

TDTCOUK FLW #3

In this Friday's installment of TDT's College of Useless Knowledge FLW Lecture Series, we focus on the early years.

Registrars note: Friday May 11th is the drop-ad deadline. We regret to inform you that because of unanticipated demand for this class, we've dropped other classes in the series due to lack of interest.

At this time the only classes with sections open are:

Mies Van der Rohe "Less is More My Ass"

Le Corbusier "Hey Your Real Name Was Charlie Jeanneret, You Pretentious French Bastard"

I. M. Pei "OK, We Get The Pyramid Thing, Move On"

Frank Gehry "Chain Link, Plywood & A Pile of Scrap Metal, Hey That's Not Architecture That's Any Front Yard in Eastern, KY"

(OK, very obscure architectural references there, extra credit to the first person to contact Professor TDT with a believable understanding of three of the four references)

I'm relatively sure you guys don't think about this on a daily basis but I occasional have (yeah I know, it's a curse). I find it difficult to comprehend that his life began in 1865, two years after the end of the Civil War, & ended in 1959, two years after Russia jump-started the space race with Sputnik. When he was born the US consisted of only 36 states, Hawaii made it an even 50 just two months after his death. Could any life bridge more phenomenal changes in the American landscape, society & culture? Certainly within our lives we've seen dramatic societal changes but nothing to compare with the contrast of life in the 1860's to life at the cusp of the 1960's. He was born into a world with no electricity, no telephones, no automobiles, no airplanes & he left a world that was planning its first trip to another planet. His life literally spanned from the days of the shoot-out at the OK Corral to the early days of the cold war.

When the transcontinental railroad drove that gold spike, he was 2.

When Mrs. O'Leary's cow torched Chicago, he was 5.

When General Custer took one for the team, he was 9.

When Thomas Edison installed the first domestic electric lights, he was 15.

When the Statue of Liberty was dedicated, he was 19.

When the Spanish-American war broke out, he was 31.

When the Wright brothers briefly left the ground at Kitty Hawk, he was 36.

When Henry Ford sold his first model T, he was 41.

When the Panama Canal opened, he was 47.

When women first voted, he was 53.

When Lindbergh soloed the Atlantic, he was 60.

When the first television flickered to life, he was 61.

When Bonnie & Clyde bought the farm, he was 67.

When Germany surrendered to end WWII, he was 78.

When Jackie Robinson went to The Show, he was 80.

When Rosa Parks kept her seat, he was 88.

When John met Paul at a Liverpool church fete, he was 91.

Considered by most architectural historians as a modernist, many of his designs do seem unabashedly modern even today. He was every bit the progressive thinker with new, liberal, even revolutionary ideas about design, government, society, & life in general. Yet so much of his life & his early trend setting work were nurtured in a 19th century world of cowboys & Indians, wagon trains & cattle drives. It never ceases to amaze me that he came out of that world, not to end up a farm hand, a factory worker or a shop keeper, as so many of his peers surely did. Rather, he rose from that simple rural upbringing & with his overriding fascination with & love for the geometry of nature,

changed the world with the power of his imagination. As the Apple commercial used to say, "the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world..... are the ones who do."

In the early 1800's a contingent of Welch immigrants settled the Wisconsin River Valley near Spring Green. Among them was the Lloyd Jones clan whose members consisted primarily of farmers, teachers & ministers. One of Lloyd's daughters was Anna, herself a teacher in a nearby town. William Wright, a Unitarian preacher, his wife & four children lived in the same town. Primarily due to William's meager & sporadic earnings, his wife Permelia took in boarders to help with expenses. One of those boarders was the young teacher, Anna Lloyd Jones. Anna was a decidedly country girl with limited worldly experiences outside of her tiny rural village. By comparison William surely seemed like a sophisticate with his eastern college education, training in the law, & who composed music & played six instruments, some of which he made himself. William certainly appeared much more exotic than the local country bumpkins. Speculation has always been that there was more than a tenant/landlord relationship between Anna & William but nothing was ever confirmed.

In 1864 Permelia delivered their 5th child who arrived stillborn & Permelia died several days later. Anna losing no time quickly swooped in on William & in less than two years they were married. By then William had become an ordained Baptist minister & was transferred to lead a fledgling congregation in Spring Green, near Anna's family. Anna did not take well to her role as stepmother to William's four children & the children, as adults, told horrific tales of constant verbal & physical abuse at the hands of Anna. When William & Anna later had their own children, the treatment of the stepchildren grew progressively worse as Anna obsessively doted on her own son at the expense of William's kids.

At the time of her marriage, Anna was already in a questionable mental state. The historic evidence now suggests that Anna was almost certainly schizophrenic & suffered from severe bouts of depression. The Lloyd Joneses would never publicly acknowledge the full extent of Anna's mental problems, only that she had "a most tremendous temper." Fearing for their safety, Permelia's mother eventually stepped in & removed her grandchildren from the Wright home, parceling them out to various relatives around the state. Bowing to pressure from Anna, William did not raise any objection to his children being shipped out. After that William had only sporadic contact with them & provided virtually no support.

William was 15 years older than Anna & more than a bit of a naer-do-well. The preaching job did not work out & he continued to drift from job to job. A total non-conformist, William tried many endeavors but could never quite seem to make a go of any one. Among several careers he tried were, lawyer, administrator, doctor, music teacher, pianist & organist.

In very short order Anna gave William three children, one boy & two girls. The first, in 1867, was a son they named Frank Lincoln Wright. At first, family life with Anna appeared to suit William & he sparked an avid interest in music in Frank & a passion for Bach & Beethoven. William would frequently play the classics for Frank & the other children. Anna sought to instill in young Frank a reverence for poetry & literature, frequently reading to him for hours on end from Greek literature & other works like "The Seven Lamps of Architecture." Wright would later credit his father's musical teachings on the works of Bach as the source of his sense of harmony in both music & architecture. Beyond the heavy indoctrination in the arts, Frank's childhood was not that unusual from most other farm children of the age.

As Anna's mental state became less & less stable, all was not harmonious between Anna & William. Tensions often flared into heated disputes about everything from crops, to finances, to child rearing, to religion. The two quarreled constantly & Anna continually berated William in front of the children & her family for his lack of ambition & financial success. There was constant interference with William's role as head of the household from Anna's extended family. Especially meddlesome were her two sisters who ran a Montessori type school on the grounds of the family farm. After nine stormy years of marriage, William could stand no more & he abandoned his wife & family. For the rest of his life Frank had virtually no contact with his father, which drew him even closer to his mother & more under her control. Anna initiated divorce proceedings & when it became final, Frank changed his middle name to Lloyd as a sign of unity with his mother & her family. Although it disturbed young Frank greatly & he would later write frequently about how he resented his father for running out on the family, Wright himself would later prove the old adage that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Finding herself alone to raise her 3 small children, Anna became an even more strong willed, demanding & stern woman. When she made up her mind about something, it usually happened her way or the consequences were severe. Long before Frank's birth she had decided that he would be an architect. She lined the walls of his nursery with prints of classic Greek & Roman building plans & elevations. On Frank's ninth birthday she presented him with a gift of Froebel Blocks, which she had purchased at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Fredrick Froebel was a progressive German educator whose philosophies included exposing children, at a very early age, to geometric form, mathematics & creative design. Froebel conceived of & promoted a whole series of educational "gifts" & teaching methods designed to foster creativity & imagination as opposed to traditional rote learning & memorization. He called his concept a "garden for children" which was later adapted by the American school system as "kindergarden". The maple blocks in various shapes, sizes, colors & textures were intended to inspire young imaginations & encourage three-dimensional thought & composition.

It surely seems to have worked, at least in Frank's case. Throughout his life, Wright was loath to acknowledge even the slightest hint of outside influence on his work but he constantly paid homage to Froebel & his blocks as a major influence on his life & career. "The maple wood blocks..... are in my fingers today," Wright said late in his career. In his autobiography Wright expanded on his debt to Froebel. "Now came the geometric play of these charming checkered colour combinations! The structural figures to be made with peas & small straight sticks; slender construction, the jointings accented by the little green globes. The smooth shapely maple blocks with which to build, the sense of which never afterwards leaves the fingers; so form became feeling. And the box with a mast to set upon it, on which to hang with string the maple cubes & spheres & triangles, revolving them to discover subordinate forms.

That early kindergarden experience with the straight line; the flat plane; the square; the triangle; the circle! If I wanted more, the square modified by the triangle gave the hexagon; the circle modified by the straight line would give the octagon. Adding thickness, getting sculpture thereby, the square became the cubed, the triangle the tetrahedron, the circle the sphere.

These primary forms & figures were the secret of all effect... which were ever got into the architecture of the world."

Very early in Wright's career, it became quite obvious that his penchant was for natural geometric forms, which was very advanced for the time. In the 1880's & 90's most other architects were content to rehash past styles & classic forms taking little risk with new ideas or unproven designs.

When Frank was 12, the family moved to Madison, Wisconsin where he completed grade school & attended high school. He returned every summer to live & work on his uncle's farm in Spring

Green. It was during these summers on the family farm that Wright began to notice the varied rhythms & patterns of nature. This would later have an incalculable influence on his life & work as he spent a lifetime seeking to integrate the built environment with the natural.

"Nature is my manifestation of God; I go to nature every day for inspiration in the day's work. I follow in building the principles which nature has used in its domain."

"Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you."