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**At Home in the World —
the Architecture and Life
of Frank Lloyd Wright***

This article shows how the enduring admiration people have for the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) is explained by this principle of Aesthetic Realism, stated by the founder of this philosophy, the great American poet and critic, Eli Siegel: “All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.”

Scholars have written of Wright’s contradictions: his charm and his arrogance, the warmth of his interior designs and his coldness to persons near to him. The authors show that like people everywhere, Wright was trying in his life to put together opposites in himself, including the same opposites he was able to compose magnificently in his best architectural work: most particularly, the opposites of inside and outside, “the snug and exterior.” Two early examples discussed are his 1893 Gale House and the Heurtley House of 1902.

Wright’s love of nature led to his concept of organic architecture: buildings inspired by, and at one with, their environment. A masterful example discussed in detail is his 1935 house design Fallingwater, built dramatically above a waterfall. The authors also show how two works from very different points in Wright’s long career — the 1904 Unity Temple, and the

**Мир как собственный дом —
архитектура и жизнь
Фрэнка Ллойда Райта****

В данной статье непреходящее восхищение людей архитектурой Фрэнка Ллойда Райта (1867–1959) объясняется принципом эстетического реализма, сформулированным его основателем, великим американским поэтом и критиком Эли Сигелем: «Вся красота — это создание противоположностей, а создание противоположностей — это то, к чему мы стремимся в самих себе».

Учёные писали о противоречивой натуре Райта: его обаянии и высокомерии, теплоте его интерьеров и его холодности к близким людям. Авторы показывают: как и всё вокруг, Райт в своей жизни пытался объединить противоположности, включая и те, которые смог великолепно скомпоновать в своих лучших архитектурных творениях: в частности, противоположности внутреннего и внешнего, «уютта и экстерьера». Обсуждаются два ранних примера: его Гейл-хаус (1893) и Хертли-хаус (1902). Любовь Райта к природе привела его к концепции органической архитектуры: зданий, вдохновлённых окружающей средой и слитых с нею. Яркий пример, который подробно обсуждается, — возвышающийся над водопадом дом

* This article is adapted from the author’s popular talk series Architecture and You. Mr. Romeo and Mr. Laurin are grateful to continue their study of Aesthetic Realism in professional classes taught by Chairman of Education Ellen Reiss.

** Эта статья — адаптация популярной серии авторских бесед «Архитектура и ты». Г-н Ромео и г-н Лаурен выражают благодарность за возможность продолжения изучения эстетического реализма в профессиональных классах под руководством Эллиен Рисс.

Guggenheim Museum, completed in 1960 — are opportunities for people to know ourselves better now. The explanation lies in the beautiful way each structure puts opposites together.

Fallingwater, построенный в 1935 году. Авторы также показывают, что две работы из разных этапов длительной карьеры Райта — Храм Единства (1904) и Музей Гуггенхайма, завершённый в 1960 году, — дают людям возможность лучше познать себя. Объяснение кроется в его восхитительном умении находить способы объединения противоположностей в одной структуре.

Keywords:

Frank Lloyd Wright, Architecture, Biography, Aesthetic Realism, Eli Siegel, Beauty, Love, Fallingwater, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Ключевые слова:

Франк Ллойд Райт, архитектура, биография, эстетический реализм, Эли Сигель, красота, любовь, Фаллингвотер, Музей Соломона Гуггенхайма.

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Frank Lloyd Wright

“His is the one name recognized even by people who know nothing about architecture,” writes Regina Cole in a recent article on Forbes.com. “Though he died in 1959, Wright is still the architect who is referenced more than any other, living or dead. ... [His] stature only grows” [1]. Why is this true? We believe the enduring popularity of America’s greatest architect and the large meaning his life and work have for people today are explained by Aesthetic Realism, the philosophy founded by the eminent poet and critic Eli Siegel.

Aesthetic Realism is based on a principle that provides the means of looking at art and life, and their relation, which is new, practical, and which revolutionized our lives and our work as architects. “All beauty is a making one of opposites,” stated Mr. Siegel, “and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves” [11, p. 7]. We have seen this principle is true about, definitively explains, the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, and it also provides fresh insight into Wright’s questions as an individual yet representative self, a person who was hoping to make sense of opposites

in himself which he succeeded in composing, often magnificently, in his designs.

We begin with the biggest opposites people are dealing with all the time...

Self and World, Personal and Impersonal

In *Self and World, An Explanation of Aesthetic Realism*, Eli Siegel writes:

We all of us start with a here, ever so snug and ever so immediate. And this here is surrounded strangely, endlessly, by a there. We are always meeting this there: in other words, we are always meeting what is not ourselves, and we have to do something about it. We have to be ourselves, and give to this great and diversified there, which is not ourselves, what it deserves. This means we have to be personal and impersonal, snug and exterior. [12, p. 91]

We think what has affected many people about the buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright has to do with the way he puts together these opposites: the snug and exterior, inside and outside. He writes of how he came to feel the outer wall of a house should not just be “the side of a box” but should help “to bring the outside world into the house and let the inside of the house go outside.” [16, p. 166]



*Fig. 1. Fallingwater, glass meeting wall
[public domain — Historic American Building Survey]*

(See fig. 1) And in his own first home built in Oak Park, Illinois, he even allowed a tree to grow within the house and through the roof, in spite of the consequences, which included more of the outside coming in than one would want!

One of the techniques Wright used was to make the transition from the outside to the inside of his buildings very dramatic. For instance, in his Unity Temple, after you walk from the low, dark entrance passageway, you are surprised and thrilled by the bright and spacious sanctuary within. (See figures 8 & 9) And in his design known as Fallingwater, perhaps the most famous residence of the

20th century, the “personal and impersonal, the snug and exterior” are brought together in another way: the living room has both a cozy fireplace and a broad expanse of glass above built-in seating, providing expansive views of its beautiful surroundings. (See fig. 19)

Now these architectural elements have been written about a great deal, but we’re saying something new: that Frank Lloyd Wright was dealing, in all of his designs, with a problem had by everyone. “The inner life of a person is deeply about whether one likes oneself or not,” wrote Eli Siegel [12, p. 232], and he showed that true self-esteem comes from honestly trying to like the *outside* world

and “give to this great and diversified *there*, which is not ourselves, what it deserves.” We feel that Wright’s inward debates and self-questioning were deeper than any of his biographers recognized, and so was his desire to like the world and give it new, expressive form in his architecture.

We can see Wright dealing with these opposites of the snug and exterior in his earliest works: the homes he designed for his Oak Park neighborhood, many of which can still be seen there. In the 1890s, when most homes were tall and often heavily ornamented in the popular Victorian style, Wright was among a group of Midwest designers that came to be known as the Prairie School of Architecture because their work was influenced by the low, horizontal line of the American prairie. These architects include Joseph Silsbee and Louis Sullivan, with whom Wright apprenticed.

Walking through Oak Park today is like walking through a Frank Lloyd Wright museum, and it’s an opportunity to see how his thinking progressed from rather traditional looking houses that were largely focused inward, to ones that are increasingly open and more horizontal. An example of the first is the **Walter Gale House** of 1893, designed while he was still working for Louis Sullivan. (See fig. 2) While it has a conventional, steeply sloped gable roof, you can see him experimenting with simple, strong geometry. For instance, he takes individual square windows and joins them together to create a continuous horizontal band.

The **Heurtley House** was built nine years later, in 1902, and we can see how far Wright has come from the Gale House. (See fig. 3) The dark band of windows now extends across the entire façade, making the roof—which is no longer a high gable but a low-profile hip roof with broad overhangs—seem to hover effortlessly above, and the horizontal emphasis is continued by that low front wall and even the brick coursing.

Wright was a tremendous energy, designing not only homes, but also book covers, murals, textiles, furniture, stained glass windows! His

designs, which are more popular than ever, were inspired by the beauty of nature he saw growing up in Wisconsin—the prairie, the sumac and hollyhock plants. His geometric abstractions of these forms show how deeply he was affected by the world around him, and he took it in and made it part of himself, so that these designs are recognized today as distinctly his.

Wright’s love and respect for nature led him to develop his concept of organic architecture—epitomized by Fallingwater, which we will discuss later—of designing buildings as if they grew from the earth. He wanted them to work together with, not take over, their surroundings. He once wrote: “Each material has its own message, its own song.” Wood, for instance, should never be “encased in an armor of paint” [7, p. 485].

Meanwhile, recognizing and respecting the value of other *people*, Wright found more difficult. He seldom admitted learning anything from other architects and wrote disparagingly, “The Parthenon is an architectural fraud,” and “the domes used by Michelangelo and Christopher Wren are all false as hell” [2, p. 302].

Arrogant statements like these—and sadly, he made many of them—show his unsureness. His flamboyance has been romanticized and recent biographies by Brendon Gill and Ada Louise Huxtable catalog his dishonesty and injustice to other architects. Yet with all the writing about him, what he was going after has not been understood. He was trying to answer a question that Aesthetic Realism sees as crucial in the life of every person who has ever lived, that is...

Is the World to be Respected or Scorned?

He was born Frank Lincoln Wright in 1867 in the farming town of Richland Center, Wisconsin, the son of William Wright, an accomplished musician, lawyer, and preacher, and Anna Lloyd Jones, a teacher who had studied the ideas of German educator Friedrich Froebel.



Fig. 2. Walter Gale House [Teemu008, wikimedia]



Fig. 3. Arthur B. Heurtley House [Aude, wikimedia]

In his autobiography Wright says that the geometric shapes of the Froebel building blocks he played with as a child were always in his mind whenever he designed. He wrote of listening to his father playing Beethoven or reciting Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven." This shows a respect and affection for his father. But he also wrote this, showing there was trouble in the Wright household, and as he often did, he refers to himself in the third person, as the "son":

After their son was born something happened between the mother and father. ... Anna's extraordinary devotion to the child disconcerted the father. ... The boy, she said, was to build beautiful buildings. ... Before he was born, she said she intended him to be an Architect [16, p. 31].

To say that his mother's "extraordinary devotion to the child disconcerted the father," is to make something that was a cause of resentment and pain, mild and patronizing. Did young Frank respect his mother for her "extraordinary devotion"? Did he feel he deserved it? In his book *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright*, Brendan Gill points out that Wright's autobiography "glorified mother and son and tended to diminish the father" [5, p. 26].

The desire to get a false importance for oneself by diminishing another person — whether near to us or a stranger — is, Aesthetic Realism explains, contempt, and as the Wright household shows, it's terrifically hurtful. When Wright was 18 his father divorced his mother and left their home. Even before the divorce, however, Wright had a tendency to retreat into a world of his own. Author Harvey Einbinder writes: "He preferred spending hours in his attic room. A vertical hand-painted sign on the door outside announced SANCTUM SANCTORUM accompanied by a stern warning: KEEP OUT" [2, p. 14].

Like many young men, I, Anthony Romeo, also had a sanctuary. Mine was in the basement of our Long Island home, and I maintained it long after my parent's divorce when I was 12. Some years later in an

Aesthetic Realism consultation,¹ I was asked whether I used the arguments between my mother and father to justify my feeling that the world was mean and didn't amount to much. I said I had, and my consultants explained:

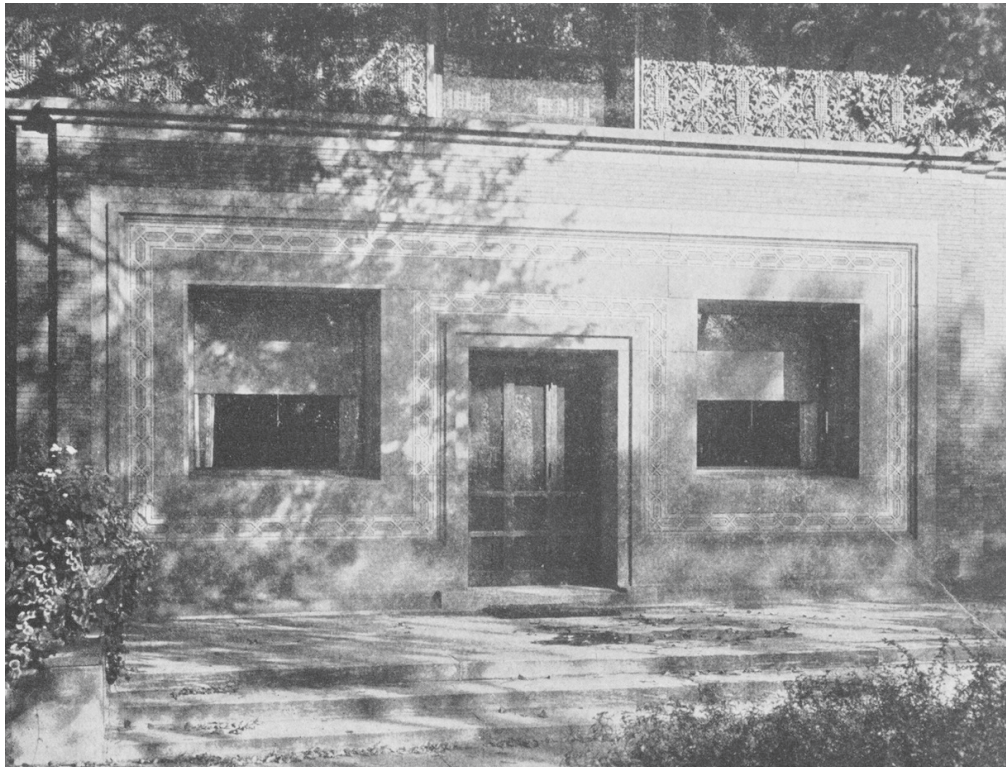
Most people don't see the world as too friendly a place, but Aesthetic Realism says the structure of reality can be seen in such a way that a person can like himself and also like the world. ... Your interest in architecture comes from a desire to see that the world has a structure that makes sense.

Studying the meaning of this changed my life deeply. I believe Frank Lloyd Wright felt — however unconsciously — that architecture stood for a world that made sense. As artist, his purpose was to respect and enhance rather than denigrate. We see this in the home he designed in 1893 for the publisher **William Winslow** in River Forest, Illinois. (See fig. 4) It honors the exterior — with a foliage motif carved into the dark green stone, relating the house to the neighboring trees; and it also honors the interior — with that snug hearth or fireplace, framed by a colonnade and located at the center of the house, something that became a hallmark of his residential designs. (See fig. 5)

Art & Life in the Wright Home

In 1889, Wright married Catherine Lee Tobin, and soon designed and built the Oak Park home where they would live for the next 20 years, with — eventually — their six children. He opened his architectural practice here too, and the home became a laboratory where he experimented. (See fig. 6) Its small library is built entirely on the plan of an octagon, with a roof — square in plan — projecting out over the corner windows. This is where he met clients and reviewed plans, spreading out the drawings on a table on which light shines from the windows above.

The playroom — which was also used for entertaining — was a barrel-vaulted space flanked by long, low window seats scaled



*Fig. 4. Winslow House, foliage motif (top)
[public domain — Historic American Building Survey]*



*Fig. 5. Winslow House, hearth
[public domain — Historic American Building Survey]*



Fig. 6. F.L. Wright Home & Studio [wikimedia]

for children. But, like many fathers, Wright found it easier to provide a beautiful home for his children than to understand them. And they, like many children who feel their fathers are remote, were not always content to stay in the playroom. His son John described how they interrupted their father's business calls, broke the custom designed furniture, found a hidden stairway to the balcony of Wright's studio, and threw things over the railings on his visitors. In his autobiography Wright asks:

Is it a quality? Fatherhood? If so, I seemed born without it. And yet a building was a child. I have had the father-feeling, I am sure, when coming back after a long time to one of my buildings. That must be the true feeling of fatherhood. But I never had it for my children [16, p. 135].

He is courageous in saying this, but it troubled him. There was also trouble between Frank and his wife, Catherine. His autobiography continues, again in the third person: "Young husband more interested in the house than in his young bride, so the young wife said to him again and again" [16, p. 131].

One of the things that makes for pain in marriage is that we don't see the person we're close to in a way that's both personal and impersonal; we see her or him just personally — as belonging to us, and we think we know all about them. We also can see a spouse with a cool impersonality. When Wright looked at the sumac plant, he saw it as having the mystery and meaning of the world. He did not see his wife that way. Although he designed lovely dresses for her, with patterns that echoed the stained glass of their home, he wasn't eager to search within the rooms of her mind — to use a metaphor that Robert Browning, the poet, used in relation to his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

In an Aesthetic Realism lesson² I, Anthony Romeo, was privileged to have with Mr. Siegel in 1978, he asked me what a woman and a building have in common. I said I didn't know. "They both have depth and dimension," Mr. Siegel said, and he encouraged me to want to know a woman's mind. This made possible my marriage to Karen Van Outryve, who is a poet, an Aesthetic Realism consultant, and my dear wife of 38 years.



Fig. 7. Unity Temple [Brian Crawford, wikimedia]

Inside & Outside

These opposites are as important as any in the life and work of Frank Lloyd Wright. While designing **Unity Temple** in 1904, Wright said he “discovered something tremendously important”: *What was it? That the reality of a building does not consist in the walls and the roof of that structure, but in the space in here to be lived in—there was the reality.*³

The reality of a building, just like the reality of everything else, is *both* inside and outside. But the exterior of Unity Temple is purposefully made less dramatic, and many architectural critics of the time criticized it as unfit for a house of worship, saying it looked more like a Mayan fortress. (See fig 7) In his catalog of Wright’s buildings, William Allin Storrer explains: “With its exposed pebble surface, the Unity monolith introduced reinforced-concrete construction to America on a grand scale. Its use was dictated in part by the need to keep costs of the structure low” [13]. The exterior does seem austere, with its thick monolithic concrete walls, but the ochre color of the stone aggregate Wright used has the concrete seem warmer.



Fig. 8. Unity Temple, view from passageway to sanctuary [James Caulfield]



Fig. 9. Unity Temple, sanctuary [James Caulfield]

What makes Unity Temple most distinctive though, is how the beauty of the interior unfolds as you enter. First, you go through the entry and a series of narrow passageways made purposely low and dark. Walking further you are forced to make a few right angle turns. (see fig. 8) Then, in sudden contrast to this constricted space you enter the sanctuary, which is bathed in warm sunlight from a large central skylight and perimeter clerestory windows, reconnecting us once again with the outdoors. Sitting in the pews within this relatively small structure, you have an amazing sense of grandeur, spaciousness at one with warmth and intimacy. You are both “snug and exterior.”

In Frank Lloyd Wright, as in most people, there was a fight between what he showed outwardly and what he felt inside. This is one of the reasons that Brendan Gill titled his biography *Many Masks*. Wright needed to know that the depths of himself could be at one with space and brightness as is true of Unity Temple and many of his best designs.

Continuity and Change in an Iconic New York Building

For the rest of his 91 years, Frank Wright went on to design many more works of great originality and variety: from the still modern-looking 1908 **Robie House** in Chicago (see fig. 10); to the **S. C. Johnson Wax Building** in Racine, Wisconsin, whose office interior is as beautiful today as when it was built in 1938 — including the original Wright-designed desks (see fig. 11); from the **Marin County Civic Center** in California, completed after his death in 1960; to the campus plan and several buildings he designed in the 1950s for **Florida Southern College** in Lakeville, Florida; from **Taliesin West**, his winter home and studio built in the Arizona desert in 1937 (see fig. 12); to what he called **Usonian homes** — beautifully designed yet affordable middle-class residences — that inspired Usonia, a housing development in Pleasantville, NY.



Fig. 10. Robie House [Sailko, wikimedia]



*Fig. 11. Johnson Wax Building interior
[Carol M. Highsmith, wikimedia]*



Fig. 12. Taliesin West [Greg O'Beirne, wikimedia]



*Fig. 13. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
[Ajay Suresh, wikimedia]*

In the late 1940s, Wright was commissioned by a New York City art collector to create a museum for his important collection of 20th century abstract art. For the **Guggenheim Museum** — originally known as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective

Paintings, Wright conceived perhaps the closest thing to a non-objective building. Lacking straight walls, right angles, even flat floors in the main gallery, its design is based on the form of a spiral. (See fig. 13)



Fig. 14. Guggenheim Museum rotunda & dome
[VillageHero, wikipedia]

This project—which occupied Wright for the rest of his life—proved to be one of his most controversial designs. It was criticized by some for the audacious curves of its exterior that were seen as an affront to its dignified 5th Avenue neighbors, for its unusual way of displaying paintings, and even for competing with the art that Wright was commissioned to show to its best advantage. But the building is also loved, including as an inspirational space for artists who, in recent years, have created installation art works specifically for it.

The building's mid-block entrance on Fifth Avenue is surprisingly inconspicuous, and once inside visitors pass through a low, rather small glass lobby, that evokes a temporary feeling of tightness and compression—related to Unity Temple—as a dramatic contrast to the main, huge, glowing space which explodes into view. (See fig. 14)



15. Guggenheim Museum, view across rotunda, structural ribs
[Antony-22, wikipedia]

Straight ahead, on the east side of this great circular room bathed in sunlight from a low-domed skylight nearly 100 feet above, we are enticed to ascend a ramp. This ramp leads to the works of art, located along the perimeter wall that—like the ramp—winds higher and higher toward the light. So the ramp serves as both circulation for museumgoers and as the main display space for the art. Opposite central to the museum's design are continuity and discontinuity, which Eli Siegel writes about in his landmark 15 Questions: "Is Beauty The Making One of Opposites?":

*Is there to be found in every work of art a certain progression, a certain indissoluble presence of relation, a design which makes for continuity?—and is there to be found, also, the discreteness, the individuality, the brokenness of things: the principle of discontinuity?*⁴

Wright himself described the Guggenheim as, "...one great space on a single continuous floor. The eye encounters no abrupt change, but is gently led and treated as if at the edge of a shore watching an unbreaking wave ... one floor flowing into another instead of the usual superimposition of stratified layers." [4] But there is discontinuity too, as the twelve concrete ribs that rise from the ground to support the ramps and skylight above, also serve to divide the circular



*Fig. 16. Fallingwater (Edgar Kaufmann House)
[aroundtheworldl.com]*

walls into smaller segments, creating mini-galleries that encourage visitors to pause and ponder. (See fig. 15)

Then there is the simultaneous continuous-discontinuous experience that's unique to

the Guggenheim: as you study one painting, you can turn around and look across the vast open space to see on the opposite wall a painting you may have admired ten minutes earlier, or on the level above that one, get a

preview of paintings you haven't yet seen. This establishes a sense of continuity — of exciting, often surprising relation — between the different works in our mind's eye.

This always makes for a thrill and it has great usefulness for ourselves. For as much as we can like the sureness and regularity of continuity in our lives — such as having a cup of coffee every morning or making the 8:30 bus everyday — we can also get into a routine that's boring and closes our minds to what's discontinuous with that routine, and very possibly something wonderful that we can miss: the morning song of a bird, the colorful print of a woman's dress on that crowded bus. The Guggenheim encourages us to be fair to what's before us, but also not to miss its relation to what else is around us.

Fallingwater: At Home in the World

We take a closer look now at **Fallingwater**, the house Frank Lloyd Wright designed for Edgar J. Kaufmann in 1935. Critic Clay Lancaster describes it as — and listen for all the opposites he points to: “*a rare compositional perfection of harmonious contrasts. ... The building is so well suited to the setting that it becomes an integral part of it. The shapes that make up the Kaufmann house are simple yet complex, sturdy yet light as air, studied yet casual, well defined yet intangible, and functional though somewhat elusive and unreal.*” [8] (See fig. 16)

Architectural historian Bruno Zevi called it “one of the greatest monuments created by human genius” [17, p. 10]. Every year thousands of people from all over the world journey to see and experience it. They come away deeply stirred, and the reason, we think, is explained by Eli Siegel in a section of his *Outline of Aesthetic Realism* titled, “The world is friendlier than you know”:

Trying to like the world on an honest basis is the most useful activity of a person. Unless one likes the world, one doesn't like oneself, and the chief reason the world is friendly is that it is the oneness of opposites which we like when we see a beautiful thing [10].

Fallingwater — through the many ways it puts reality's opposites together — has a person like the world more, feel a sense of being truly at home in the world.

In 1932 Edgar Kaufmann, owner of a department store in Pittsburgh, purchased 1,600 acres of rural property 100 miles southeast of the city, in Bear Run PA, as a vacation site for his family and store employees. He and his wife Lillian loved this rocky, heavily wooded land that had a scenic waterfall at its heart. They came to spend more time in a modest cabin built near the falls, and soon decided to build a permanent summer home.

At this time their son Edgar Jr. was working as an apprentice to Frank Lloyd Wright. He encouraged his parents to ask the famous architect to design their new home, and a visit to the site was arranged in December 1934. As frequently occurred, walking the land inspired Wright. He once wrote: “[I]n the stony bone-work of the Earth, the principles that shaped stone as it lies, or as it rises and remains to be sculptured, by winds and tide — there sleep forms and styles enough for all the ages, for all of man” [3, p. 33]. After the trip he wrote in a letter to Edgar Kaufmann Sr., “The visit to the waterfall in the woods stays with me and a domicile has taken vague shape in my mind to the music of the stream”⁵.

Incredibly, the design *remained* in his mind until the very day a few months later when Kaufmann surprised Wright with a phone call saying he had flown to Wisconsin, where the architect's office was located, and would be there in a couple of hours to see how the design of his house was progressing. After the call, Wright calmly sat at his drafting table — surrounded by anxious associates and apprentices — and proceeded to draw floor plans and sketches of a house that amazingly ended up changing very little in its final conception. The Pittsburgh businessman had pictured his home as *facing* the waterfall. Imagine his astonishment when he saw Wright's sketch showing the house seeming to hover precariously

above the falls. Kaufmann knew of Wright's reputation for being innovative, eccentric, headstrong, but this?!

The very idea of building over a waterfall CAN be questioned. Is it respectful of nature or competitive with it? Could the architect have designed a house facing the falls that would have been just as beautiful? These ARE valid questions. But we think Wright's *purpose* also had validity. "E.J.," he told Kaufmann, "I want you do live with the waterfall, not just to look at it, but for it to become an integral part of your lives"⁶.

A House that Does What We Want to Do

In Eli Siegel's preface to his book *Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana: Poems*, he wrote: "[T]he very self of a thing is its relations, its having-to-do-with other things. Whatever is in the world, whatever person, has meaning because it or he has to do with the whole universe: immeasurable and crowded reality [9, p. xi]. This idea is of great importance to people everywhere, because Aesthetic Realism explains that the outside world is the other half of ourselves, and our happiness and well-being depend on how much we want to know and welcome our relation to other people and things. The success of Fallingwater is that this is what we feel: a building with strong, unique identity because it is at one with what is around it. We once suffered — as most people have — because we saw the outside world as too different from ourselves, as an interference to be fought or managed or gone away from.

The inaccuracy and hurtfulness of this way of seeing is something that I, Anthony Romeo, learned about in the lesson I spoke of earlier. At one point Eli Siegel asked me: "Do you believe your questions are distinguished and pretty much alone?" Yes, I answered. This feeling, which many people have, is painful, but we can also cherish it because we use it to feel important, distinguished. Mr. Siegel continued with depth and kind humor: "Can you name one question no one else has?" AR: "My question about anger." ES:

"No one else has that? That's old stuff. Seneca wrote an essay on anger, *De Ira*, in the time of Nero, first century A.D. or so. There are a few statements in the Bible. What can get you most angry?" AR: "Usually it's when I don't get my way." ES: "My, that makes you distinctive! Who ever got angry because he got his own way?"

As we wrote earlier, the desire to see ourselves as unrelated to others and better than them is a form of contempt. People secretly feel their contempt is what makes them distinguished, special, unique, but we've learned contempt is the most common, unoriginal thing; it makes our lives dull and unhappy.

We see Fallingwater as a criticism of the contempt that thrives on separation and hates relation. We think one large — if unconscious — reason people love this house is because it gives them hope for their lives: it shows self and world, inside and outside, and other opposites can work together. This can be seen in many details: for instance, the way a flight of stairs gracefully joins the living room to the stream beneath it (see fig. 17); the way a trellis anchors the house to a natural rock cliff and at the same time jauntily yields to the natural growth of a tree. (See fig. 18) Doesn't this say: my purpose doesn't have to fight with yours, oh World? — we can be friendly to each other! Are stream and living room, trellis and tree more themselves; do they have greater meaning through their relation to each other? Do we want to feel that the world adds to us and we add to it, just as Fallingwater and Bear Run add to each other?

The Opposites Are the Means

Wright saw the world as friendly at Bear Run, and nature's opposites were the basis of this feeling, which he translated into architecture. About his design approach, he said:

*There in a beautiful forest was a solid, high-rock ledge rising beside a waterfall and the natural thing seemed to be to cantilever the house from that rock bank over the waterfall.*⁷



Fig. 17. Fallingwater, stair to stream [wikimedia]



Fig. 18. Fallingwater, trellis & tree [wikimedia]



*Fig. 19. Fallingwater, hearth
(foreground) & window wall (rear) [wikimedia]*



*Fig 20. Fallingwater, corner window
[Jenna Michieli, flicker public domain]*

Cantilevers are beams supported at one end only, with the other end extending outward, horizontally into space. “Wright saw the cantilever as a profoundly natural principle,” writes Donald Hoffman in his book on Fallingwater, “as in the outstretched arm, or the tree branch growing from the trunk” [6, p. 18]. The cantilevers here, built of steel-reinforced concrete poured in place and extending far out over the falls, were so extreme, engineers said he was crazy, and contractors balked at removing their temporary supports. But they were removed and the cantilevered terraces held.

Yet awesome as the cantilevers are, they would not have been truly successful if they *appeared* too heavy to the eye. They would look like they *should* fall; they would lack the necessary grace. One might think Wright would have used wood for the cantilevers — a relatively light yet strong natural material. But Wright wanted his building to capture the essence of the jutting rocks: a very heavy material that nonetheless can have a *form* that simultaneously makes for a sense of lightness. He wanted strength and grace to be more powerfully one. The success of concrete has to do with its quality of plasticity: even though it is a massive material, concrete can be given a *form* that makes for a greater sense of lightness. At Fallingwater this form is a smooth-surfaced rectilinear shape with rounded edges and painted a creamy ochre to make it appear even lighter.

Rising from the rock ledge is a solid, vertical stack of stone quarried from nearby. This stack or core is, in effect, a man-made extension of the rock ledge. Wright then has the horizontal living volumes and terraces extend outward in different orthogonal directions from the core. They imitate the rock ledges, seeming to float in space even as they are solid, heavy. At the same time, the living volumes and terraces step down the hillside in a way that’s related to the movement of water over the rocks below. (See fig. 16)

The meaning these opposite directions — vertical and horizontal — have for our lives is described by Eli Siegel in “The Aesthetic

Method in Self Conflict” — a chapter from *Self and World*:

The vertical line is a symbol to the unconscious of the self alone; the horizontal, of the self going out. Were the vertical line to become one with the horizontal line, narrowness, width, and height would exist at once [12, p. 118].

This explains what one feels observing Fallingwater rise toward the sky and spread outward at once as if to embrace the universe. Isn’t this what we hope to feel, an awareness of our individuality even as we reach out to all that out there?

I, Dale Laurin, was once like that vertical line Mr. Siegel described, someone who felt very much alone and was interested in little besides architecture. But after beginning to study Aesthetic Realism, I met a young woman, Barbara Buehler, who was a city planner. In an Aesthetic Realism lesson I was greatly fortunate to have with Eli Siegel, he asked me this crucial question: “Do you think if you saw the *depths* of yourself, you’d be rather close to the *depths* of a woman?” To my delight I came to see it was true. Like me, Barbara was also trying to put opposites together such as outside and inside — what she showed and what she felt within. I soon fell in love with her and wanted to spend the rest of my life with her — and since our marriage in 1980, I happily have.

The World Comes Inside

Many people see home as a haven from a world they see as different or unfriendly. Fallingwater is kind because even as it satisfies a person’s desire — as we wrote in the beginning — to be snug and secure, it also impels us toward the exterior, to feel at one with the outside world.

For instance, as he did in other homes we’ve discussed, Wright made a huge stone fireplace the central focus of Fallingwater’s living room. Yet even in this cozy spot, the hearth yields to a boulder that juts right up through the stone floor. Left in place at the suggestion of Kaufman, this was the family’s



favorite rock where they had picnicked for years. (See fig. 19) And in several details, Wright makes the separation between outside and inside almost indiscernible — with the way, for instance, 1) that full length band of glass above the built-in seating has it seem there's no wall there at all; 2) the corners of rooms, usually closed, have windows that open out to frame unobstructed vistas (see fig. 20); and 3) a charming circular moss garden is divided in half by a window so that it's indoors and outdoors at once.

Perhaps the most thrilling detail is the way smooth glass meets rough stone directly, without the customary vertical window framing-piece, allowing the wall to continue uninterrupted from inside to outside. (See fig. 1) This makes for a feeling of sheer exhilaration, expressed in these lines of Walt Whitman that Frank Lloyd Wright cared for:

O to realize space!

The plenteousness of all, that there are no bounds,

To emerge, and be of the sky, of the sun and moon and flying clouds, as one with them... [15].

Twenty-five years before he first visited Bear Run, Wright said:

Beauty, in its essence, is for us as mysterious as life. ... When we perceive a thing to be beautiful, it is because we instinctively recognize the rightness of the thing. This means that we have revealed to us a glimpse of something essentially of the fibre of our own nature. ...and we have a vision of harmonies not understood today, though perhaps to be tomorrow [14, p. 53].

What is it a beautiful thing has, that is also “of the fibre of our own nature”? The answer to this question is in the great Aesthetic Realism principle — stated by Eli Siegel — that we have been illustrating, “All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves” [11, p. 7].

NOTES

¹ “In consultations, a person’s individual life questions are understood and explained, through the principles of Aesthetic Realism. People find that the matters which confuse them most are made sense of at last, with cultural width, immediacy, and satisfying logic. Consultations may be had in person at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation in New York City or via telephone throughout America and abroad.” From: Aesthetic Realism Foundation Mission Statement & Description.

² “In 1941, [Eli Siegel] began to give individual Aesthetic Realism lessons to men, women, and children. ... “The resolution of conflict in self,” [he] taught, “is like the making one of opposites in art.” [H]e encouraged his students to see their own lives in relation to matters of culture: to other people in history, to poetry. ... The subjects of lessons were ... matters the person having the lesson asked about and wanted to understand..., for example, love, friendship, work, family. ... [A]s a person studied ethics, looked freshly at his or her own self-criticism, that person’s life changed profoundly and happily for the better.” Edward Green, Ph.D., “Eli Siegel. A Google Knol.”

<https://aestheticrealism.org/knol-on-eli-siegel/>

³ Ken Burns, *Frank Lloyd Wright (1998) (film: documentary, biography, history)*.

⁴ Eli Siegel, “*Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?*” originally published by the Terrain Gallery in 1955 and reprinted in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* the same year.

⁵ Frank Lloyd Wright to the Kaufmanns, ca 1935.

⁶ Frank Lloyd Wright to the Kaufmanns, ca 1935.

⁷ Frank Lloyd Wright, Hugh Downs interview, 1952. (Aired on NBC’s *Wisdom*, May 17, 1953.)

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