At the Death of Architecture: Frank Lloyd Wright’s Dreams of America in Japan

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Cover Page Footnote
I express my deep thanks to Professor Walker of the Art History Department for continuous support in completing this project.
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Abstract:

In 1832, French writer Victor Hugo declares the death of the edifice as a result of the totalizing popularity of Gutenberg’s printing press since the fifteenth century. American architect Frank Lloyd Wright would echo this sentiment to an intrigued Chicago audience almost 70 years later in his 1901 lecture, “The Art and Craft of the Machine.” The argument went that architecture, chief among the arts, would employ ornament, applied art, and symbolic meaning to capture and spread lasting imprints of human thought before the book usurped this position on account of its greater efficiency in accomplishing the same ends. While many architects of his time were finding ways to circumvent use of machine technology in architecture, citing worsening qualities of industrial life among other ills, Wright sought instead to make a return to the very force that had killed architecture centuries earlier. Wright attempts to revive this once central artform by inventing an original didactic architecture along with a prescribed almost spiritual set of values meant to be inherent to the United States and symbiotic with the machine.

Keywords: Frank Lloyd Wright, didactic architecture, democratic architecture

“The West has much to learn from the East—and Japan was the gateway to that great East of which I had been dreaming since I had seen my first Japanese prints—and read my first Laotze.”

—Frank Lloyd Wright, An Autobiography

“Resting on our hands
It was God’s land
It was ragged and naïve
It was Heaven.”

—David Bowie, “Memory of a Free Festival”

In March of 1901, at the Hull House in Chicago, the preeminent American architect Frank Lloyd Wright delivered a lecture—later adapted as a published essay—entitled “The Art and Craft of the Machine.” Part way through, Wright reiterates a section from Victor Hugo’s 1831 novel The Hunchback of Notre-Dame which puts forth the argument that the advent of the printing press around the mid-1400s came with the stark declaration of the death of the edifice. Due to the ability of Gutenberg’s press to more conveniently immortalize and circulate human thought in a text-based media, that centuries-old position was thereafter stripped from architecture, likewise doing away
with its need to represent novel ideas. A symptom of this tragic demise is the liberation of the traditional arts such as painting and sculpture, now free to flourish on their own, no longer in service one way or another of the building art.

This paper contends that with his use of Japanese art in his totalizing architectural compositions, Frank Lloyd Wright in a sense can be seen as trying to revive the edifice through his work—a feat of which the infamously egotistical architect likely thought only he was capable. The usual ukiyo-e woodblock prints that adorn the walls of his designs create something of a Gestalt composition, or Gesamtkunstwerk, which—it will be argued—returns to architecture to some degree reign over the arts, and breathes new life into the edifice which to Hugo and Wright after him has lain motionless since around the time of the European Renaissance. The question then remains: What does Wright seek to teach, what new paperless thought is he imparting, with this partial reinstatement of art as architecture’s ornament, a distinctive characteristic of his organic philosophy? A possible answer, that will now be addressed in turn, is his vision of a freeing architecture meant to be truly representative of the American identity—an honestly democratic architecture according to him, with full belief that none has yet existed in earnest. To this end, this paper follows Wright’s argument in “The Art and Craft of the Machine” and how, to his points, he devises a didactic architecture in the hopes of solving the architectural issues he cites in his essay and communicating his own value structure to his clients, erring more so on proselytizer than architect.

From Nature Comes Freedom: Organic/Democratic Architecture

Around the turn of the twentieth century, architects, creatives, and society at large were to come to grips with the recent popularization and availability of the industrial machine for use in trivial labor, exponentially driving up production efficiency from where it had previously been. To
Frank Lloyd Wright, the machine had theretofore been stained by human use namely in the service of vapid automation for mere capital, but holds untapped potential for humankind, especially the artist and by extension architect. Not too distant from conversations surrounding the Arts and Crafts movement, Wright nonetheless took a somewhat opposing viewpoint, believing that the machine need not be the enemy against what seemed to be the last bastion of quality handmade art. Rather, if used according to his plans, the machine could in fact serve to free the artist from unnecessary labor that could be spent as creative energy elsewhere in the design process.

It was also around this time that Wright, during the same year he split with his then employer and fellow architect Louis Sullivan, attended the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Here was Wright’s oft-cited landmark encounter with several key pieces of physical Japanese culture that many claim would go on to sow the seeds for a complex but often loving relationship with the country’s cultural and philosophical exports, not least of which include its art and architecture. As scholar Kevin Nute (2015) writes, “… the World’s Fair was to prove a watershed in Wright’s personal relationship with Japan, not only apparently providing him with his first direct experience of Japanese buildings, but also bringing to Chicago several of America’s leading authorities on Japanese art” (p. 51). The latter would prove equally as, if not more important than, the former, as Nute explains elsewhere, for Wright’s musings on what goes into making organic architecture (p. 178-181). Experiencing the Japanese pavilion, Wright would have been exposed to traditional Buddhist temple architecture, a characteristic Japanese tea house, a taste of visual art from the region, and as Nute again adds, some key figures from the Orientalist movement of the period. Though, Wright’s interest did not develop in a vacuum. In fact, his growing fascination with the East coincided with this larger social phenomenon of which those such as Edward Morse, Ernest Fenollosa, and Kakuzo Okakura, who were also involved with the expo, were part. In fact, even in
the time leading up to the exposition there were publications and lectures given by this crowd, educating the architect’s fellow Chicagoans.

Wright’s interaction with and love for Japanese art offers a useful starting point to understanding the first of his central design philosophies that underlines much of his extensive body of work: organic architecture. Ever-evading a clear and simple definition, “organic architecture” as Wright describes it can be broadly seen to embody several main and relatively stable principles. First and foremost, among them, organic architecture seeks to capture the essence of nature, and through human building, enhance rather than destroy its splendor (hence, Wright’s Fallingwater home seems to rise out of the rocks rather than totally dominate them). Very much based in American Romanticist thought, Wright saw nature as essential to one’s well-being and so built this belief into his architecture. Also gleaning much inspiration from traditional Japanese design principles, the framing of landscapes and natural vistas was not uncommon in Wright’s work. For instance, the bird walk at his Taliesin East extending out from the main house over the viridescent landscape affords sustained appreciation of the serene countryside flanking the viewer.

Organic also conveys the notion of something that lives and has a pulse, which is not far off from Wright’s conception either. Less so talked about among writers on Wright, the influence and evolution in Japan of this general line of thinking can be seen in the later Metabolist movement that would develop in the region, officially coalescing just one year following Wright’s death in 1959 (Stipe, 1999, p. 34-39). Like a living organism with different organs and internal systems all working in concert, architecture according to Wright was similarly to function in tandem with all its subsequent parts, including each of its rooms and spaces at a macro scale, and all of its furniture and fixtures at a micro scale. Hence, it is unsurprising to learn that Wright often designed nearly if
not entirely every part of a building—tables and chairs included. Treating his buildings like miniature landscapes in themselves where trees and lakes are never out of place, he preferred to include such minutiae as coherent with the overall composition, not merely added on top of it—much like how he called for building not on nature, but of nature (Meech, 2002, p. 50). Here is where the Japanese woodblock print comes in. In line with his love for the artform, and found in his designs for various exhibitions, Wright had a tendency (especially in commissions for particularly wealthy clients, common throughout his storied career) in some of his plans to adorn the usually residential space with these prints.

This practice also gets at another aspect of the Japanese influence on Wright in his adapting of the ideal of abstraction and simplicity, where every part of the composition is necessary and there is nothing included which is not so. This is to say it is, in Wright’s eye at the very least, a perfectly balanced Gesamtkunstwerk. This idea Wright talks about appropriating from traditional Japanese dwellings and Shinto precepts: “Consider too that, ‘Be Clean’—‘the simplest way without waste’—was dignified as ceremonial in Old Japan … every structural member and fibre of [the Japanese dwelling’s] being means something fine, has genuine significance and straightaway does that something with beautiful effect” (Wright, 1931/1987, pp. 34, 35). Waste not, just as he thought Shinto wastes not, just as he thought nature wastes not—to Wright, every component is strictly purposive. The print for him suggests the perfect embodiment of the organic. To him, it is “organic” as in coming from a local people and their tradition, not muddied by external forces because of historic isolation, and “honest” as its scenes were believed to depict the everyday. For Wright, organic architecture then can be thought of as that which seeks to incorporate and enhance nature and humanity’s connectivity with it; that which is greater than the sum of its parts; and that which is truthful in materials, time and place in which it is conceived,
and overall conception.

The 1893 Chicago fair was equally as important for Wright in further igniting his passion for creating a truly American architecture, one intended to encapsulate the idiosyncratic spirit of the nation and its dream rather than a simple rehashing of old styles or an uninspired European hand-me-down. For Wright, this could be summed up by his own passionate and loaded heuristic label of “democratic architecture,” completing the set of two guiding principles in his work that are by and large to be explored further in this paper. Though again an always-evolving term—like organic architecture—never graced with a concise definition throughout Wright’s lengthy career, he seldom shied away from expanding on exactly what he meant by democratic architecture. For now, it is sufficient to equate the idea of democratic architecture with Wright’s utopian vision of a design philosophy that would enable its user to achieve perfect individual freedom.

Though arguably a rather misleading use of “democratic” by Wright, it may be more precise to equate his philosophy with the mythos surrounding the freedom supposedly inherent in the American dream and so-considered “heroic” figures like the colonial frontiersman than actual democracy as such. Self-sufficiency and ensuing equality are key here (in theory alone, as only those with sufficient socioeconomic means had a chance at inclusion). Once the primal urges for safety and privacy are taken care of, the client then has free reign over the outcome of the rest of their life. This is true democracy for Wright—all have the right to reach their full potential, be it creative or otherwise, and their architecture should reflect and physically encourage that. In practice, however, it was never wholly inclusive. That Wright can be seen grasping for this ideal throughout his entire life is evident in his designs for his somewhat more affordable yet still highly curated Usonian houses, American System-Built Homes, and, perhaps most representative, his Unified Farm Project for Broadacre City intended to give limitless freedom to the farmer complete
with thoughtful design at a discounted price (Wright, 1958/1988, p. 94).

Through deeper analysis, one finds hints that Wright’s specific uses of organic and democratic architecture actually seem closer to converging for him, rather than being disparate terms—it is difficult to detect precisely where one ends and the other begins. It is not exactly that the two are totally equivalent, it is more so accurate to say one leads to another or one is in service of the other. In this case, designing organically seems to be the antecedent to a democratic architecture. Democratic is the ideal being reached for, one that requires an organic foundation to be realized. Though, all said and done, a materialized Wright building contains aspects of both the organic and the democratic simultaneously—his shared ideal of the “untapped” American landscape being so reminiscent of the country, its people, and their ideas of democratic freedoms so central for Wright. Toward a democratic end, the individual rife with now-realizable potential is integrated into the Gestalt of their residence, one that is already in tune with nature from an organic perspective. Thus, assigning it to a sequence, organic ideals inform democratic reality, and they feed into each other: this is the starting point of the nature of Wright’s new didactic architecture.

**The Art and Craft of Frank Lloyd Wright, The Life and Death of Architecture**

Together, Wright’s concepts of organic and democratic architecture offer a compelling base upon which his cryptic “The Art and Craft of the Machine” can be analyzed in the hope of providing a fuller understanding of some of the potential motivations underlying his design practice. As Wright expresses in his essay, architecture was somehow different before the advent of Gutenberg’s printing press. To that end, and invoking Victor Hugo, he explains how architecture from before the printing press stood as the premiere receptacle of human thought. Without the simpler and more effective means of recording and disseminating novel ideas by way of the written word, mass
produced at unparalleled efficiency, architecture was “the principal writing—the universal writing of humanity” (Wright, 1901/1992, p. 60). At this time as well, his argument goes, the other traditional arts—such as painting, music, and sculpture—served architecture above all. Painting colored windows and walls, music filled theaters and halls, and sculpture existed to decorate the façade. Each of these mediums that hold the abilities to tell stories and keep information (often, pictorially) were both contained in architecture and more widespread or perhaps even more important than writing for Wright. Taking this claim as is, regardless of whether it is necessarily true, can allow for further illumination of Wright’s design praxis in turn.

Architecture being this repository of thought, it had also the capacity to communicate this thought through its physical structure to the visitor. Perhaps most characteristic of this is the Gothic cathedral, like the Notre-Dame de Paris, which in the Middle Ages functioned not just as a meeting place for parishioners, but also offered a didactic function. A space wherein one’s spiritual encounters were encouraged, and individual enlightenment was facilitated—not unlike the ethos behind Wright’s spaces—through religious teaching. Spires reached to Heaven, stained glass windows told the story of Christ, bas-reliefs depicted biblical events, choirs sang hymns of praise, and suffused light flooded the pews. In the same way one was free to find themselves in God at the cathedral, the individual has the freedom and the tools to cultivate their passion in an organic, democratic Wright home.

Following Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, and getting only more popular from there, Hugo and Wright sharply declare: “The book is about to kill the edifice” (Wright, 1901/1992, p. 60). With this great machine comes a eulogy for the art of building, and a simultaneous weakening of its grasp on all other arts as it is no longer the only way for their dissemination either. Gone are the spires, stained glass windows, and bas-reliefs—or more
accurately their necessity. Architecture is no longer the background of human civilization, and moreover it need not be one for the arts anymore. Not only has architecture’s power dwindled beyond the point of domination of the plastic arts, but one could also think of new ways of to spread these arts via written media. Paintings and sculptures now free to exist outside the building can be viewed in a mass-producible book with musical scores being reproducible much the same.

It seemed that along with this death knell of architecture came not just the loss of its status as the art, but also nearly if not entirely the loss of its status as art at all. With the autonomous development of the visual arts, architecture was certainly knocked off center stage. Then, with previously innovative and verbose architecture being cast away in the hands of the amateur builder, the reintroduction of bygone styles reconceived for the day—seen in subsequent movements such as neoclassicism—saw architecture drop down yet another level to that which is barely art if at all. In a sense, it was no longer restrained by having to constantly say something new, so it stopped. Seemingly in an instant, architecture reduced to a husk of its former self, a depthless face that bears not even the ability to whisper, let alone speak.

This period also saw the rise of the copy, the mere image for image’s sake, which Wright writes extensively against. Pictures are dishonest (hence, inorganic) as they are spawned from a childish desire to add to a material that would be otherwise clean a false surface. “The insubordination of painting,” claims Wright, “setting up shop on its own account, divorced from Architecture … has cursed every form of Art endeavor whatsoever with similar abuses of the pictorial” (Wright, 1931/1987, p. 37). Of course, this is taken to be yet another symptom of architecture’s untimely murder. Using the Renaissance architecture of the period as an example, at its base a retelling of ancient Greek and Roman architecture adapted for the time, architects sought to embody largely old values in largely old ways rather than continue the conversation in new
directions. The archetype of the “master builder” is broken down and fractured as it makes way for the now separated roles of “builder” and “designer,” as if to tacitly recognize the builder is no longer the master of his craft (Burr, 2011). It follows then, that Wright played both roles in his own practice, and at times took to being his own engineer and publicist as well. As architectural historian Narciso Menocal (1988, p. 151) writes, quoting Hugo (1832), “Eventually ‘architecture crawled like a pitiful beggar of the studios, from copy to copy [emphasis added] of the Greek, Roman, and barbaric works of professors according to Vitruvius and Vignola.’” What seemed like a freedom given to architecture on account of its being relinquished from the standard of poetry presented as a crisis as it looked back on the past for imitation over the present for inspiration.

So then let this set the stage for the revival of architecture by Wright. Though resting on the condition that, according to Hugo’s prophecy, architecture can never return to its chief position among the arts, and thus can never fully live again so to speak: “Thenceforth, if architecture rise again, reconstruct, as Hugo prophesies she may begin to do in the latter days of the nineteenth century, she will no longer be mistress, she will be one of the arts, never again the art…” (Wright, 1901/1992, p. 61). Keeping this in mind, Wright will not stray from trying. Now, during the twentieth century’s rapid mechanization of human labor enveloping the West, new industrial machines, which are comparable to the printing press in terms of their totalizing cultural effect, are taking hold. Unlike some of the more hesitant in his cohort, the always effervescent architect sees hitherto unused potential in this new technology.

**Frank Lloyd Wright the Curator**

Conditions in America as a result of the post-press death present to Wright as a lack of a strictly national identity in its mainstream architecture. This for Wright contrasts with American architects
building in a derivative Gothic revival style, for example, appropriated from peoples and stylings of European nations, rather than existing as a development made by American architects on their land during their time. As a remedy for this, Wright propounds a democratic architecture, one which in sum is supposed to encapsulate the American people in a way analogous to how he considered the woodblock print to do so for Japan’s people but updated by the architect for the people living in his country at a time closer to his own. This would be achievable through, as has been shown, organic principles that then allow for the independent spirit of the individual to flow free, in accordance with nature, the American dream, and the unique wants of the client. This ostensibly virtuous national quality he finds to be compatible with the Japanese woodblock print as to him it developed within national borders—rather than imported from elsewhere—and was perhaps inaccurately believed by Wright to represent honest scenes of the everyday. At last, a novel architecture is to be again born containing profound human thought and action uncompressible into two-dimensional written word, an architecture which to Wright signifies the birth of the American people and their culture topped with the freedom endemic to his notions of true democracy, and thus the return to an architecture that is markedly more alive. Wright’s larger motion towards this revitalization is metonymically captured in his symbolic placement of the Japanese print in his greater architectural compositions.

That Wright once again adorns the edifice with the visual art of the woodblock print, itself reflecting his ideas of the organic and democratic, is nothing short of a stand-in or symbolic gesture representative of his entire aim to revive the art of architecture. It is the fulcrum on which this entire paradigm rests. In effect he is re-adorning the edifice with a traditional fine art, representing an honest attempt to resuscitate it from its post-press death. Moreover, in the Japanese print, Wright sees an implicit form of life itself. The print is both a constituent detail in his composition, and its
own composition providing a partial glimpse of a larger scene. In the print’s simultaneous depiction of the supposedly every day and its status as a product of a national human culture, Wright’s homes act almost as fractals of a self-contained spirit of life—both living in themselves and containing equally alive elements within. A landscape of landscapes, each with their own scenes brimming with activity. Taken further, this new life of architecture assumes there is a reinstatement of human thought in architecture. Herein lies Wright’s hopes for democracy: the new didacticism, the new cathedral so to speak, can now be divulged.

All this is not to say that Wright was the first to hang a piece of art in a house and revive the edifice, as it were. However, what Wright creates is more than just a Gesamtkunstwerk. He creates principles of architecture, taken largely from nature, a counterpart of humanity, to integrate humans more fully with the ground on which they walk, and afford them the freedom to create for themselves a life which they find most desirable. Wright would not build in a classical style to represent democracy for the same reason he would not build in a Gothic style to represent the divine: these would be faceless copies that do not seek to embody real concepts so much as they emulate an emulation of a concept. An architecture limited by virtue of its copying can do nothing but limit individuals in their search for self-actualization just the same. He sees his architecture as severed from homogenizing academic codes and rather generated from idiosyncratic philosophical backing. This architecture based on this backing once again has something with which to instruct humanity. Principles are living, organic. Styles are dead, sedentary. Here, principles that may generate a context-dependent style are privileged above mere surface-level features of building.

The new ideology Wright breathes into his architecture is that of a built embodiment of how he understands the American identity. This architecture is as much a then-contemporary physical manifestation of the American dream as classicism was an original experiment with
standardized geometry and mathematics in structure complete with the inclusion of exciting new 
construction materials of the moment. From here, it follows to reconcile with the didactic nature 
of this new building. Wright, in typical Wrightian fashion, believed no one before him had devised 
a totally American architecture.

Taking into account the centrality of Wright’s belief that style should not be emulated, and 
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architectural education should instead consist of teaching principles, his architecture is then legible 
as didactic in its incarnation of such principles. To him, complete with his organic ideals of site 
specificity and honesty of materials used, which reflect his beautiful country’s verdant landscape, 
he is teaching the next generation of architects the principles of how to build an architecture that 
captures this identity—one that would continue this American legacy he is building. This new 
building can be typified as a sort of zombified architecture. Aligned with Hugo’s prophecy, a new 
literally undead architecture could not again subsume the other arts and thus cannot become fully 
living again. And with its built-in didacticism coupled with Wright’s fervor and ego, he of course 
wants others to take note of this direction—infected them, so to speak. In the same way it is alive 
in that its context-conscious organicism imbues it with certain living principles that can generate 
an adaptive architecture of similar values, yet stylistically distinct in its sensitivity to time, place, 
and person, so too does it almost give itself to infecting other architectures. He spreads his own 
ideas far and wide across his restored American landscape, teaching designers and clients alike 
what they need, and never hesitating to prescribe it to them himself. Additionally, he teaches the 
individual about themselves and helps them realize—both by way of their allotted democratic 
freedom and attunement with nature—their full potential as a creative, as a person. Thus completes 
the organic-democratic plugging into the framework of the broken edifice declared first by Hugo’s
*Hunchback of Notre-Dame* and later amplified by Wright in his Hull House speech. In true organic nature, this type of architecture would be living as in “not dead” and simultaneously generative of future forms in its own fertile lineage based on its set principles.

Additionally, the art holds a significant didactic function as well. If painting in the form of glass and walls, music in the form of spatially accommodated hymns, and sculpture in the form of bas-reliefs aided the cathedral’s spiritual guidance, then certainly Wright’s placement of the woodblock print adds to its didactic function as well. Some of the didacticism is part and parcel of the architecture itself. Spires and tall ceilings in the cathedral correlate to organic spatial envelopes and democratic elements in Wright homes. However, the Japanese print, being this fractal of life in harmony with nature, is perhaps another clue given to the client by Wright on how to live. The prints are to Wright produced by this impressive culture, which in his view is teaching enough about how to live one’s life in the search of something greater. Though moreover, Wright’s placing of the prints, often containing scenes of the everyday albeit idealized and from curated regions of Japan, can perhaps be read almost as an attempt to teach the client of what Wright believed to be a cultured and honest way of living. Going through the banalities of one’s quotidian existence in a living space sprinkled with woodblock prints offering a sense of splendor and authenticity, not least of which is fueled by an appreciation of nature also so common a theme in ukiyo-e prints.

**Frank Lloyd Wright & the Machine**

Part of this paradigm also relies on the machine itself. With this modern industrial technology making possible a more efficient means of construction, architecture can now in some sense contend with the mass printing of books. This symbolic gesture can be further seen almost as a polemic against the period Wright came from and the discourses with which he was directly engaged. Modernist contemporaries of Wright sought only to perhaps superficially represent the
zeitgeist of the time, utilizing aesthetics of the machine to do so. Wright preferred instead to search for something more timeless, something greater. Again, it is not as easy for an architect like Wright to envision a single design style and build forever based on that—visuality is in some way secondary to Wright, or at least not totalizing. The principle behind the design and its physical appearance takes an equal if not paramount importance. These principles of organicism and democracy in building are not frozen as Wright may have seen modernist ideas of designing by industrial means and aesthetics. They are rather one step further abstracted as they allow for a flexible application in any time period to adapt to the values of a specific society, its time, and its place. A revived and once again breathing architecture possesses this capability. It goes through a cycle of development as it evolves with a people, it is never outgrown by them and ignored. Theoretically, it would never die. In Wright’s perfect utopia, it would only change. One is left only to wonder if Wright got his wish of 15 more years to live in 1957 what shape his rebuilt United States would have taken (Wright, 1957).

Instead of letting industrial machine technology and automation wrest complete control of society and the arts with no recompence paid to architecture, Wright intends instead to use the machine as an asset rather than a further blow to the vitality of the discipline. In some sense, he is trying to save what is left of architecture and bolster its strength once again before it is fully subdued. Hence is again why this can only be a partial reinstatement of art to architecture. Wright is almost fighting fire with fire, with any inclusion of the machine (still the enemy in his case) implying, however begrudgingly, its uncompromising utility by virtue of its apparent necessity in the modern era. Indeed, there is also the Tower of Babel problem alluded to by Wright in his essay. In effect, the arts now all speak a different language, having not been under architecture’s rule for hundreds of years. Architecture is the mother tongue, the lingual ancestor from which all other
newly autonomous arts have spawned and taken their independence. And ever one to look, or at least appear as he was looking, for ways of decreasing housing costs to widen the population of those who could enjoy his democratic freedom, the machine helped too to reach this end by its cheapening of the construction process.

**The Church of Frank Lloyd Wright: A Lesson in a New Spiritualism**

Finally, the didacticism imparted by Wright into his living and liberating architecture can be extended further to include a broad and largely religiously undefined spiritualism which pervades his designs. This implicit spiritualism comes as no surprise when considering his family history of preachers and passes with Unitarianism. Indeed, as Menocal (1988) touches upon, imagery of the American dream, which Wright is in contact with insofar as it is a piece of specifically American culture, often invokes religious connotation such as “the city on the hill” and “God’s country” (p. 150). Of course, as discussed earlier, Wright’s reading of centuries-old Japanese Shinto practice elevating nature to that of divine status, similar to America’s own Romanticists, also calls for simple and unwasteful religious attitudes that play a significant role in Wright’s honest component of his organic philosophy. But Wright’s United States is in quite a different position than early Japan at the genesis of Shinto. His time and place are that of the emerging machine and misguided country with no novel identity expressed in its building.

Beyond a revival of architecture and continuing with this spiritual approach, Wright’s designs can be seen as almost inventing a new core value structure for the American people, or at least adapting a classic ideal into an architecture that has not been successfully conceived of for the nation prior. This value system erring on the religious is then assimilated into and forms the basis of the new didacticism in this architecture. Additionally, these values also go beyond the organic and democratic into a territory of general spiritualism. Coincidentally enough, in
describing the freeing of the arts from architecture’s servitude, Wright says the arts “break the yoke of the architect,” a phrase used biblically to conjure notions of slavery or service in the Lord (Wright, 1901/1992, p. 60). Against this backdrop, Wright becomes a democratic preacher for a church of his own making, so to speak, at his pulpit attempting to proselytize the American public with a new spiritual soul embedded in an architecture that gets its point across without the excess of any individual element. And surely, a spiritualism based on such fundamental and universal abstractions, such as nature, was for Wright the epitome of democratic building. But where does this spirituality leave us?

The climax of Wright’s new didacticism after reanimating the corpse of architecture can be further qualified through a Nietzschean lens. After his famous proclamation to the world in 1882 that “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him,” humankind was left to its own devices to fashion a new ethics not based fully in Christian scripture directly or indirectly in Enlightenment rationality (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 194). With God dead, Wright in effect attempts to reinvent Him in the ideology of his architecture: before anything, nature, the organic aspect of the paradigm, is to be satisfied in harmony with humanity even before humanity itself, the democratic aspect, is freed and fulfilled. In this way, Wright is somewhat of an embodiment of Nietzsche’s Übermensch, or overman, the one who takes up the reigns after God’s passing to find a new moral center. And with Wright’s teaching, we too can become the overman, a collective of individuals, and find in his architecture our own meaning and pursue it without restraint. In the cathedral, you think of God. In the home, you think of Wright, or if you are lucky, yourself.

It is not too far of a logical jump to invoke the writings of Nietzsche either, with the assumption that Wright was at least familiar with the name, though evidence points to him knowing some of the writings as well. In fact, he mentions the name on a number of occasions either in
texts, plans, or letters, such as one particularly illuminating example from 1949 in which Wright listed Nietzsche as “chief among the modern exemplars of the tradition in which he knew himself to stand” (Dahlin, 2018, p. 20). Indeed, Wright also includes Nietzsche as part of the required reading for students of his planned quintessential democratic utopia, Broadacre City.

It is only here, after the exploration of the spiritual, that Wright fully completes the analogy started by Hugo and comes full circle. Architecture was alive in the Middle Ages, with its principal didacticism present in Gothic cathedrals of the day. Then, architecture was murdered by the hand of the reproducing printing press, losing its hold over the arts along with it. Now, Wright symbolically and aesthetically redecorates the edifice with flat art, creating a new democratic value system for the American people and an architecture based on organic principles with an underlying spiritual connotation, referencing the original didactic cathedral. It was in Japan that Wright truly found America. And in the heavens in which he invented its architecture.

Conclusion

At the end of “The Art and Craft of the Machine,” Wright (1901/1992) passionately exclaims, almost shouting here, that what the machine really needs is a soul (p. 69). If the machine that is the city has a soul, given to it by the ideal expression implicit in art, the human individual is then allowed to find and realize the true potential of their own soul. This will save architecture, this will save the machine, this will save humanity from it and with it. Though it remains to be seen to what degree Wright was directly influenced by Nietzsche’s ideas, through nearly worshipping nature in pursuit of freedom for (ideally) every individual, his architecture proposes an antidote to nihilism and this moral curse of modernity. The machine becomes the god-maker, and the actualized individual its rightful master. Questions linger still about how Wright’s ideas presented in this essay could potentially relate to more contemporary discourses around the
machine (now, the computer) with theorists like Greg Lynn and Manuel DeLanda at the hypothetical fore. How does the generative organic mesh with something so inorganic in its generation? Especially considering the capabilities of today’s mechanization to mass produce prefabricated construction elements more efficiently than ever, and even the role of promising 3D printing technology or artificial intelligence tools in this discussion, the democratic dialogue is certainly still cause for conversation.

Finally, fundamental questions linger about whether Hugo’s prophecy was truly at play in Wright’s revival, or if indeed Wright sought to surpass this soothsaying. Though architecture never again became the art, Wright’s architecture certainly feels quite alive, perhaps even surpassing its vitality during pre-press architecture times: It is novel, principle-based design that aims to speak and teach architects and the public alike; it simultaneously respects and incorporates natural contexts; it contains ancillary fractals of life in the form of woodblock prints; and it goes even further to propose an entire new universal value structure for humanity based on the one constant of nature. One that is timeless and continuously relevant with respect to time and place. Admittedly, it can likely never fully subjugate the arts once again, but perhaps in the same way it arrests the machine for its own profit, so too can Wright’s architecture be seen as doing what it can with the arts through its proof of concept in the woodblock print. This then may allow the building art to be at least alive to the same extent as pre-press architecture, just as a different presentation. It is open to interpretation whether or to what degree we have achieved Wright’s goals in architecture—in life—in the present day; and up to anticipation, in the event that we have not, if we ever will.
References


