



Frank Lloyd Wright's vision of organic architecture

by Bruce Giffin

Handmade houses and organic architecture are the things that drew me into becoming a builder twenty-nine years ago. I was seventeen and travelling across the country when I stopped in northern Idaho to visit Ed Kienholz, a father figure in my life. My five-day visit turned into five months as we dismantled four old log homes hidden high up in the mountains and rebuilt them on his lakeside property. We kept the old log walls (the foundations, floors, lofts, roofs and bigger windows were new), yet the four homes felt handmade and unique. Each log had originally been hewn out of nearby timber by pioneer families—each showing their own distinct style of joinery and workmanship. (One was particularly crude, and a hundred years later the urgency with which that family had worked to put a roof over their heads prior to winter arriving could still be felt.) Our four homes became a blend of old and new; they felt honest and true, and people appreciated being in them when they were finished.

That blended sense of accomplishment, craftsmanship, creativity and the utilization of local materials was organic architecture—only I didn't know it. Frank Lloyd Wright coined the term in the 1930s to describe a new way of viewing architecture: a vision that

neither reflected traditional style nor the emerging International style.

Wright's vision of organic architecture acknowledged and paid respect to the building site. He designed structures so that the people who occupied them were aware of the setting and were a part of the environment. He utilized local materials and quality workmanship in his designs, and what was ultimately built became a statement of the shared values of the builder, client and architect.

"Green" building technology and techniques were not added to Wright's equation until the 1970s. The ideas of using low VOC (volatile organic compounds) paints, photovoltaic solar panels for electricity, sustainably harvested lumber and recycled building materials all evolved over the last thirty years as "new age" builders began to look at incorporating alternative materials and products into building projects. Now, many of those once alternative strategies are incorporated into mainstream homes.

While today's organic architecture incorporates green building techniques, simply building green doesn't equal organic architecture. What's missing is the human element—that spiritual quality of designing a home and building it in such a way that we are aware of and celebrate the environment

that we are living in. Good architects capture that element as Wright certainly did in his design of Fallingwater: a stunning and timeless contemporary custom home that was built over a waterfall in the woods of south western Pennsylvania in 1938. (Fallingwater is probably America's best known architectural icon of a truly custom home. The image of its cantilevered levels projecting out from gigantic stones has influenced generations of American architects and builders as a great masterpiece.)

I was given an in-depth tour of Fallingwater recently, and while there are a few things that have not aged well, overall it is still a powerful example of organic architecture.

What works is its setting and the sense of arrival you get. The home is hidden until you turn a corner in the lane and then, across the underlit bridge, it appears. A light trellis of cast concrete from the house to the vertical stone ledge provides the first physical connection. From the entry foyer Wright captured two primary views across the living room: up and down the creek; you know where you are and yet, you're pulled to the windows to see more. There is a sense of place.

Throughout the home, the attention to detail is extraordinary: across the floor, highly polished and waxed local sandstone extends through the house to the cantilevered patios and terraces, making the indoor-outdoor connection seamless; a terrarium of horizontal glass panels rolls at the touch of a hand, revealing a set of seemingly floating stairs leading down into the creek's waters; a cool wet breeze from the creek fills the space, while across the room a massive stone fireplace built around one of the creek's boulders beckons you to light a fire—a great contrast of water and fire.

I could empathize with Albert Hall, the builder, knowing the struggles, problems and dilemmas he worked out in executing Wright's vision (under the watchful eyes of Wright's project architects), yet it was a success. Everywhere you go in the house there are little touches, views to the exterior, intrusion of boulders—natural building products incorporated to make you aware of the environment you are in.

Fallingwater exists today as a message to pay attention to what's around you when you choose to build. In following an 'organic' approach, you too can create places where people experience a life fully lived.

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