CONTENTS

Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation News: Treasure Hunt ....................... 3

Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect of Landscape (Part II)
by Anne Whiston Spirn .................................................. 4

The Summer 2000 issue of the Quarterly featured Part I of scholar Anne
Whiston Spirn’s essay which included a detailed report of the development of
the Taliesin landscape in Spring Green, Wisconsin. This issue continues with
an analysis of the Taliesin West landscape and further exploration of Wright’s
principles of landscape design.

Books .............................................................................. 26

Wright Sites/Events Information ............................................. 30

Ironwood—An Apprentice Shelter
by Chad Cornette ............................................................. 32

COVER PHOTO: The entrance to the main complex of buildings at Taliesin West,
PART II

By Anne Whiston Spirn

On January 23, 1935, Frank Lloyd Wright, along with his wife, two daughters, and a group of more than twenty apprentices—thirty people in all—loaded drafting tables, the partially constructed Broadacre City models, and canned fruit and vegetables on a new red truck and set off across the country to Arizona. Wright wanted to escape the harsh weather of his native Wisconsin, but he was also returning to a land he had discovered during the 1920s, a land that provided new horizons, both literally and figuratively. By late 1937 Wright would purchase land in what is now northeast Scottsdale, Arizona, and begin construction on Taliesin West as his winter home, studio, and architectural campus.

Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Arizona, ca. 1940. Large image, © Pedro E. Guerrero; top photo, by Marion Kanouse. Inset, Frank Lloyd Wright in his office at Taliesin West, ca. 1955, courtesy Frank Lloyd Wright Archives.
Apprentice Eugene Masselink, who drove Wright's car on the 1935 trip, captured the experience of that journey and the excited anticipation of arrival in Arizona, Wright's promised land:

"Magically we came from the mountains as the sun was nearing the horizon and we rode out upon the Arizona desert. Tall ancient saguaro and graceful waving ocotillo and the vivid green on the floor of the desert and the purple mountains beyond. A garden like none I had ever seen. A desert like something I had never dreamed. The mountains were softened by the distance and the fading light, and the desert plants stood out strong in the long low streaks of sunlight. The new forms, the vivid green, the purple shadowed rock masses and the blue sky and the movement of the car winding in and out and around. Suddenly a quick stop... and with startling theatrical rapidity all the cars of the caravan caught up with us and there the truck which had proceeded was waiting. The procession was resumed and as we started from home, so we entered the destination of the long journey."

From 1938 Wright divided his life between Taliesin in Wisconsin and Taliesin West in Arizona, journeying twice each year by automobile back and forth across the American landscape, his schedule driven by seasonal heat and cold, the cycle of spring planting and fall harvest. The juxtaposition of the two landscapes clarified each and kept his perceptions fresh. Perhaps his tendency to romanticize both was encouraged by periods of absence and the fact that he spent the most pleasant seasons in each, did not contend with the harsh Wisconsin winter or torrid Arizona summer. Progressively, the two Taliesins, in the relationship between buildings and landscape, came to resemble summer cottage and winter camp rather than year-round dwellings.

Wright returned to both each year full of ideas for change, seizing afresh the task of reshaping buildings and gardens: "It was pandemonium for two weeks—tearing out walls, rebuilding," recalled Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer. The built landscapes of the two Taliesins are similar yet different;
structured by similar principles, but taking different shape, each in dialogue with the other and with its own landscape. Despite all the changes over the years, buildings and gardens at Taliesin are rooted in the first half of Wright's career, fixed by foundations that survived successive fires and demolitions, while Taliesin West represents a new chapter in his work. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, director of the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives at Taliesin West, remembers when the stone marker inscribed with the words “Taliesin West” was set up near the entrance. Wright pointed to the name “Taliesin” molded into the wall of the parking area opposite—“That's the book,” he said, then pointed to the new marker—“And that's the chapter.”

By identifying Taliesin as a book and the places he came to call Taliesin North and Taliesin West as chapters, Wright underscored the role of Taliesin as text with purposeful plot and the two places as essays elaborating similar themes. Together, the Taliesins embody in built form Wright’s ideas on nature and land-
They are villas, as scholar James Ackerman has defined the type, distinguished from farms or ranches by “the intense, programmatic investment of ideological goals... rooted in the contrast of country and city, in that the virtues and delights of the one are presented as the antitheses of the vices and excess of the other.” The Taliesins present in tangible form Wright’s ideas of a world made better by design. They are the built versions of his utopian texts, Disappearing City, When Democracy Builds, and The Living City. As villas the Taliesins belong to
a tradition thousands of years old where
dwelling is simultaneously function-
al, pleasurable, and ideological,
where landscape is embellished to
express ideas of nature and humanity.

Wright’s “Wilderness Years”

Frank Lloyd Wright spent many
months of the 1920s in the dry land-
sapes of California’s chaparral and
Arizona desert. For anyone who has
spent his or her life in a forest biome,
with soft light filtered through humid air
and leaves, with spongy ground cloaked
in lush green growth, the desert is shock-
ing: bright crystalline light, but above
all the clarity and stark simplicity of land-
scape structure revealed. For Wright,
for whom structure was a passion,
the Arizona desert was a revelation.
As he wrote in 1940 in Arizona
Highways, “We found Paradise.”

This 1920s period was pivotal for
the architect—Wright’s “wilderness
years” as Reyner Banham called them.
Wright’s designs from 1911 on for
his Taliesin estate in Wisconsin had
prepared the ground for the large-scale
landscape proposals of the 1920s
that prompted his first encounters with
the desert: A.M. Johnson’s compound
near Death Valley, California, and
Alexander J. Chandler’s San Marcos
resort in the Sonoran Desert south-
east of Phoenix, Arizona. Though
they were never built Wright later
adapted many aspects of these pro-
posals to Taliesin West. For example,
in his drawings for San Marcos-in-
the-Desert (figs. 8-A & 8-B), Wright
placed the buildings and gardens on

9-A & 9-B: A.M. Johnson Desert Com-
pound, Grapevine Canyon, California.
Site plan, above/top, and aerial per-
spective, above, ca. 1924. Frank Lloyd
Wright, architect. All images these pages
© Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.

9-C: Taliesin, near Spring Green,
Wisconsin. Site plan, 1928. Frank Lloyd
Wright, architect.
a prowlike platform looking out over the landscape and let the desert come right up to the base of the retaining wall, juxtaposing the cultivated and the wild much as he later did at Taliesin West and had done already at Taliesin. This approach was strikingly different from the norm of walled-in gardens in Spanish/Moorish style or the irrigated green, grassy lawns and groves of trees of the “pastoral” resort.

Building and living at Ocatilla, the desert camp Wright built in 1929 near the proposed Chandler, Arizona, site of San Marcos-in-the-Desert, were seminal experiences of great personal significance, though the whole episode lasted only a few months, from January to May. In “Freedom,” book three of An Autobiography, Wright turned from reflection on the past and present to speculation on the future. He described Ocatilla in a spirit of excitement and optimism as a “preliminary study,” “the first of an ‘Arizona type.’”

Reynier Banham later discerned in Ocatilla “an air of freshness and new invention usually associated with the beginning of an architect’s career,” remarkable in a man of sixty, and ranked it as one of the great personal statements in twentieth-century architecture (figs. 6-A, 7-A & 7-B). Banham regarded Ocatilla as a “second beginning” to Wright’s career. It is no wonder he later made Arizona his second home, that he oriented important sight lines at Taliesin West to repeatedly draw the eye to South Mountain (and thus to the site of Ocatilla on its southern slopes). Ocatilla marked the rise and renewal of Wright, who wrote to his son, John, “Phoenix seems to be the name for me too.”

Ocatilla is an essential link between Taliesin (or “Taliesin North,” as Wright sometimes called it) and the more permanent desert outpost he built later at Taliesin West. The structures of Ocatilla, like those at Taliesin, embraced a hilltop with a “camp fire”—like the tea circle—just below the crown (fig. 7-B). The enclosed hilltop—like the hill garden at Taliesin—provided a prospect of the surrounding landscape from within a protected enclave and gave a “measure of privacy” to the quarters downslope. Bedrooms, living room, dining room, office, and studio were small structures, some grouped at
right angles to one another like miniature versions of the main wings at Taliesin, all sited more or less along the contours, much like the relation of building to hill at Taliesin (fig. 7-A). Unlike the earliest version of Taliesin, however, where a single orthogonal (right-angled) grid organized the layout of buildings, courts, and gardens, two grids structured the site plan of Ocatilla. Wright offset the grids from one another by 120 degrees in response to the V-shaped hilltop, an angle he also expressed in the seats embracing the campfire. The individual units were aligned along the lines of these two grids, foreshadowing the strategy he developed further at Taliesin West eight years later.

Until the 1920s Wright’s landscape compositions were dominated by a single orthogonal grid. This sometimes led to problems on steeply sloping or irregularly shaped terrain, as in the grided gardens at Taliesin.

Working in complex topography on large landscape compositions in the 1920s, Wright gradually adopted structural strategies more appropriate to sloping, irregular terrain with views in various directions. At the Johnson desert compound (fig. 9-A), for example, he organized the 1924 plan with several axes aligned in response to terrain and views, a strategy he also used in a design for the Nakoma Country Club and employed again four years later at San Marcos-in-the-Desert (fig. 8-B). By the time he drew the 1925 site plan for vineyard, gardens, and farm buildings at Taliesin (fig. 9-C), Wright had aligned them with a new grid oriented perpendicular to the line of the slope, at a forty-five degree angle to the grid of the earlier plan. At Ocatilla, when Wright overlaid two grids in a structural geometry derived from the terrain, he brought to resolution ideas with which he had been working throughout the 1920s and sowed the seeds that would come to fruition in Taliesin West.

11-A: Taliesin West, 1940, looking south toward the drafting studio. The site is an integrated complex of buildings, courtyards, and gardens aligned, notched, and knit into the landscape; walls cut into, extend above, reach out to the immediate terrain. Photo © Pedro E. Guerrero.

“Pioneer” in Paradise Valley

In Arizona Wright was a “pioneer”—reenacting the 1850s experience of his mother’s family in the

“In inhabiting the two places [Wisconsin and Arizona], you learn. You have the open book of nature. On the one page you have efflorescence, richness, ease, what comes of great . . . well I suppose actually it’s a form of decay. Perhaps this vegetation that grows all over so abundantly is a form of mold that comes upon more accurate elements—the stone foundation of things. But when you get out here, you’re back to the foundation.”

—Frank Lloyd Wright, His Living Voice, 1954
Jones Valley of Wisconsin—settling
in a landscape that seemed remote,
the nearest road a dirt track, the
nearest settlement a few miles away.
Like Jones Valley in the 1850s, how-
ever, the desert area was already set-
tled by the 1930s: Paradise Valley
was a rapidly growing winter resort
area frequented by many tourists,
including wealthy Chicagoans.
Unlike Jones Valley, the site Wright
chose for Taliesin West did not sus-
tain the Fellowship; they brought
canned fruits and vegetables from
Wisconsin, relied upon Wright's son
David for oranges from his orchard,
and some years received weekly train
shipments of eggs from Taliesin.
Food in nearby Scottsdale was
expensive, and Wright complained of
having to pay "resort prices," which
he could ill afford.

In 1937 Wright bought property at
the foot of the McDowell Mountains
on a gentle, south-facing slope with
panoramic views over Paradise
Valley to distant mountains (fig. 10-A).
The hills behind have heaps of shat-
tered rock at their base, all covered
with desert varnish, black and red
from many years' exposure to cycles
of moisture and evaporation. The
ground is hard, with rocks scattered
across the surface as if cast there.
Two deep washes structure the site.
Their steep sides, breadth, and long
heaps of loose rocks and gravel are
cues to the violent force of waters
that come crashing down the stony
hillsides after rainstorms. Dozens of
small, shallow washes lace the whole
area. Wright sited Taliesin West up
against a hill between a large wash to
the west and a smaller wash to the
east. Here, as Wright put it, "we
decided to build ourselves into the
life of the desert."

Taliesin West is an integrated
complex of buildings, courtyards,
and gardens aligned, notched, and
knit into this landscape: walls, roofs,
pergolas, and paths catch sunlight
and cast shadows; sight lines point to
distant landforms; walls cut into,
extend above, reach out to the imme-
diate terrain. Segments of the main
path and most of the buildings (stu-
dio, dining room, kiva, the Wrights'
living quarters) are aligned along a
straight line that forms the spine
of the complex. Wright considered the
orientation of this spine carefully; an
eyear drawing shows a different ori-
entation with the present one drawn
over it. The spine is aligned so that
the walls of the buildings that line it
receive both morning sun and after-
noon light, and so that ends of the
main path point to distant land-
forms. This spine, moreover, is not
an isolated axis but is embedded
within two grids, as an orthogonal
line in one grid and a diagonal in the
other. All the disparate parts of the
place are held within the lattice
structure formed by these two inter-
secting grids. Lines of movement
through Taliesin West zig and zag
along the lines of the two interlocking
grids. This structure of spine and
grids has accommodated changing
needs and considerable expansion
relatively gracefully over the past
half century (fig. 12-A).

Buildings, gardens, paths, and
patios are set into the slope in some

12-A: Taliesin West, Scottsdale,
Arizona, Site plan, ca. 1942. All images
these pages © Frank Lloyd Wright
Foundation.
places, elevated on a platform above the desert in others (fig. 13-A). This is a landscape meant to be walked through. Approaching and moving through the complex along the spine, you enter at grade, descend a few steps, turn and turn again; ascend, turn down the main path with a wall at shoulder height, your eye just above the level of the retained slope. Go straight and you emerge at grade again; turning right through a loggia, you descend onto a platform elevated above the desert floor. As in a Japanese stroll garden, you turn repeatedly, your eye drawn to the "borrowed" view of landmarks in the distant landscape. At Taliesin West, your eye is directed again and again to South Mountain and the site of Ocatilla on its far side; Wright incorporated landmarks of personal significance as he had in the Jones Valley with Romeo and Juliet, Midway Hill, Bryn Mawr, Bryn Canol, and Bryn Bach. Patterns of life and landscape merge over time as repeated shuttling along Taliesin's paths weaves you into the landscape, immediate and distant.

Wright planned this structure carefully from the outset, then built it gradually. A survey and grading plan of about 1938 with meticulously calculated spot elevations guided the necessary digging and filling and gives a precise picture of how Wright shaped the landscape (fig. 13-B). An area labeled "DIG" marks an east-west notch cut into the slope for the studio and main path behind; areas marked "FILL" delineate the broad, raised paths at the edge of the prow garden. The sunken area in the middle of the garden was at existing grade; Wright merely enclosed it (figs. 12-A, 13-B). This was a lot of excavation and filling to accomplish with picks and shovels. As Cornelia Brierly, an early apprentice, recalled: "All we did the first year was dig!" And Wright said his wife Olgivanna thought "the whole opus looked more like something we had been excavating, not building."

The second year, 1938-39, the apprentices commenced walls and buildings; apprentice John deKoven Hill said the construction proceeded swiftly within the framework set the preceding year. They took the materials of the desert and reordered them. Desert rocks—huge boulders,
14-A: Taliesin West, prow garden, looking from sunken garden to terrace, garden room, and cove, early 1940s. Note how massed desert plants and walls of desert masonry "capture" the hill beyond—covered with similar rocks and plants—as borrowed scenery. State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Howe Collection, Whi (Howe) TSP3. Right, apprentices constructing a wall, 1940. Photo © Pedro E. Guerrero.
sharp-edged stones, rounded "goose-eggs" from the washes—were set in a rosy matrix of concrete made from desert sand to form the walls of platform and structures. The rocks float in this matrix, their positioning startling in its dynamism, unrelated to the positioning one would expect in a wall, prompting one to wonder about the processes of their formation. As Wright said, "Here in Arizona, one is much closer to the cataclysm." It is just this sense of cataclysm that the walls convey (fig. 14-A).

By 1942 the prow garden was built. The plants of the garden were those of the surrounding desert, massed as single species and reordered in planters and beds of angular shapes. Yucca filled a large bed next to the pool in the sunken part of the prow garden, and prickly pear another planter (fig. 14-A). Staghorns lined the path at the base of the pergola and retaining wall behind the studio, and a mass of prickly pear next to the petroglyph near Wright's office marked another "dot" along the line of that axis. The cacti were transplanted from the desert; photographs show Wright directing apprentices moving a huge saguaro.

The prow garden is the countertype of both hill garden and cantilevered terrace at Taliesin (built the same year as the initial construction of Taliesin West). Desert and garden meet at the wall and the view is elevated, as in hilltop garden and terrace; here, desert wilderness once surrounded the garden, not fertile fields. The garden is an oasis open to the desert, jutting out into it (fig. 10-A). The wall does not enclose the oasis but marks a boundary, inviting comparison between the domesticated and the wild, the human-built garden and what Wright called "a grand garden the like of which in sheer beauty of reach, space, and pattern does not exist ... in the world."

**Nature, Landscape, and Frank Lloyd Wright's Principles of Landscape Design**

Frank Lloyd Wright revered nature, not landscape, and his use of the two words was distinctly different. When Wright spoke of nature, he spoke of principles, of authority for architectural form, and his words were abstract. He rarely mentioned landscape; when he did describe a landscape, his language focused upon recurrent features or patterns rather than idiosyncratic variables. The peculiarities of a local landscape held no interest for him; he wrote, for example, of the prairie, as an abstract ideal, not a prairie. He interpreted the prairie as a horizontal plain, emphasizing its flatness (while, in fact, most prairie landscapes have a rolling topography), and designed most of his "prairie style" houses for sites that were originally forested or in the transition zone between forest and prairie.

Wright used the word "nature" in several senses: as essential quality, material reality, and divine force. He often moved from one sense of the word to another without transition. In his early writings, he emphasized the first two senses—essential quality and material reality; in later years the metaphysical emerged more explicitly. In 1912 he wrote that by Nature, he did not mean "that outward aspect that strikes the eye as a visual image of a scene or strikes the ground glass of a camera, but that inner harmony which penetrates the outward form ... and is its determining character; that quality in the thing ... that is its significance and its Life for us—what Plato called ... the 'eternal idea of the thing.'"

Sunset terrace outside garden room looking south, 1940. Photo © Pedro E. Guerrero.
Taliesin West is a landscape meant to be walked through. As in a Japanese stroll garden, you turn repeatedly, your eye drawn to the "borrowed" view of landmarks in the distant landscape. Photos below, right, and top of opposite page ca. 1940 by Brad Storrer. Bottom opposite page by Robert May. Courtesy Frank Lloyd Wright Archives.
Later in life, Wright described why he capitalized the word nature: “Nature should be spelled with a capital ‘N,’ not because Nature is God but because all that we can learn of God we will learn from the body of God, which we call Nature.” This remark is pure Emerson, who had written similar words more than 150 years earlier: “The noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God.” To Wright nature held the key to “the right ordering of human life”; nature was an ideal, “an original source of inspiration” from which to craft art and civilization. Wright saw the artist—himself, for example—as nature’s prophet and art as a moral force whose task was to reveal how society might create institutions that were harmonious with universal principles. “Ideas exist for us alone by virtue of form.” The artist’s work was thus “the revelation” of the “life-principle which shall make our social living beautiful because organically true.”

These ideas were well developed by 1900 and fully worked out by 1912, when Wright first constructed Taliesin. Wright had expressed some of these ideas in his earliest texts, “The Architect and the Machine” (1894) and “Architect, Architecture, and the Client” (1896); he developed them in “A Philosophy of Fine Art” (1900); and he expressed them most fully in “The Japanese Print: An Interpretation” (1912). These four essays permit one to follow the evolution of Wright’s ideas on nature and architecture from the time he opened his own practice through the original construction of Taliesin. In “The Japanese Print: An Interpretation,” Wright employed Japanese art as a vehicle through which to express his own philosophy of nature, art, and architecture; it is an essential text for understanding his intentions in landscape architecture. The essay distills and expands upon earlier texts and lays the foundation for his future writing on the subject. At the heart of the essay is Wright’s idea of “conventionalization,” the process whereby one draws out the inner nature of the material world (a process Wright equated with civilization): “Real civilization means for us a right conventionalizing of our original state of Nature. Just such conventionalizing as the true artist imposes on natural forms.”

To Wright, landscape was often an imperfect, outward manifestation of nature; the task of the architect was to bring the outer in closer conformity with the inner ideal, its nature, or essential characteristics. This accounts for seeming inconsistencies between texts and acts: his veneration of nature, on the one hand, and his imposition of architectural form upon landscape, on the other. This distinction is not so obvious to most modern readers, for nature and landscape are commonly equated. Wright had contempt for what he called “some sentimental feeling
about animals and grass and trees and out-of-doors generally," as opposed to reverence for nature as an internal ideal, the very "nature' of God.

Here lies the fundamental difference between Wright and landscape architect Jens Jensen. The two friends agreed that nature should be the authority for design, but they disagreed on the proper interpretation of that authority. Jensen's naturalistic designs for parks and gardens imitated the outward appearance of nature as reflected in the regional landscape. Wright, on the other hand, believed that a "true artist" must "impose" an idealized geometry derived from a landscape's inner nature upon the given or "natural forms." Wright's critique of Western art can be read as a critique of naturalistic landscape design: "Where the art of Japan is a poetic symbol, much of ours is attempted realism, that succeeds only in being rather pitifully literal." To Wright the outward appearances of natural features were important only for the hints they provided to their "inner nature" as expressed in their underlying structure. This structure is what he sought to clarify in his landscapes and buildings.

"Structure is the very basis of what I call reality," wrote Wright in 1937, the year before construction began on Taliesin West. Twenty-five years earlier in "The Japanese Print," he had asserted that structure was "at the very beginning of any real knowledge of design. And at the beginning of structure lies always and everywhere geometry." By structure, he meant the way that elements are united in "a larger unity—a vital whole." Though his definition of structure remained fundamentally the same, it evolved between 1912 and 1937, the years in which he published the two texts and was engaged with the original Taliesin and Taliesin West. In 1912, he stressed that structure as "pure form, as arranged or fashioned and grouped to 'build' the Idea" and geometry (Euclidian) was "the grammar of the form, its architectural principle."

At Taliesin from 1911 to 1914 Wright grouped the squares, rectangles, and
circles of buildings, terraces, and gardens in a highly sophisticated play of blocks within a single orthogonal grid. By 1937 when he declared, “Nature could not have static structure first if she would,” he was emphasizing the organic, dynamic quality of structure: its origin in ideal conception, then unfolding, a product of creative process, shaping and shaped by function. This describes the structure of Taliesin West, a complex lattice that holds within it varied forms and has accommodated much change over the years. The two Taliesins represent a profound shift in structural strategy. Here, as in so many other respects, Wright has one foot in the past, the other in the future. There is often an unresolved tension in his works and texts between static “eternal” geometry and dynamic “organic” structure.

Apart from his native Wisconsin terrain, the landscapes that moved Wright most powerfully were those whose underlying structure was expressed clearly in the shape of their surface, as in deserts. Given the importance to Wright of landscape structure as embodied by landforms and plants, his work had to respond when he moved from the gently rounded deciduous trees and layered landforms of Wisconsin’s Driftless Area to the spiky desert plants and angular landforms of the arid Southwest. How apt that the hill garden is a rounded mound enclosed by a square of layered limestone walls, the prow garden a triangle elevated by walls of rocks tumbled in mortar like talus at the base of desert mountains.

Wright took care to distinguish between outer and inner form—shape and structure—but the irony is that he himself often fell into the trap of imitating outer shape and ignoring inner structure. Jensen chided Wright for designing flat roofs, which echoed the horizontality of the prairie’s ground plane but were poorly adapted to the region’s heavy snowfall. Taliesin West was built into the land and out of it, the geometry of its plan inspired by the angles of the surrounding terrain, but when floods swept down off the nearby slopes, they sometimes washed right through the buildings. When Wright responded to the sur-

1939 photo taken from door of Wright’s office, looking southeast toward drafting studio. Photo © Pedro E. Guerrero.
face form of a landscape rather than to the processes that shaped its underlying structure, he ran into trouble.

Abstraction, as opposed to imitation, is an important device for Wright, a means of fusing the real and the ideal. Abstraction is a process of simplifying landscape features, stripping away details that do not contribute to the intended meaning, and emphasizing significant detail. Through abstraction, or "conventionalization" as he had called it in early texts, Wright sought to express the unity of inner essence and outward appearance, as in the perfectly rounded form of the knoll in the hill garden and the steps/ledges cut to appear as if they were layered
bedrock revealed, but their edges straighter than one would find in “nature.” “Abstraction is stark form,” said Wright in 1937. “In abstraction it is the structure of pattern of the thing that comes clear, stripped of all realistic effects, divested of any realism whatsoever.” Wright often juxtaposed the ideal and the real, abstracted landscape form and given form, the cultivated and the wild: cantilevered terrace over “wild” slopes below; raised garden on prow and the desert; hilltop garden enclosed by wall and the freely growing grass beyond (figs. 22-A, 10-A, 14-A). Experiencing all these contrasts together heightens the appreciation of each. Juxtaposed in the mind’s eye, as they were in Wright’s life, the Taliesins sharpen the perception of their two landscapes; hill garden and prow garden are equivalents, each an abstraction, a re-presentation of the region.

For Wright, abstraction also meant a progressive geometrization of outward form, since he believed that natural features were underlain by “an essential geometry.” He wrote, for example, of how a “Japanese artist grasps form always by reaching underneath for its essential geometry . . . By the grasp of geometric form and sense of its symbol-value, he has the secret of getting to the hidden core of reality.” Wright stressed this principle of abstraction in his teaching; as apprentice John Lautner reported in 1934, “We are learning to see the essence of the abstract here at Taliesin.” At Taliesin West, Wright abstracted the formal structure of the landscape, the angles of mountain peaks and talus at the base of nearby hills, and applied that triangular geometry to the form of house and garden and the structure of the whole (figs. 12-A, 14-A).

Geometry, for Wright, was “an aesthetic skeleton” that held symbolic meaning: “Certain geometric forms have come to symbolize for us and potently to suggest certain human ideas, moods, and sentiments—as for instance: the circle, infinity; the triangle, structural unity; the spire, aspiration; the spiral, organic progress; the square, integrity.” Through “subtle differentiations of these elemental geometric forms,” and “a sense of [their] symbol-value,” form could be made to signify. Wright employed this idea in both buildings and gardens. Gardens, however, are different from buildings in one respect: they

22-A: Terrace outside Wright's Taliesin, Wisconsin, study cantilevered over wooded landscape below, 1938-51. State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Howe Collection, WHI (x3) 48219.

Buildings were central and integral to Wright, and they were his primary means of integrating varied landscape features into a unified composition. One cannot imagine Wright as the designer of a place like Stourhead in England where the main event, the park in the valley, is a separate world from the house. Wright’s landscapes are also inconceivable without the structures that order the landscape even as they respond to it. The terraces and gardens of Taliesin emanate outward from the dwelling; the reverse is also true: Landscape suggested the form of the buildings, the size and placement of windows. It is often impossible to say where building ends and landscape begins.

This point was brought home to me while working on the present essay. To describe Wright’s approach to landscape design as distinct from his buildings is impossible. Again and again, I found myself inside the buildings looking out to distant views of hills, lakes, trees, and buildings, following the plane of interior floor to exterior terrace, then outside, tracing the line of walls and roofs as they slid into terrain in a fusion of building and earth. Wright’s work is part of a larger tradition of architecture that embraces the idea of landscape and building as continuous, where building interiors are like landscapes, where the real and the ideal are always in dynamic tension.

embbody both real and idealized nature. Landscape features may be representations of the world, but they are also the world itself, physical reality and idea together, the source of metaphor and metaphor. A tree can be a tree and The Tree; a path, both path and The Path. The round mound may be an abstraction of a hill, but it is also a hill, not merely a representation. The fusion of the real and the ideal in Wright’s landscapes contributes to their aesthetic and symbolic power.
The same principles guided Wright’s design of buildings and landscapes; both were architecture. Plants were materials that should be “massed and grouped,” each according to its “true nature—that is, as it naturally grows best to show its full beauty as a lilac, a syringa, an elm, an oak, or a maple . . . The formality necessary to harmonize these growing things with man’s surroundings is sought and found in the architectural nature of the plan, the division, the enclosure, the arrangement.” Wright applied these principles to landscape design throughout his career; from the high walled enclosure of the gardens in his prairie-style houses, to the lower wall enclosing the hill garden at Taliesin, to the wall raised above the desert at Taliesin West; all are organized by the geometry of the plan through division, enclosure, and arrangement. At the Taliesins, places where he worked over a long period and exerted the most control, buildings and landscapes gradually merged. One finds oneself, as Wright was with Japanese architecture, stumped to determine “where the garden leaves off and the garden begins . . . too delighted with the problem to attempt to solve it.”

It was these very qualities of structure, abstraction, symbolic form, and correspondence of buildings and landscape, of interior and exterior space that attracted Wright to Japanese landscape art. At both Taliesins he employed principles of Japanese garden design of different times and traditions: simplification and condensation, miniaturization or embodiment of the large in the small, correspondence between parts and whole, “shakkei” or borrowed scenery, and what Mitsuo Inoue has called “movement-oriented architectural space.” Just as the small garden of stones and raked gravel at Ryoanji can be read as a microcosm of Japan, the hill garden at Taliesin can stand for the landscape of southwestern Wisconsin. Wright also used the hill garden as borrowed scenery when he captured the long, horizontal view of the hilltop with clerestory windows running the length of the room. In Japan shakkei entails far more than incorporating a view, it means “capturing a landscape alive,” and there is a whole tradition of gardens composed around borrowed scenery. Wright “captured” scenery with windows, eaves, tree trunks, and sky. At Taliesin West for example, he captured the landscape of Paradise Valley by holding it between sky above and open, elevated platform below. South Mountain is a prominent element in this borrowed landscape, its significance emphasized by being captured in different ways—at the bend in the path, framed by the loggia, repeatedly hidden and disclosed as one moves through the stroll garden that is Taliesin West. The Japanese tradition of movement space, as defined by Inoue, is episodic, entailing successive spaces or views, revealed a bit at a time, and irregular in structure compared to “geometric space.” The stroll garden, with its twisting, turning path, views concealed, then revealed, imparts a sense of flux and mutability. At Taliesin West, Wright fused geometric and movement space; the zigs and zags are not irregular but structured by the lines of two orthogonal grids. Static “eternal” geometry and dynamic “organic” structure are held in deliberate tension.

Wright understood landscape as dynamic, as subject to constant change, and growth was among the primary life principles of his organic architecture. His own homes at Taliesin in Wisconsin and Arizona are brilliant essays on landscape design that can accommodate growth and change. As Brierly observed, “Mr. Wright never cared about things lasting. He was satisfied just to see them take shape.” The buildings and their landscapes were built and rebuilt, shaped and reshaped in successive paroxysms of creative destruction. Their very essence was change, their current form the result of addition and subtraction, accretion and erosion, growth and decay.

The prow-garden pond outside the drafting studio and dining room, 1940. © Pedro E. Guerrero.
The "desert" surrounding Taliesin West has changed radically as the density of settlement in the valley increased. Seeds have blown in from lawns and gardens of nearby subdivisions. Runoff from roads, parking lots, and irrigated gardens and effluent from sewage treatment have altered the character of plants growing there; there are fewer cacti in the valley, more woody shrubs, denser growth on the desert at Taliesin West than just ten years ago. The tough desert plants of the prow garden are gone, replaced by subtropical ornamentals that require irrigation; these have also replaced much of the original desert plantings within the rest of the complex. While the changes do alter the clarity of juxtaposed geometries that once existed between gardens and desert, according to apprentices Cornelia Brierly and John deKoven Hill, who became staff members of Wright's successor firm, Taliesin Architects, and continued to live at the two Taliesins, it was Wright himself who first introduced these foreign plants.

Wright's Landscape Legacy

Wright left a rich legacy of landscapes—written, drawn, and built—whose scope and significance have barely been realized. Most extraordinary are the two places he shaped and inhabited during much of his lifetime—the Taliesins. Though altered since his death in 1959, hundreds of photographs from 1900 to 1959 enable us to experience successive stages of these places, to appreciate the scale of Wright's achievements. The importance of the two landscapes is amplified by their embodiment of principles of design worked out in texts, drawings, and construction over half a century, each medium illuminating, clarifying, and extending the others for us today as they must have done for Wright himself. It is one thing to read, "We decided to build ourselves into the life of the desert," and quite another to examine the plan of cut and fill, to see photographs of people digging and moving rocks and plants, to experience the reality of the place itself, how its very structure is knit into the desert. The Taliesins were Wright's landscape laboratories for ongoing experiments in form, feeling, and meaning; they are ideas in the original sense of the word: "visible representations of a conception; realized
ideals.” All this would be more than sufficient to set the Taliesins among the most important landscape compositions of the twentieth century. Their significance, however, is deeper still.

Steepled in the picturesque while advancing the modern, the Taliesins are important links between past and future, chapters in a much larger book on nature and landscape, essays on how to celebrate our human selves as part of nature. The Taliesins belong to a vision of architecture and landscape architecture as social arts whose task is to perfect a union of human and non-human nature. Wright shared roots in Transcendental philosophy and scientific agriculture with Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), his predecessor in this tradition. Jens Jensen (1860-1951) and Lewis Mumford (1895-1990) were peers and friends. Among Wright’s successors are Kevin Lynch (1918-1984) and Lawrence Halprin (b. 1916), whose visit to Taliesin in 1941 inspired him to become a landscape architect.

Wright’s contribution to this tradition was extraordinary. He believed that architecture—of buildings and landscapes—could become “natural” if designed according to principles derived from nature. The aim of his art, he wrote to Lewis Mumford in 1929, was “truly no less than the creation of man as a perfect ‘flower of Nature.’”

Anne Whiston Spirn is Professor of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This article is an excerpt from her chapter in Frank Lloyd Wright: Designs for an American Landscape, 1922-1932, edited by David De Long (Harry Abrams and Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1996).