

TDT COUK FLW #6

In this Friday's installment of TDT's College of Useless Knowledge FLW Lecture Series, we have a grab bag of architectural trivia. Sort of the flotsam & jetsam of my brain. Some of it about Mr. Wright, some just rambling architectural minutia & then a few tidbits on the architecture of our soon to be host city Pittsburgh, PA.

Registrars note: Due to popular demand our extra credit question has returned. In this session we touch briefly on the architectural movement of post-modernism. Arguably the most famous US example of this architectural genre is found, amazingly enough, here in Kentucky. Name the building & the architect.

The late architect Philip Johnson was a pioneer of the International Style of architecture, characterized by its cubic forms, glass skin & total disdain for ornamentation. He was a friendly competitor with FLW but their architectural philosophies could not have been further apart. Wright was an outspoken critic of the sterile glass boxes that flourished in the US after WW II. He blamed them & their much copied & poorly executed cousins that sprang up all around the country for leading to the urban blight of sameness that has erased individuality & regionalism from virtually every American city.

One of Johnson's early works, & the piece that put him on the architectural map, was a small house he built for himself in Connecticut in 1949. The house is basically one large rectangular room with a flush to the ground concrete slab floor, a flat steel roof & floor to ceiling butt-glazed (not sure if that's a good word) glass around the entire perimeter. Only a freestanding chimney & a bank of kitchen base cabinets give any separation to the interior space. As a piece of sculpture it is quite beautiful & in 1949 quite groundbreaking in its modernity. As a home to actually live in it is ridiculous. That of course was FLW's primary objection to the modern ethic. It was art for art's sake & not to suite the needs of its inhabitants. It also sought to stand totally apart from its surroundings; an idea that even by suggestion drew the ire of Mr. Wright with his own organic philosophy.

It became the poster child of the modern movement & was widely praised by the intelligentsia press as the latest & greatest way of thinking & living. The public was informed that this was the new gold standard & they should willingly adapt their lifestyles to accommodate the new artistic building form. All this publicity for the new kids on the architectural block pushed Frank Lloyd Wright out of the limelight & his organic architecture seemed like horse & buggy thinking by comparison. After hearing more than he could stomach about this new modern house, FLW finally agreed to accept one of Philip's many requests to visit him at his new estate.

When he arrived, FLW barged inside, sat down on the hard cube bench & said to his host with calculated insolence, "Well Philip my friend, here I am at last. Am I inside or am I out? Do I take my hat off or do I keep it on?" With those few words Philip Johnson had his friend's review of his new achievement.

Later in his career Philip Johnson, both in his words & in his designs, forsake his modernist roots & moved closer to Mr. Wright's end of the continuum. He became an innovator, proponent & practitioner of the Post-Modern movement where ornamentation was not only allowed it was celebrated. Columns, arches, color, moldings & all manner of architectural detailing were once again all the rage. Johnson is the only architect in history to have been at the forefront of two distinct & hugely influential architectural movements.

(OK, so you've been wondering where this long slow train was going, here it is) One early example of the Post-Modern movement is Philip Johnson's PPG Place in downtown Pittsburgh. The world

headquarters building for the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company was built in 1984 as a cross between one of Philip's earlier glass boxes & a Gothic cathedral. This building dominates the Pittsburgh skyline today with its hundreds of blue glass spires. It is their signature building & what makes the skyline instantly recognizable as Pittsburgh. It consists of a 40 story central tower with several other low-rise buildings surrounding its base. True to its modernist roots, the building has a wide sweeping plaza at its center. The plaza is a focal & meeting point for Pittsburgh residents. It features a very unusual sculpture that includes a large base with 4 round spheres supporting it. The locals have dubbed it the Tomb of the Unknown Bowler.

Fallingwater is not the only Wright design in the greater Pittsburgh metropolitan area. Kentuck Knob (aka the Hagan house) is a Usonian home that Wright designed in 1956, just 3 years before he died. Usonians & later Usonian Automatics were homes that Wright envisioned for the average Joe lunch-box, working class American. Usonian by Wright's definition meant "a home of the common people" & was an abbreviation for the United States of North America. They followed his organic principles but were designed to be easily & cheaply built, even by a homeowner with little or no construction experience, using simple locally available materials. It was for these simple easy to build structures that Wright's invention of concrete block originated. As with many of Wright's ideas, things did not always go completely as planned. Many of the Usonians ended up costing far more than their original budget & suffered from the do-it-yourselfers inexperience. Many had to have contractors brought in to correct or complete the jobs. Wright originally began developing his Usonian homes during the great depression in the late 30's. His idea of building affordable housing with no attics, basements, little ornamentation & no frills was designed to suite the needs of the day.

Wright thought his Usonian Automatics were ideally suited for the post WW II housing boom when entire communities were springing up everywhere, almost overnight. Instead, vast mega-developments like Levittown in New York became the blueprint for mass-produced subdivisions everywhere, much to Wright's horror. These communities sprawled across the American landscape featuring row after row of nearly identical houses (not unlike Lexington today). They were totally lacking in any architectural thought or character. They were simply storage containers for people & in Wright's view offered their inhabitants, shelter & little more. They were affordable for the returning GI's & they sold as fast as they were slapped together.

As the Eagles song goes, "Some rich men came & raped the land, nobody caught em. Put up a bunch of ugly boxes, & Jesus..... people bought em. And they called it paradise, the place to be." Or how about "Another Pleasant Valley Sunday, charcoal burning everywhere, rows of houses that are all the same, & no one seems to care" (that one's for you Dharma).

And finally, Pete Seeger said it best "Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky tacky, little boxes, little boxes, little boxes all the same. There's a green one & a pink one & a blue one & a yellow one & they're all made out of ticky tacky & they all look just the same."

This concludes the musical portion of our program.

Wright's dream for his Usonian Automatics was for so much more. He also wanted to create affordable housing but in a new, bold & uniquely American style for the rapidly expanding middle class. Homes that were at one with their surroundings, tied to their site, adapted for the specific needs of each family & easily expandable as the family grew. It was always Wright's belief that great architecture enhanced the quality of life for its inhabitants while the bland, mind numbing sameness that became the American suburbs was dehumanizing. Wright often spoke about the need to provide the common man with homes that included inspirational architectural design at an affordable price. "Well designed affordable housing is America's greatest architectural challenge & a challenge for her greatest architects", Wright once said. The Usonian Automatics were Wright's solution to that

challenge. One hundred or so of his Usonian homes were built around the country but his idea never took root with the American public who then as now cared little about good design or individuality, only about a cheap price (such as it ever was). At the time of his Usonian Automatic experiment, Wright was in his 80's & still had another highly productive decade remaining in his career.

When MB & I lived in Michigan, our house was around the corner from a neighborhood of a dozen or so Wright Usonian homes from around 1947. A couple were fairly ordinary (if any Wright house can be such) but most of them were sparkling little architectural jewels. The original site plan for the development called for large circular lots. The circles were to overlap in some areas & in others there would be space between the circles. These spaces were to be communal property to act as natural privacy buffers between the homes. Of course the Kalamazoo planning commission didn't understand any of this so they rejected the plan & forced Wright to resubmit the plot plan with conventional rectangular lots. One of the architectural firms I worked for was the local architect of record for the development & they still had some of the original submittal drawings in their files with Wright's hand written notes, seal & signature.

Kentuck Knob is a kind of deluxe version of a Usonian having a few more bells & whistles than the norm. It's located about seven miles from Fallingwater. Its original owners were friends of the Kaufmans & were no doubt influenced by Wright's masterwork built decades before. The Hagan's lived in the home for 30 years & sold it to its current owner, an English Lord, in 1986 when their health declined. He lived in the house for ten years before opening it for tours in 1996. The house is located on Kentuck Road & near a mini mountain called Kentuck Knob which is the origin of the name. I'm sure there's some connection to Kentucky from back in the day but I've never been able to track it down. Both Kentuck Knob & Fallingwater are located in the county of Fayette.

The house shares many organic design concepts with its big brother Fallingwater but has many of its own unique features. Where Fallingwater was designed as a summer & weekend party house for a wealthy businessman & his celebrity guests, Kentuck Knob was a year round family home for a couple & their children. It accommodates much more of the everyday necessities of a family including a carport, which we now know is a Wright innovation. Mrs. Hagan even talked Wright into allowing her a small basement for laundry & other utility functions. With Wright's disdain for basements, attics & other spaces to collect junk that he did not feel you needed, getting the master's approval for a basement was no small feat.