

Biography of Frank Lloyd Wright

Frank Lloyd Wright was born in Richland Center, Wisconsin, on June 8, 1867, and died in Phoenix, Arizona, on April 9, 1959, at the age of 91.

Wright's father and mother divorced in 1885 and Wright never saw his father again. To help support the family, Wright worked for Allan Conover, a dean of the University of Wisconsin's department of Engineering. Wright spent two semesters studying civil engineering at the University of Wisconsin and also assisted architect Joseph Lyman Silsbee draft and supervise the construction of Unity Chapel, which still stands near Taliesin.

The Wisconsin countryside had a profound effect on Wright: "As a boy," he wrote in his autobiography, "I learned to know the ground plan of the region in every line and feature. For me now its elevation is the modeling of the hills, the weaving and fabric that clings to them, the look of it all in tender green or covered with snow or in full glow of summer that bursts into the glorious blaze of autumn. I still feel myself as much a part of it as the trees and birds and bees are, and the red barns."

In 1910, at the height of his career, Wright left his family and his practice in Oak Park, and went to Europe with Mamah Borthwick Cheney, the wife of a client. In 1911, Wright returned to the land of his ancestors and began construction of his home, Taliesin, near Spring Green, Wisconsin. There he resumed his practice and soon received a large commission for an entertainment center in Chicago called Midway Gardens. In 1913 the Japanese contacted him regarding the design of a new Tokyo hotel. The next year, 1914, while Wright was in Chicago working on Midway Gardens, an insane servant set fire to the living quarters of Taliesin, killing Mamah Cheney, her two children, and four others. Although stunned by the tragedy, Wright began immediately to rebuild Taliesin.

Soon thereafter, he met and married sculptress Miriam Noel. Wright spent approximately six years (1915-22) working on Tokyo's Imperial Hotel, acclaimed for its earthquake-proof supporting structure. It was one of few buildings that remained standing following the Kanto earthquake of 1923, which demolished much of Tokyo. Coinciding with this period, Wright began developing designs for several California residences such as the Hollyhock House and the Millard House.

Tragedy struck Wright again in 1925 when the living quarters of Taliesin were destroyed by fire, this time due an electrical problem triggered by lightning. Wright immediately began to rebuild, living for a time in Tan-y-deri, a house he had designed for his sister Jane Porter on what is now the Taliesin property.

In 1928, Wright married Olga Lazovich (known as Olgivanna), daughter of the Chief Justice of Montenegro. With few architectural commissions coming his way, Wright turned to writing and lecturing which introduced him to a larger national audience. During the Great Depression, with almost no architectural commissions coming his way, Wright and his wife founded an architectural apprenticeship program at Taliesin. The school was known as the "Taliesin Fellowship." It was established to provide a total learning environment, integrating all aspects of the apprentices' lives in order to produce responsible, creative and cultured human beings. Apprentices were to gain experience not only in architecture but also in construction, farming, gardening and cooking, and the study of nature, music, art and dance.

Wright was at this time considered a great architect, but one whose time had come and gone. In 1936, Wright proved this sentiment wrong and went on to stage a remarkable comeback with several important commissions: The *SC Johnson Wax Administration Building* in Racine, Wisconsin; *Fallingwater* in rural Pennsylvania (designed in 1935 but built in 1936); *Jacobs I* (a functional yet inexpensive home, the first executed "Usonian" house); and *Wingspread* near Racine, Wisconsin, a residence for Herbert F. Johnson of the Johnson Wax company.

In 1937, Wright decided he wanted a more permanent winter residence in Arizona and he acquired several hundred acres of raw, rugged desert at the foothills of the McDowell Mountains in Scottsdale, Arizona. Here he and the Taliesin Fellowship began the construction of Taliesin West as a "Desert Camp" where they planned to live each winter to escape the harsh Wisconsin weather. Taliesin West, as conceived by Wright, was to be a bold new endeavor for desert living-- "a look over the rim of the world," in the architect's own words. Taliesin West would serve as Wright's architectural laboratory for more than 20 years.

During these years Wright also began the first of many versions of his Monona Terrace Civic Center for Madison, Wisconsin.

In the last decades of his career Wright received many awards, titles, medals and citations. In 1955, the University of Wisconsin conferred an honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts degree on Wright. Upon receipt of the degree, Wright returned to Taliesin and began to work on a thesis called "The Eternal Law," which he submitted to the president of the university.

Ground was broken for the Guggenheim Museum in 1956 - a project that Wright had worked on from 1943, when he received the commission, to the end of his life. Although the majority of Wright's work during his lifetime had been for residential designs, 1957 marked a change. That year, 59 new projects came into his studio - 35 of which were for public buildings. Wright also designed a state capitol building for Arizona and a house for Marilyn Monroe, neither of which were built.

And finally, in this whirlwind year, at age 90, Wright produced another book, "A Testament" in which he, according to Archivist Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, made "his final statement concerning the place of his work and his art in the 20th century." Of the more than 1,100 projects Wright had designed during his lifetime, nearly one-third were created during the last decade of his life.

Wright had an astounding capacity for self-renewal and was tireless in his efforts to create an architecture that was truly American. Through his work, his writings, and the hundreds of apprentice architects that trained at his side his ideas have been spread throughout the world.

Biography Courtesy of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation © 2010, Scottsdale, Arizona.