It was a revelation. The neighborhood was one ornate pile of bricks after another, and then there was this house, which looked as if it could have been built last year. Triggered a life long interest in architecture.

Reply React  1

no_baloney  7h

My Dad met FLW in Chicago at a seminar in the late 40's. He walked up to Frank, FLW said, "So, what do you do?" My Dad said, "I'm an civil engineer." FLW said, "I'm sorry."

Reply React

blpAthwart  33m

Interesting. That probably explains the lack of structural soundness and durability that an architect of Wright's level would have insisted from a consulting engineer. Perhaps Wright thought that his creativity would be enough. Nature says otherwise.

Reply React

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FarmerPat  7h

Thank you for this essay. Have you seen Wright's studio in Oak Park and Unity Temple just down the street?

Next time you visit the Art Institute try to sneak in a visit...and also maybe hit Robie House down near the University of Chicago, and then wrap it up by visiting Sullivan's masterpiece, the Auditorium, and the reconstruction of the Stock Exchange trading floor at the Art Institute.

Such great art and architecture in Chicago.

Reply React  1

George_Costanza  8h

We visited here a few years ago and the tour was not as informative as this article. We were a bit disappointed. I think we need to re-visit with this and other background information in mind.

Reply React

Fat_N_Happy  8h

All I kept hearing about was how the wife wanted air conditioning

Reply React

2 replies

vpomeroy  8h

"Architecture is man's great sense of himself embodied in a world of his own making." FIW, 1930

Reply React

Blondrealist  9h

Wright certainly did many interesting designs and I've seen some of his buildings in person - which made me appreciate some of his art much more than looking at photos in books or online.

What's interesting to me is that so many articles about Wright - like this one - don't mention that he was often a lousy engineer. The Fallingwaters house in Pennsylvania is a prominent example - not enough steel reinforcing rods were used in the concrete, and the house began sinking soon after it was complete. (It's also unlivable - the waterfall promotes mold growth, the floors are cold and damp all the time.)

grown, the floors are cold and damp all the time.)

The houses he designed often had/have leaky roofs. The internal drainage systems he designed were often too small. Some of his office buildings had major functional shortcomings - such as the S.C. Johnson Wax Research Tower.

One article I read recently said Wright was a crappy architect, but a great artist. In my mind, that's a fair statement.

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Thidwick  7h

Yes, the flaws get a quick mention, thankfully in full disclosure, when stories are told. He probably could have used a trusted engineer to check his work and they both would have flourished.

Reply React

1 reply

Fat_N_Happy  9h

I have toured this place. Different

Reply React

ERROLLTRESLAN  10h

Bravo. Arrived at National Review for the punditry and was delighted to find a cultural offering like this. I had the pleasure of visiting Taliesin West this past fall and this article should be included in its promotional material.

Reply React  2

Cameron  11h Edited

I really enjoyed this article. This article helps my neurons in the long run alot better than coffee       thank you and happy new year.

 Nikki Haley 2024 

Reply React  1

KimSteiner  11h

This man is a treasure. (I'm referring to Brian Allen.)

Reply React  5

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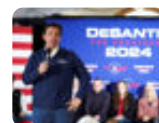
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