

THE PRAIRIE YEARS 1899–1910

WITH THE WORK OF ADLER AND SULLIVAN, a prominent Chicago firm at the end of the nineteenth century, a new architecture was being built in the Middle West, no longer based on classical examples, but founded on new design and engineering principles. Sullivan gave the skyscraper an aesthetic expression it never had before.

Until Sullivan the tall building was little more than a piling up of masonry boxes on a cast-iron or steel frame. Sullivan accentuated the sense of verticality, the long lean lines extending from ground to cornice, emphasizing this now remarkable and new characteristic: height. Adler's engineering, especially his intuitive knowledge of architectural acoustics, resulted in some of the best opera houses and concert halls yet built. But their work—and thus their innovations—was confined to commercial projects. While Frank Lloyd Wright was in their employ, from 1887 to 1893, they only accepted residential designs to accommodate a commercial client or a friend who wanted a house, and those commissions they turned over to the young Wright.

When he started his own practice, Wright sought to create a new architecture for residential designs springing from the work he had been doing with Adler and Sullivan. Although the Winslow house was his first independent commission, on a photograph of this house he wrote in 1950, "First house design under own name: 1893. Previously, Charnley House, Astor St. Chicago. Harlan House first building designed while with Adler and Sullivan that was as I would have it. Harlan house may be said to be beginning of my own practice."¹

Within six years of opening his own office, Wright had developed a new architecture that changed the face of residential design and created new patterns for living. These revolutionary designs—soon widely imitated in what would become known as the "prairie style"²—have today made the dozens of Wright homes in Oak Park and neighboring areas the destination of thousands of architectural enthusiasts. When Wright's "prairie" designs were first published by the German Ernst Wasmuth in 1910 in the portfolio *Ausgeführte Bauten und Entwürfe von Frank Lloyd Wright*, the influence of these early buildings moved beyond the boundaries of the suburbs of Chicago to the capitals of Europe.

Wright was born on the Midwest prairie—in a small town in southwestern Wisconsin on June 8, 1867. He later moved with his family to Madison, the more urbane capital of Wisconsin, but still spent his summers on the farm of his uncle James, near Spring Green, Wisconsin. In 1887 Wright moved to Chicago for two years. But settling in the suburb of Oak Park in 1889, he once again took up life on the Midwest prairie. As he recalled in July 1936:

I loved the prairie by instinct as, itself, a great simplicity; the trees, flowers, and sky were thrilling by contrast. And I saw that a little of height on the prairie was enough to look like much more. Notice how every detail as to height becomes intensely significant and how breadths all fall short.³

The houses around him, however, appeared to Wright to be unsympathetic to their region: jumbles of tall, pointed roofs and narrow, threatening chimneys. Natural materials were treated unsympathetically: wood and shingles were painted, stone and brick plastered over. Inside, small rooms were cut up like so many boxes and displayed even more idiosyncratic uses of paint and wallpaper. Windows were small holes cut into the walls. Everything about these houses seemed confined and constricted.

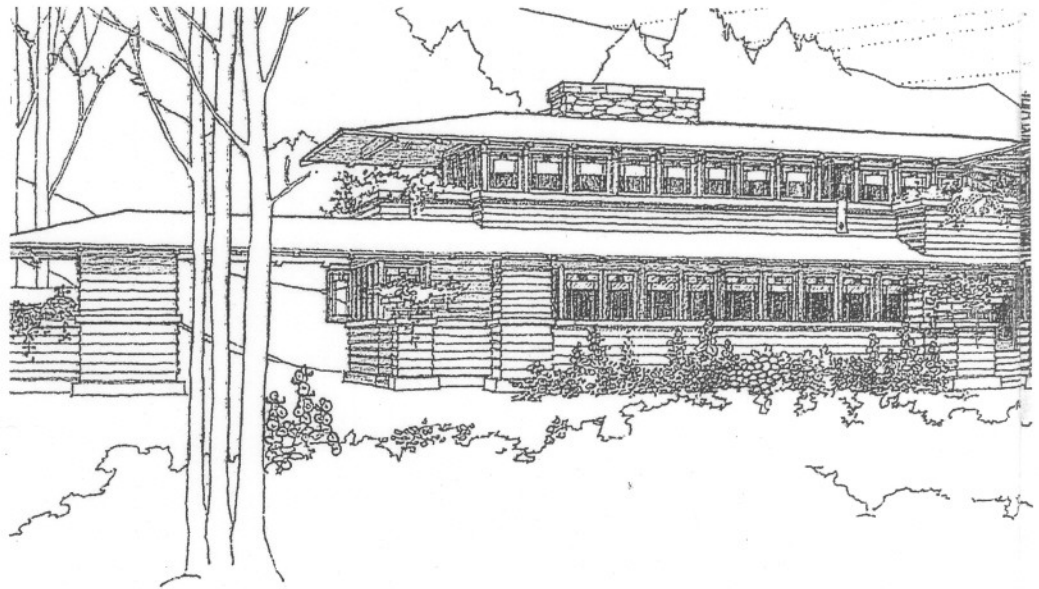
In seeking to create a new language in domestic architecture, Wright took the prairie as his thesis. He wanted an architecture of long, low lines, which he argued was more desirable on the prairie. He eliminated the attic and basement and made his rooflines quiet and graceful, designing wide and generous masonry masses to contain fireplaces and flues for heating. The walls of the first floor of the building rose directly from a stylobate, or water table. This effected a very clear, clean outline of the house on its site, elevated the living quarters above the ground level, and negated the need for the usual bank of plants and shrubs to conceal the normal basement walls. Wright later elucidated his thoughts on prairie architecture:

An idea (probably rooted deep in instinct) that shelter should be the essential look of any dwelling, put the low spreading roof, flat or hipped or low-gabled with generously projecting eaves, over the whole. I began to see a building primarily not as a cave but as broad shelter in the open, related to vista; vista without and vista within. You may see in these various feelings all taking the same direction that I was born an American, child of the ground and of space, welcoming spaciousness as a modern human need, as well as learning to see it as the natural human opportunity. The farm had no negligible share in developing this sense of things in me, I am sure.⁴

I had an idea (it still seems to be my own) that planes parallel to the earth in buildings identify themselves with the ground, do most to make the buildings belong to the ground. At any rate, independently I perceived this fact and put it to work. I had an idea that every house in that low region should begin on the ground, not in it as they then began, with damp cellars. This feeling became an idea also; eliminated the basement. I devised one at ground level. And the feeling that the house should look as though it began there at the ground put a projecting base course as a visible edge to this foundation where, as a platform, it was evident preparation for the building itself and welded the structure to the ground.⁵

The types of floor plans of the prairie houses vary with the sites and the clients' needs. There was no set formula at work, but rather an individual response to each situation. Wright did, however, make a concerted effort to abolish the sense of the house being a "box," what he later in life referred to as "the destruction of the box in architecture." This meant that rooms would flow into each other by the elimination of unnecessary walls and doors, that light and air would come in by way of generous glass areas, and that the dwelling would open onto the landscape.

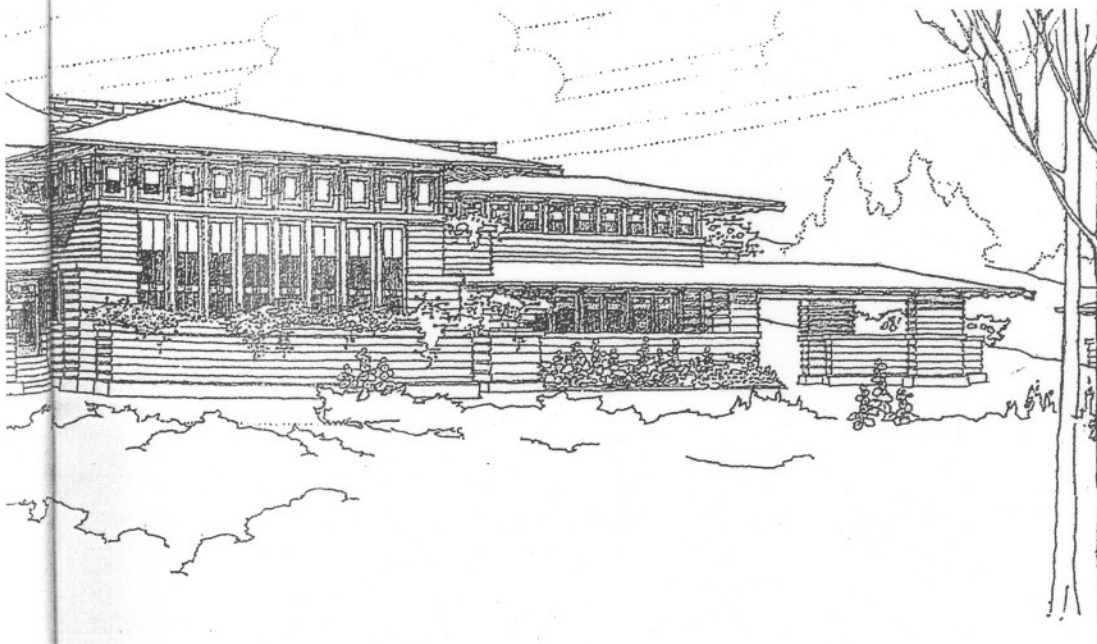
Windows were no longer treated as individual holes cut into the walls, but grouped together as bands of light. On ground level, or opening to a terrace, were French doors. On the upper stories windows were treated as continuous bands. He abhorred the traditional double-hung—or what he called "guillotine"—window, and he revised the European casement from windows that swing in to ones that swing out. He achieved a complete opening of the window space, usually opening under the soffit overhang, and extended the roof three to four feet beyond the window wall to protect the open swinging sash. He later recollected that many an early client would not accept his casement



windows—and the commission usually ended at that point.

Wright's prairie houses, for the most part, did not enjoy dramatic sites. They were built in sedate, suburban regions. But by the use of extending terraces, some open, some roofed over, Wright was able to let the walls of the interior rooms reach out to engulf gardens and plantings, to make the connection between interior and exterior more obvious, and therefore more pleasurable, than it had ever been. He recalled his native-inspired philosophy in 1955:

In considering the various forms and types of these structures, the fact that nearly all were buildings for our vast Western prairie should be borne in mind; the great rolling prairies where every detail of elevation becomes exaggerated; every tree towers above the great calm plains of flowered surfaces as the plain lies serene beneath a wonderful unlimited sweep of sky. The natural tendency of every ill-considered thing on the prairie is to detach itself and stick out like a sore thumb in surroundings by nature perfectly quiet. All unnecessary heights have for that reason and for other reasons economic been eliminated, and more intimate relation with outdoor environment sought to compensate for loss of height.⁶



CLUBHOUSE FOR THE COMO ORCHARD COMMUNITY. PLATE FROM PORTFOLIO OF WRIGHT'S DRAWINGS
PUBLISHED BY ERNST WASMUTH, BERLIN, 1910.