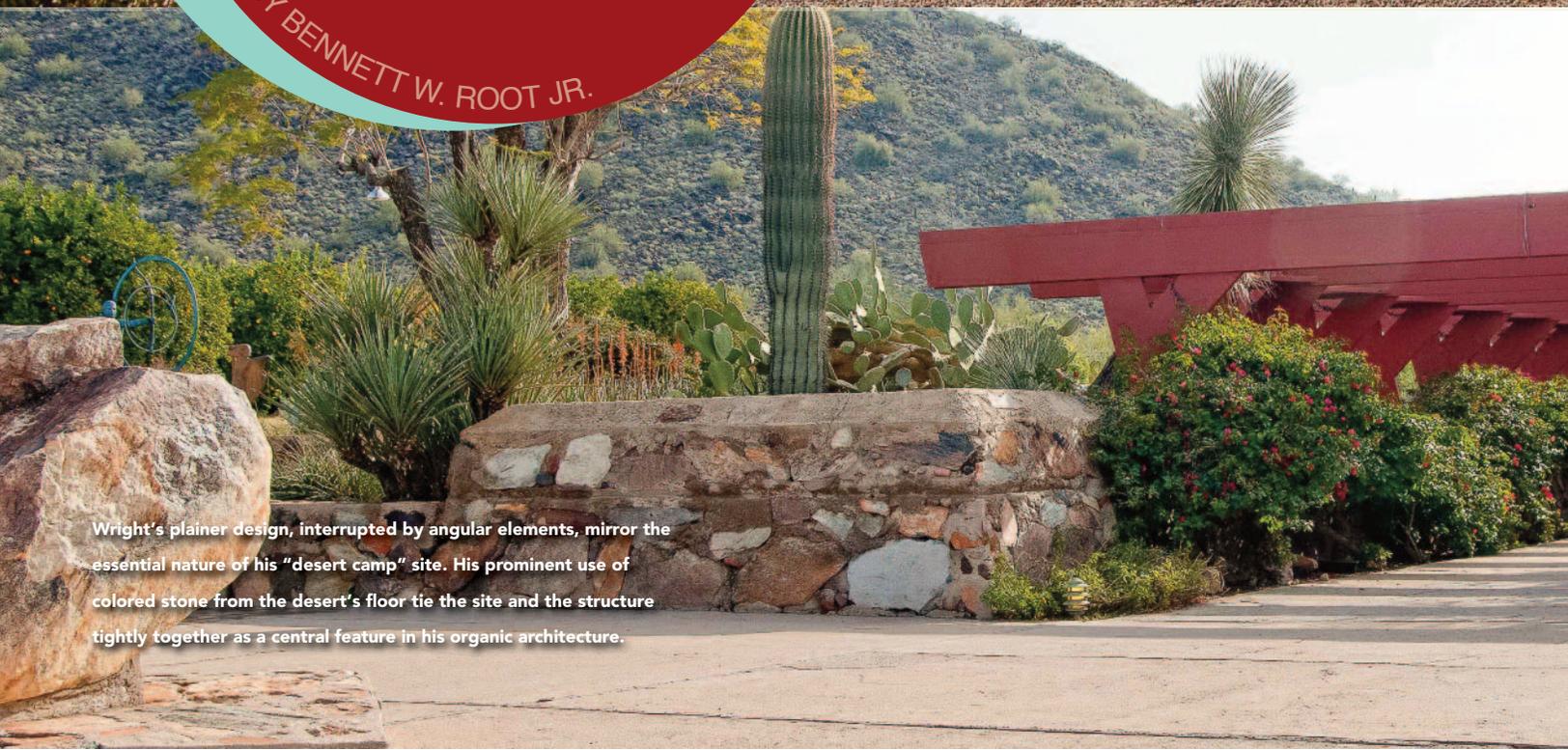


Taliesin WEST

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY BENNETT W. ROOT JR.

AN ARCHITECTURE FROM THE ARIZONA DESERT



Wright's plainer design, interrupted by angular elements, mirror the essential nature of his "desert camp" site. His prominent use of colored stone from the desert's floor tie the site and the structure tightly together as a central feature in his organic architecture.



The neighborhood of my youth consisted primarily of little boxed living spaces organized by rank and file, like soldiers on parade. I ate, slept, played and learned life's early lessons in our family's little "box house" and those of my friends.

Growing up with such limited architectural exposure, it is hard to describe my delight at discovering that living and learning spaces could incorporate an aesthetic that was exciting, engaging, and made living easier and more enjoyable. It was this experience of this discovery—and the years of exploration that followed—that drove me to Taliesin West, Frank Lloyd Wright's winter home and studio in Scottsdale, 26 miles north of Phoenix. I wanted to see how Wright, a colossus of American architecture, had adapted his famous Prairie style to the sand and sagebrush of the Sonoran desert. As I drove northeast toward





TOP, LEFT: Looking north from the site's "prow," one can appreciate how canvas stretched between ceiling trusses would provide a magical, diffuse light "ideal for drafting." LEFT: Sculpture located strategically throughout the complex reinforce the abundant creative energy of Taliesin West.





Wright was particularly fond of the color red and it predominates as one looks south towards the drafting studio (OPPOSITE, TOP), in the entrance to the cabaret (ABOVE) and in the patio outside his private living quarters.

the McDowell Mountains, I could not imagine the treat that lie in store at the end of Frank Lloyd Wright Drive.

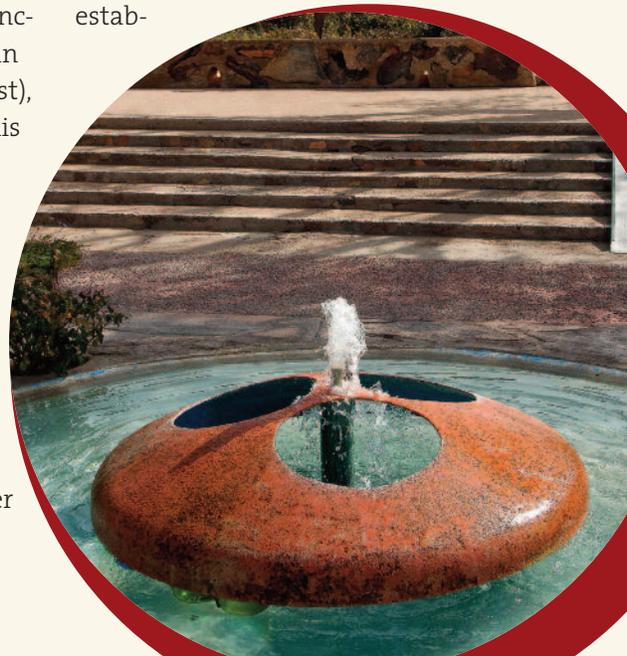
My father introduced me to Wright's work when we toured Robie House, his premier Prairie house style statement on Chicago's south side. Here I began to understand Wright's organic architecture: Total design, inside and out, for the purpose of inducing an enjoyable, stimulating experience of space in harmony with the essential nature of its location. The Robie house experience connected me to similar feelings of being captivated by the space I was in that I had had when visiting the Saarinen designs at Cranbrook Academy of Art and the Kingswood School just north of my childhood home. Along with the awe-inspiring structures created by Mies van der Rohe in Chicago and New York City, "design," "style" and even "architecture" took on a new depth of meaning for me. It was with this excitement

in mind that I approached my recent exploration of Taliesin West.

Frank Lloyd Wright is often called America's greatest architect. In 1991, some 30 years after his death, those laurels became official after the American Institute of Architects' national survey. His work was innovative and visionary; artistic, but firmly anchored in humanistic principle. While the manifestations of his vision were constantly evolving, most often as a function of circumstances (as reflected in his home and studio at Taliesin West), his work was always grounded in his concept of an organic architecture that flowed from a sense of place and usefulness for those who would occupy the space.

Wright grew up and started his career in Chicago, initially as a draftsman for the architectural firm of Joseph Lyman Silsbee and later under the tutelage of Louis Sullivan of Adler & Sullivan, another

giant of American architecture. By the turn of the 20th Century, however, he had his own studio in Oak Park, north of Chicago. There, his concepts of breaking the "box" of traditional living spaces and bringing nature and natural elements into his living designs created the foundations of his Prairie School. Numerous residential design commissions followed. Two decades later, Wright estab-



During his long and productive life, Wright's presence infused both the design and the essential life of Taliesin West and its apprentices. Today, his image as reflected in this and other paintings and reproductions of his drawings, keep the master's design concepts very much alive.





lished a studio for apprentices in Wisconsin named Taliesin, celebrating his heritage by adopting that name from a poet of Welsh mythology. But personal circumstances frustrated development of Wright's career in Chicago, and in 1928, he found himself in the Arizona desert consulting with Albert Chase MacArthur and his brothers on the design of a luxury hotel north of Phoenix, the future Arizona Biltmore. That led to further desert commissions from Dr. Alexander Chandler and eventually a rhythm of living and working that would find Wright at Taliesin in Wisconsin during the summers and working and exploring the Arizona desert during his winters. Health issues reinforced Wright's desire to spend more time in the warm, dry climate of Phoenix, and in 1937 Wright acquired several hundred acres of sand, cacti and colored rocks just south of the MacDowell Mountains looking "over the rim of the world." Here Wright built his "winter camp" which would morph into a permanent home, studio and school of architecture: Taliesin West.

Camp was indeed an apt term for the early years at Taliesin West. The site was raw and pure: crystalline air, intense light, angular mountains and large rocks strewn across a broad horizontal plain. While the severity of the site would inspire a new desert architecture, it also dictated the terms of early camp life--tents, kerosene stoves and water hauled in daily. Undaunted, Wright, his family and his apprentices who had traveled with him from Wisconsin, set about the task of creating a design concept from the elements they encountered as they set up their camp. Almost a decade earlier, Wright and his then-fellows had built a working camp—Ocatillo (Wright's spelling)—



Wright balances consistency in essential design elements with surprise in architectural and design details to create an exciting aesthetic experience for student and visitor alike.

Taliesin WEST

outside of Chandler, Arizona. There he created a camp of cabins with wood frames and canvas roofs. He discovered that these building elements created workspaces with a beautifully diffused light, ideal for drafting. The lessons of Ocatillo were implemented on a grander scale at Taliesin West: Redwood frames and canvas roofs would provide the first living space for Wright, his family and the apprentices, but not in cabins, rather in an integrated complex of buildings for working, teaching and living.

The Taliesin West site was perfect for Wright's organic design architecture. Wright himself described the evolution of his desert design: "It was a new world to us and cleared the slate of the pastoral loveliness of our place in Southern Wisconsin. Instead came an aesthetic, even ascetic, idealization of space..." "The plans were inspired by the character and beauty of that wonderful site." "The design sprang out of itself, with no precedent..." After absorbing the potential presented by the site, Wright positioned his complex of buildings with its "prow" pointing south by southwest to take substantial advantage of the views and movement of light during the day. Then he created a new "desert masonry" for the walls of the drafting studio, the office and living quarters. Rocks (boulders really) from the site were set into wood forms and cement made from site sand was poured over the rubble. When the cement dried, the forms were stripped away from newly created walls, resulting in a distinctive look for all of the

sites' buildings drawn directly from the desert.

With his process set, Wright and his apprentices tackled the labor-intensive challenges of building out the Taliesin West "complex." There would be an office where Wright met clients and from which he managed the ongoing business of the community. A long drafting and working space was set in at a right angle to the axis of the project, yielding a relatively constant soft light particularly suited to drawing and drafting. The Wright living quarters were situated across a spacious patio stretching toward the prow of the complex. The family quarters, long off-limits to tourists (consistent with Wright's wishes) have been exquisitely restored and are open to visitors on a limited basis. Here, one can reimagine the richness of the life of a community resident at Taliesin West while touring the Garden Room, the Sun Trap and the Cabaret (theater) where Wright's special design of the inside space created phenomenal acoustics (the lecturer can be clearly heard in the back row, and the tones of the grand piano resonate clearly throughout the space), while the outside design fits elegantly into the surrounding desert and the fellowship's complex.

Wright constantly tinkered with the space design at Taliesin West. Desert masonry walls, redwood ceiling trusses and canvas roofing were the principal elements from which Taliesin was constructed at the beginning. Ceiling elements overhung roofs. This permitted walls to be "half walls" allowing horizontal light, but not the harsh and punishing direct sun characteristic of desert light. Glass was not used—and was not permitted—as a construction element until well into the 1950s. Plastics eventually replaced the canvas roofing when available material became suitable to mainte-

nance of quality working light. Rooms were rearranged and gathering places for apprentices and others in the Fellowship were modified from time to time. Through all this, however, the essential design of Taliesin West remained unchanged, consistent with Wright's vision.

Wright lived and worked at Taliesin West until his passing in 1959. In the years since his death, his School of Architecture and his Foundation have sustained and built on his vision through a variety programs, both academic and lay, active here and at Taliesin in Spring Green, Wisconsin. (The School of Architecture offers accredited degrees, including Bachelor and Master programs.) They accommodate over 100,000 visitors each year and graduate budding architects whose talents have been developed in the shadow of Wright's genius. It is a special legacy for them and for Wright's many fans.

Visiting this evocative spot allowed me to re-experience the joy I found so many years ago when I discovered Robie House and experienced the magic of Wright's organic design for the first time. Visitors today can enjoy the experience of Wright's vision and design artistry as they would have when Wright was in residence. It is a trip well worth taking. 🌟

If You Go

Taliesin West is celebrating its 75th anniversary (and the Centennial of Arizona statehood) in 2012. A variety of tours of Taliesin West is available, except on certain holidays. Details are available on-line at www.franklloydwright.org or by calling (855) 860-2700.