



The Westcott House Foundation
1340 East High Street
Springfield, Ohio 45505
www.westcotthouse.org

Frank Lloyd Wright - The Prairie Style: From Theory to Practice

Although Frank Lloyd Wright designed houses, churches, and commercial buildings in differing styles, he is probably most associated with the Prairie Style, which dates from approximately 1893 to the First World War. It seemed to embody his most significant philosophical ideas about architecture and brought him both national and international acclaim by the time he was forty.

Neil Levine, in *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), attributes the impetus of the Prairie School to Chicago architect Louis H. Sullivan, with whom Wright worked before establishing his own studio. The group included, among others, Dwight Perkins, Myron Hunt, and Robert Spencer—all housed on an upper floor of Steinway Hall. They worked mainly for middle- to upper-middle-class clients in suburban Chicago, notably Oak Park, rural Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Their work “was a regional revolt and reform then occurring in the visual arts,” notes H. Allen Brooks (*The Prairie School: Frank Lloyd Wright and His Midwest Contemporaries* [NY: Norton, 1972]: 4).

“Nature was Wright’s constant preoccupation,” says Levine (xvii). Wright gained an appreciation for nature, particularly Midwestern nature, from working on his uncles’ Wisconsin farm during his teenage summers. There he could observe the horizontal line of the land, the line that he considered domestic and democratic and freeing. “On the flat prairie of the Midwest, breadth would be a sign of shelter, as height was a sign of power and success in the city” (17). It would signify comfort, a quality that Wright wanted to characterize his buildings, particularly his houses.

To this end Wright’s Prairie Style house typically features a large, centrally-placed fireplace, a hearth that “grounds” the house, that becomes its focus. Frequently he designed benches on either side of it, as he did for the Westcott House here in Springfield, Ohio, in effect creating a room within a room. In at least one instance he elevated this space from the rest of the area and set it off by a series of arches.

The Winslow House in River Forest, Illinois, built in 1893-94, typifies the Prairie House. It set the standard. In fact, Wright himself called it “the first ‘prairie house’” (14). Similar to the later Westcott House, it, too, was sited back from the street on an elevated spot and featured a reflecting pool on a terrace, tawny colored Roman brick, and a deep overhang of hip roof. “In the Winslow House,” says Levine, “the formal equation of hearth and home became a fundamental element of the Prairie House type, transmitting the emotional content of the type through the very core of the building” (19).

Building materials of Prairie Style homes were simple: plaster (stucco), wood, and brick. According to Henry-Russell Hitchcock, nearly all masonry houses stood on open, prairie sites, while wooden and brick ones were typically suburban (*In the Nature of Materials: The Buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright 1887-1941* [New York: DaCapo, 1942], 39). Although Wright departed from members of the Arts and Crafts Movement by approving use of the machine, he made relatively little use of current engineering innovations; however, upon occasion he did include steel beams. Ornamentation on his houses (except for leaded glass) was also rare. Instead he depended for interest upon juxtaposed shapes and forms, for example, horizontal bands of windows, as displayed in the Westcott House.



The Westcott House Foundation
1340 East High Street
Springfield, Ohio 45505
www.westcotthouse.org

Furthermore, they believed that the relationship between the building and its landscape should be close; i.e., a house should blend into its setting. Therefore, they used materials indigenous to the Midwest: e.g., pine, oak, and limestone. They left exterior woodwork unplanned and unpainted (but stained). They stained and waxed interior woodwork (10).

Noteworthy to the Prairie Style was the openness of both interior and exterior spaces. Rooms became fewer in number than those in previous architectural styles but more flexible in use. Instead of having several rooms each with its own purpose, the main room of the Westcott House, for example, is an open space extending sixty feet. Portions were used as a living room, a dining room, and a library. In other words, the interior spaces were not enclosed in the traditional sense. Wright believed that this multi-purposed approach to living areas made the house seem larger and more relaxed. When he did use dividers, they were usually piers or screens rather than walls.

This unified approach to design meant that Wright wanted the furnishings of a house integrated into the total design plan. He created formal, slat-back chairs, window glass, light fixtures, rugs, china—aiming for artistic harmony (20). Generally each set of furniture, lighter than that of the Arts and Crafts Movement, was unique to its building. “What is most striking about [Prairie School architects’] work is its optimism and genuine sense of purpose—a spirit which is characteristic of much of the new architecture at the turn of the century—and its earnest moral tone, perhaps best described by the dual imperative that their work be both ‘simple’ and ‘honest.’ Theirs was a fundamentally American approach, although one based on principles that were recognized and applauded far beyond our borders,” comments Brooks (7).

In *The Wasmuth Portfolio* (Berlin, 1910), Wright articulates his goal in this way: “To thus make of a dwelling place a complete work of art, in itself as expressive and beautiful and more intimately related to life than anything of detached sculpture or painting, lending itself freely and suitably to the individual needs of the dwellers, an harmonious entity, fitting in color, pattern and nature the utilities, and in itself really an expression of them in character—this is the modern American opportunity” (16).

Although other Prairie School architects overshadowed Wright after 1909, the Prairie Style had a significant impact upon the United States, Europe, and Australia. (The ranch style homes of the 1950s and 1960s illustrate its revival.) Says Brooks, “The buildings of the Prairie School, in spite of their international impact and continuing influence, were very respectful of their own time and place and very much American. They were not fanciful inventions for the sake of being different, but rather combined the best ideas, both from high art and the vernacular, that American architecture had to offer. Responsive to the lessons (and romanticism) of nature, and to the modernity of the machine, these buildings, the many hundreds of them, have more than stood the test of time and continue their useful service with little or no need of modification. Nestling quietly into the landscape, where they seem to belong, they enrich the quality of life for all who know them, and leave us with an abundant inheritance of ideas and principles for the future” (27).