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The influence of Frank Lloyd Wright on the architecture of Europe

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Although I am deeply convinced of the relativity of all appreciation in art, where contemporaries or persons very near to us are concerned, yet in my opinion the figure of Frank Lloyd Wright towers so assuredly above the surrounding world, that I make bold to call him one of the very greatest of this time without fearing that a later generation will have to reject this verdict.

Of such flawless work as his, appearing admits architectural products which, in their lack of style, will have to be designated 'nineteenth-century style'; of such unity of conception in the whole and in details; of such a definite expression and straight line of development another example can hardly be given.

Whereas it is a peculiarity of our day, that even the work of the cleverest nearly always betrays how it *grew* to be such as it is, with Wright everything *is*, without being at all perceptible any mental exertion to produce. Where others are admired for the talent with which we see them master their material, I revere Wright because the process by which his work came into being, remains for me a perfect mystery.

It is no detraction from this reverence, which retained its high degree through the varying phases of my own development, when, asked to give my views on the important, even great influence of Wright on European architecture, I do not call this influence a happy one in all respects.

What happened to that influence might be compared to what occurred with the rise of a 'Wright-school' in the West of America. Concerning the latter Wright once wrote in a pessimistic mood, that he grieved to see that the form in which he had expressed his ideas in his works, appeared to have a greater attraction than those ideas themselves. Since those ideas aimed at starting from the function and not from the form, he believed this to be 'pernicious' to the development of architecture in general.

Pernicious in that sense I would also call the suggestive influence which the rare giftedness of Wright has exerted on the architecture this side of the Atlantic. In the confusion of opinions which in the European architecture of the last decades – after the too great unanimity and certainty of former generations – raised each suggestion which was not too absurd all at once to an almost nerve-exhausting problem, the oeuvre of Wright, when it became more thoroughly known, could not fail to work as a revelation. Free from all finical detail-work, which undermined the architecture of the ancient world, self-evident notwithstanding exotic peculiarities,

fascinating for all the simplicity of the motifs. Wright's work convinced at once. So firm of structure for all their movability were the piled up masses growing as it were out of the soil, so natural was the interlacing of the elements shifting as on a cinematographic screen, so reasonable was the arrangement of the spaces, that nobody doubted the inevitable necessity of this form language for ourselves too, since it was assumed as a matter of course that practicalness and comfort had here been combined into a beautiful synthesis in the only manner possible in our day, that Wright, the artist, had achieved what Wright, the prophet, had professed, that now the example – the long sought for – had been found, in which universal meaning and individual result were absolutely one, in short, that, in this case personality was universal again. In addition to which – and to this many were certainly not indifferent – the application of Wright's means, even where they were applied less faultlessly, with less virtuosity than by the master, appeared as a rule to warrant a tolerable even a piquant effect!

Thus did the architecture of Holland, Germany, Czecho-Slovakia, France, Belgium, Poland, Roumania etc. in its 'avant-garde' and all those who, if things are not going too far, like to consider themselves as belonging to this, willingly undergo the influence of this admirable talent. The shifting of the planes, the projecting penthouse-roofs, the repeatedly interrupted and again continued masses, the predominantly horizontal development, all typical of Wright's art appear at the time when the spirit of Wright's work began to influence our part of the world, as characteristic features of a considerable portion of modern architectural products in Europe.

Meanwhile it is a mistake which is continually made by critics and to which attention cannot too emphatically be drawn, because in this very misconception lies the reason why Wright's influence on European architecture must be considered a less happy one, – it is a mistake to ascribe the arising of these features exclusively to Wright. For at the time when the adoration of Wright's work by his colleagues on this side of the Atlantic had reached its culminating point, European architecture itself was in a state of ferment, and cubism was born. Like the influence of Wright, cubism plays an important part in producing the characteristic forms which found expression in the above-meant current of European architecture. This current itself – as may be apparent – is the result of a blending of two influences: a blending which is not only disappointing, because on either side its points once again to a cult of forms instead of an orientation towards the inner nature, but also because it weakened a tendency – the cubistic one – which bids fair to become of the highest importance for the future of architecture. A tendency moreover which must after all be nearer to Wright himself than the cult of externals with which he was glorified unintentionally through imitation of his work.

If, in determining the factors which stimulated the rise of the aforesaid phenomena in European architecture, we put cubism next to the influence of Wright, it remains notwithstanding an unquestionable fact, that the fascination of Wright's work smoothed to a great extent the way for cubism itself; and the irony of fate has willed – as was suggested above – that the lyric charm of this architectonic piper of Hammeln at the same time impaired the purity of the sound which began to be heard in the architecture of Europe, in consequence of intentions which must be identical with Wright's, though his works often revealed them in a different manner than his aims (as expressed in his writings).

That which Wright desired, viz., an architecture based on the needs and the possibilities of our own time, satisfying the requirements of general economic feasibility, universal social attainableness, in general of social-aesthetic necessity, and resulting in compactness, austerity and exactness of form, in simplicity and regularity; that which he desired, but from which he continually escaped on the wings of his great visionary faculty, was tried in more actual consistency in cubism.

Cubism in architecture – this should be grasped clearly – arose in complete independence of Wright, just like in free art and suggested by it, from within. Besides superficial external resemblance there was undoubtedly inner affinity with Wright's work – it may be worth while to trace this affinity and with a view to it one should also glance at some of Wright's reliefs – whereas in reality the two were wholly different, nay rather opposed to one another.

They seem to agree in the preference for the right angle, in the three-dimensional tendency, in the breaking up of bodies and again combining their parts, in general in the striving to gather into one whole many small parts – previously obtained through analysis – into a whole which in its appearance still betrays the elements of the original dissection; they also have in common: the application of new materials, new methods, new constructions, the conforming to new demands.

What was with Wright, however, plastic exuberance, sensuous abundance, was in the case of cubism – it could not for the present be otherwise – puritanic asceticism, mental abstinence. What with Wright out of the very fullness of life developed into a luxurious growth which could only suit American 'high-life', compelled itself in Europe to the humble level of an abstraction which had its origin in other wants and embraced all: men and things.

Whereas Wright proved to be an artist rather than a prophet, cubism (Cubism, viz., as it was originally; not what people were pleased to make of it here and there – especially with us (in Holland!).) paved the way for the more actual execution of that which was his theory too. Since the days of the Renaissance in cubism spoke – after a thirty year's incitement – for the first time again the conscience of architecture: painfully scrupulous as inherent to the years of puberty, but likewise equally strong!

In architecture as in free art cubism was a period of transition; a phase of dissolving the old system and building up the new order. The idea of construction and the value of proportions were regained and transferred to another plane; the essential importance of the line and the almost oppressive gravity of the form were recognized anew and sounded to the depth; the insight into the importance of the mass and its complement, space, was recovered again and deepened. But above all in cubism – as the logical continuation of former attempts of renovation – was expressed directly and clearly the tension of a greater, a truer vitality than that which was apparent from the architecture of many previous periods whose independent life was until within recent days confined at best to the sweetly-affecting fitness of a talented, highly cultivated taste.

Thus cubism was an introspection and a beginning as well: it imposed tasks relying on the future, where former generations had laid claims parasitizing on the past. In the involuntary romanticism of its vehement craving after complexity, it was the beginning of a new form-synthesis, of a new – an unhistorical – classicism.

The need of number and measure, of purity and order, of regularity and repetition, of com-

pleteness and finish, properties of the organs of modern life, of our technique, our traffic, our hygiene: inherent also in the state of society, the economic conditions, the mass production, find their precursors in cubism.

There is something tragic in the fact that to the development of things which Wright has advocated so long and so energetically, harm has been and is still being done, through misconception of his work, by the dilettantism of his own followers. It may be a matter of indifference to us that with Wright himself the conception of the architect outgrew the consciousness of the preacher: because of the beautiful result, because the basic idea of his work is a reasonable one, not confused by aesthetic premises, because, lastly, life, which has not become rigid and fixed, continually escapes from the dogma of theory. Theory, however, be this emphasized, is valuable as a basis in life. Valuable always, but altogether indispensable now-a-days, when every aesthetic guidance, each traditional hold is wanting. The new architecture can hardly be too consistent in its aims, and we shall be willing to take into the bargain the inevitable inconsistencies of its results, should they be worthy.

We cannot insist too much withy the disciples of Wright – as he used to do himself –, that carrying on the good work Wright began is a different thing from what they call 'to be inspired' by his work. It is no less wrong to imitate what a contemporary has built than to copy a Greek column: on the contrary. More harmful, indeed, than the impediments which an academic architecture puts in the way of a rising functional art of building, are the works of those who imitate modern masters, because the second-hand appearance in which the latter clothe their products, shirks the struggle for pure building, owing to its actual form and its pretence of organic growth, whereas the Academics honestly expose their front to the attack. And if anything is 'pernicious' for the future of the new architecture, it is this half-heartedness, which is worse than frankly plagiarism, which is lack of character.