

# FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

## ARCHITECT

February 20 – May 10, 1994

For Immediate Release

### MAJOR FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT RETROSPECTIVE OPENS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

A retrospective devoted to the work of the legendary American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) opens at The Museum of Modern Art on February 20, 1994. **FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT: ARCHITECT** is the first critical examination of Wright's architecture achieved with full access to the archives of The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, the world's largest and most important collection of Wright drawings. With more than 500 works, the exhibition fully reveals the depth and range of expression in Wright's architecture, offering an unprecedented opportunity to explore every phase of his seventy-year career. Wright is shown to be not only an architect who profoundly influenced the course of modern architecture, but also an important cultural figure whose work reflects dramatic changes in the patterns of daily life in the United States during this century.

**FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT: ARCHITECT** was organized by Terence Riley, chief curator, with Peter Reed, assistant curator, Department of Architecture and Design, The Museum of Modern Art, in cooperation with The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Scottsdale, Arizona. Curatorial consultants are Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, director, The Frank Lloyd Wright Archives, and Anthony Alofsin, Sid Richardson Centennial Fellow and director of the Center for the Study of American Architecture and Design, The University of Texas, Austin.

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**FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT: ARCHITECT** presents 190 of Wright's buildings and projects, ranging from his celebrated monumental works to lesser-known projects from all periods. Included are some 350 original drawings, many of them rarely exhibited during the last thirty years; thirty scale models; six full-scale wall constructions; 126 photographs; and a selection of architectural fragments, such as windows and decorative concrete blocks. Occupying both floors of the Museum's temporary exhibition space, the retrospective is installed in a rough chronological order which reflects its organizing themes. These include Wright's interpretation of nature, his use of technology, his relationship to European modernism, his relationship to the media, and his changing vision of the American community.

The retrospective opens with Wright's work of the 1880s, when, as an apprentice to the Chicago firm of Adler and Sullivan, his talent was already evident. His subsequent work, as a young practitioner in Oak Park, Illinois, reflects his identification with his clients' values. Designs for the William H. Winslow House, River Forest (1893-94), and the Susan Lawrence Dana House, Springfield (1902-1904), with their delicate hand-cast friezes, colorful murals, and custom-designed window glass are sensitive interpretations of the aesthetic and the social ethos of the garden suburb.

Wright's design for a prototypical "Home in a Prairie Town" (1900), published in the *Ladies Home Journal* and on view in the exhibition,

revolutionized the American suburban home, and provided direction for the architect's work during the next decade. The horizontal composition of the so-called Prairie house, with low overhanging eaves organized around a central vertical element -- the fireplace -- became the formal program of numerous residential projects. They range from the Ward Willits House, Highland Park, Illinois (1902-03), to the Frederick C. Robie House, Chicago (1908-10). The fluidity of the Prairie-house floor plan is matched in the vertical dimension in such urban projects as the Larkin Administration Building, Buffalo (1902-06; demolished 1950), and Unity Temple, Oak Park (1905-08). New sectional models and original drawings highlight Wright's use of innovative technologies in these monumental buildings.

Taliesin I (1911; rebuilt in 1914 and 1925 after fires), Wright's country house in Wisconsin, marks a turning point in his formulation of the relationship between architecture and landscape. More than his previous work, the romantic design for Taliesin I responds directly to its environment. Similarly, a change in Wright's attitude towards ornament at this time is evident in his lavish design for the Imperial Hotel, Tokyo (1912-23; demolished 1968). The original plaster model, as well as a full-scale construction of the hotel's corner columns, both on view for the first time in the United States, convey the visual and textural qualities of this elaborate design.

During the 1920s, Wright developed a series of houses in southern California, known as the Textile Block houses, in which he attempted to integrate efficient, low-cost construction with ornament. A full-scale mock-up of a wall from the John Storer House, Hollywood (1923-24), shows how concrete-block construction allowed Wright to explore these concerns and develop a technique which was particularly appropriate to the rugged

landscapes of the southwest.

The 1930s are represented by both a proposal for a middle-class residential community and a masterpiece of residential architecture. The unrealized Broadacre City (1934-35, with revisions until 1959), is Wright's most comprehensive and polemical plan for a deurbanized America. Seen in conjunction with Wright's community plans, the twelve-by-twelve-foot Broadacre model, restored for the exhibition, provides an overview of his changing perspectives on American culture. It represents a four-square-mile settlement recalling a patchwork of midwestern farmlands interspersed with a grid of highways. Central to Broadacre City was the so-called Usonian house, which reflected Wright's ongoing commitment to affordable custom-designed homes for the middle class. Best exemplified by the Herbert Jacobs House, Madison, Wisconsin (1936-37), this suburban house was smaller than the Prairie house and less likely to have servants quarters. In contrast to the modest Usonian house, Fallingwater, Mill Run, Pennsylvania (1934-37), is Wright's residential masterwork. It is a *tour-de-force* in planar abstraction that, in a pointed critique of the contemporary European machine aesthetic, is balanced by romantic imagery and natural materials.

By the 1940s, Wright was using triangular, circular, hexagonal, and spiral forms derived from nature. The spiral was employed most spectacularly in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1943-59), in which Wright was successful in his search for the expression of both the "organic" and of the building's material and method of construction, that is, the seamless flow of poured concrete. Several drawings and a model show the development of ideas that resulted in one of the most astonishing interior spaces constructed in this century.

Wright's post-World War II architecture reflects his acute understanding of the decentralization and suburbanization of the American landscape, and the importance of the automobile. His roadside projects included drive-in hotels, banks, and gas stations, representing the beginnings of a new genre of American architecture, related to and dependent on the roadway. In his design for the Pittsburgh Point Park Civic Center (project, 1947), bridges bring high-speed traffic to a monumental structure containing a host of civic amenities and ringed by parking facilities.

Wright's final projects comprise a portrait of an architect in his late years: the bold gesture that had characterized his life's work remains, though frequently without the intense elaboration. His proposed design for an opera house in Baghdad, Iraq (1957), in which an indiscernible structure supports delicate facades, conveys a sense of lightness and is decidedly less architectonic than his previous work.

In the catalogue to the exhibition, Terence Riley writes, "A generation after Wright's death, in the wake of successive energy crises, suburban congestion that rivals that of any crowded city, and the alienation resulting from the diminishment of the public realm, it is vital to reconsider Wright's work in the light of our present, contemporary culture. The values reflected in his work must be reformulated yet again if they are to have any impact on the current needs of American society."

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PUBLICATION

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