

Frank Lloyd Wright and Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Arizona

This feature was published by *The Denver Post*.

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Long walls made of native stone, interesting angles, and the Arizona blue sky welcome visitors to a tour of Taliesin West, architecture icon Frank Lloyd Wright's desert camp and studio. (Claire Walter photo)

A Man Ahead Of His Time

Frank Lloyd Wright has a legacy in Colorado, especially through his granddaughter and her projects around the Colorado Springs area.

By Claire Walter

Every time you see a low-slung home nestled into a hillside or blending into the prairie, think of Frank Lloyd Wright. Every time you enter a tranquil space infused with natural light, think of Frank Lloyd Wright. Every time you learn of a home built with indigenous or salvaged materials, think of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Every time you flick on track lighting, tuck your vehicle into a carport, make a bank transaction at a drive-in window, follow little lights down a dark theater aisle or even enjoy an air-conditioned public building on a hot summer day, think of Frank Lloyd Wright. And every time you hear the phrase "on-the-job training," think again of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Although Wright never personally designed any buildings in Colorado, his granddaughter, Elizabeth Wright Ingraham, is a Colorado architect who, like her illustrious grandfather, advocates for modern architecture utilizing new materials and approaches. She is one of several connections between Wright and the Centennial State.

"The most wonderful part of his legacy is that he inspired architects all over the world," Wright Ingraham says of her grandfather. "He got modern architecture moving."

Her local projects include the Vista Grande Community Church in Colorado Springs, dedicated in 1987. It was one of the first buildings in the country to utilize an energy-efficient, easy-to-maintain, insulated concrete called Thermomass.

Wright Ingraham also designed the new Fountain branch of the El Paso Country Library, opening next month. The low-slung building offers long views of nearby wetlands.

"I love libraries," says Ingraham, who moved to Colorado Springs in 1950. "They may be our most important institutions."

The residences she has designed include Solaz in Manitou Springs and La Casa in Pueblo. Both have been acclaimed for their use of materials, siting selection on the landsite and exceptional attention to outdoor views. And Kaleidoscope, which she calls "a big house" near Pulpit Rock Park in Colorado Springs with undifferentiated spaces rather than conventional rooms, is slated for completion in December. It features a 100-foot skylight - Ingraham inherited her grandfather's passion for natural light.

"I'm all for historic preservation if it acts as a propeller to the future, but if it acts as an anchor to the past, we're sunk," she says. Her grandfather would concur.

Frank Lloyd Wright's career spanned more than seven decades, and he's generally acknowledged as the greatest architect of his time. He was born in 1867 during the administration of Andrew Johnson and died in 1959 near the end of Dwight Eisenhower's presidency. Of the 1,141 buildings he designed, a little over half were built and 409 are still standing. Two are complexes called Taliesin, comprising his own family home, studio and the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture.

Wright called the students "apprentices," but in fact, they were laborers, working with cement, wood, stone and other materials to carry out Wright's vision. By actually building, they learned a great deal about design.

Even early in his storied career, Wright's works epitomized a reaction to Victorian ornateness. He was an environmentally conscious architect decades before his time. In words and designs, he expressed revolutionary attitudes regarding materials and the land on which he built.

Wright was featured in a 1998 Denver Art Museum exhibition called "Forging a New Century: Modern Metalwork from the Northwest Collection, 1890-1940." He was, in fact, so far ahead of his time that the new century could just as well have been the 21st.

Wright thought outside of the box - literally and figuratively. Unlike Europe's Bauhaus architects, who were his contemporaries, he rejected squares and cubes in favor of slanting lines; multiple angles; curves; and pentagonal, hexagonal or even round window and door openings. His innovations were practical solutions to real problems, yet he never patented any of them.

Wright built Taliesin East in verdant Spring Green, Wis., in 1911, and 26 years later began Taliesin West as a "desert camp" for himself, his family and his apprentices. What is now the sprawling Phoenix area was then an agricultural backwater. Taliesin West was definitely off the grid. During the first four years of construction, life on the 600 arid acres was beyond rustic. It was primitive. There was no electricity or heating. Water was hauled in from a nearby ranch.

Taliesin West felt like a camp. Apprentices built it using materials found on site and scavenged from the small city of Phoenix and even smaller Scottsdale in the valley below. The roofs were made of white canvas, filtering in natural light by day. There was no glass on the windows, just canvas coverings that were pulled down to protect the interior and its occupants from wind or occasional downpours. To solve the problem of leaking roofs, Wright devised a unique system of indoor rain gutters.

Like migrating birds, Wright and his entourage moved between the two Taliesins, locking all the furniture into secure, roofed storage rooms and taking everything out again in fall.

Apprentices also were, and still are, required to design and hand-build their own small abodes. Cabin, lean-to, tent and other structural forms dot the property. At the end of the year, their occupants demolish their handwork, so their successors can do the same thing.

The Wright way

Frank Lloyd Wright's vision catapulted architecture into a 21st-century mindset. His influence continues on contemporary designers and architects. Three pillars of that influence include:

A preference for the horizontal over the vertical.

The land is as important as the house and the building ought to be an integral part of the landscape.

Rooms reflect the compress-and-release principle. Doorways and entryways are low, visually and psychologically releasing into larger spaces with higher ceilings.

See it here

Frank Lloyd Wright's legacy flourishes throughout Colorado

Edward B. Hawkins developed a large post-World War II subdivision in Englewood called Arapahoe Acres. He had worked in Oak Park, Ill., where Frank Lloyd Wright evolved his signature, low-slung Prairie Style homes with particular attention to lighting, climate control and simple built-in furniture. Arapahoe Acres incorporates those concepts and is now a registered historic district.

The Beaver Meadows Visitor Center in Rocky Mountain National Park was designed by Edmund Thomas Casey of Taliesin Associated Architects. It too is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Aspen has two Wright-influenced lodges: The Hearthstone Hotel, designed by Robin Mulney; and the Boomerang Lodge, built by owner/architect Charlie Paterson, who began designing it as a Taliesin East student.

Students of Wright's design philosophy at Taliesin West work at local firms. Matthew McMichael, 28, is an architectural intern with Denver's Fentress Bradburn Architects, the firm that designed the Colorado Convention Center and the DIA terminal.

Sarah Murphy, 24, graduated from Taliesin West in 2003 and works in the Denver office of Short Elliott Hendrickson. She subscribes to the Wright mantra that "everything works as a whole."

You don't have to be an architect to admire Wright's genius and foresight. Just make a pilgrimage to Taliesin West in Arizona. Wright's home and studio are open for tours (daily September through June, and daily except Tuesday and Wednesday in July and August). For information, visit franklloydwright.org, or call 480-860-1700. - *Claire Walter*

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