

# A REFRAMING THE IMPERIAL HOTEL

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The Imperial Hotel in Tokyo took over a decade to build—its earliest designs date from 1913 and it was completed in 1923—and exerted a profound influence on both Wright’s designs and the architecture of a modernizing Japan. From his first encounter with the Ho-o-den, a Japanese pavilion at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, Wright had been inspired by traditional Japanese art and architecture. He began collecting Japanese woodblock prints during his first visit to Japan in 1905, subsequently mounting exhibitions of them and becoming an important dealer. Now he was called upon to build a modern hotel adjacent to the Imperial Palace, at the very heart of the Japanese capital—a monumental building with western services, Japanese protocol for imperial visits, and integrated gardens.

Alongside nearly 800 drawings of the project, the archive also contains Wright’s personal copy of *Teikoku Hoteru* (Imperial Hotel), a very rare illustrated book on the building published in 1923, shortly after its completion. The publication allowed Wright, who had returned to the United States before the hotel opened, not only to see the finished results of his work but to continue reworking, adding notations, adjustments, and even landscaping details in pencil. The photographs in the book, as well as others displayed here, frame the building in highly aestheticized ways, while the building’s vertical windows create meticulously controlled views of the garden and of Tokyo, not unlike the compositions of the Japanese prints Wright admired. The architecture of the Imperial Hotel together with its representation suggests the varied ways Wright endeavored to engage and reframe cultural exchanges between East and West.

# B ORNAMENT

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The cascades of colorful circles on the tavern murals of Midway Gardens, Chicago (1913–14)—which reappear throughout the elaborately ornamented entertainment complex and speak to the festive ambience during its heyday—are emblematic of the ways in which Wright integrated ornament and structure into what he called an “organic” architecture. Modernist architects famously advocated the elimination of decoration from buildings, yet ornamentation persists throughout Wright’s design work in a great variety of forms, materials and scales, including furniture, mural designs, rugs, stained glass, friezes, and ultimately architecture itself.

No longer an extraneously applied element, Wright’s ornament often became enmeshed with the worlds of commerce and finance, as its inseparability from his architectural designs together with its increasing cost allowed Wright to profit from his decorative systems. On several occasions he produced highly decorated designs for companies, commercial undertakings, and even religious institutions, such as the V. C. Morris Gift Shop in San Francisco (1948–49) and the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin (1955–61), in which the ornament is in continuity with the building structure.

The decorative artifacts and architectural relics compiled here, including a copper urn, textiles, mosaics, stained glass doors, and concrete blocks, are but fragments of Wright’s vision for them as parts of a total work of art.

Wright believed in the profound relationship between architecture and the organic, and his life-long exploration of the natural world was complex and ever-changing. From his early preoccupation with the prairie landscapes of the Midwest to his experiments with living in harmony with the Sonoran Desert of the Southwest, Wright was inspired by the varied terrains and ecosystems he encountered. Two little-known drawings offer new insights in this regard. A planting plan for the Darwin D. Martin House in Buffalo, New York (1903–06), called the “Floricycle,” reveals a surprising mixture of native and exotic plants. And an undated graphic he designed for the Friends of Our Native Landscape, an environmentalist group founded by prominent landscape designer Jens Jensen, invites reflection on Wright’s views on conservation and regional landscapes.

These projects reveal that Wright was engaged with the natural environment at every scale, from the garden bed to the regional territory, and that he was conversant with key figures in the emerging profession of landscape architecture. His interest in natural landscapes existed in tension with his desire to reshape them using hard infrastructures; while his attentiveness to indigenous plants points to ongoing horticultural debates tied up with larger issues surrounding race, immigration, and belonging. Wright understood nature to be a contested territory where competing interests—environmental, architectural, and social—played themselves out.

During the Great Depression, Wright, like many others in the back-to-the-land movement and beyond, turned his attention to the potential of farm life. Teetering on insolvency and with no architectural commissions in sight, he retreated to Taliesin, his family's Wisconsin farmland. There, in 1932, he embarked on a project to prefabricate "Little Farms" where people could lead independent, productive lives and derive sustenance—both physical and spiritual—from nature.

The original idea was conceived by his friend Walter Davidson, a management consultant in food distribution and warehousing, as part of an ambitious farm-to-market system. On networks of one- to five-acre farms, people would grow food for their own consumption with some land set aside for cash crops delivered on a daily basis to a central roadside market.

Wright's development of Little Farms as a model of organic architecture, sustainable agriculture, and simple, yet civilized, living paralleled his resuscitation of Taliesin, where, also in 1932, he and his wife, Olgivanna, started an educational fellowship that combined architectural study with working the land. The first apprentices worked on models for the Davidson prefabricated farms and for Broadacre City, Wright's proposal for a decentralized urbanism that placed networks of such small farms into a larger territorial plan. Davidson died in 1941, but Wright continued to feature the Little Farms Unit in exhibitions and publications and to cultivate the concept (dropping all reference to Davidson) until 1958.

Wright was keenly interested in American Indian art and architecture, especially in the early decades of the twentieth century, when native culture was widely celebrated by many people as an authentic expression of American identity, even as native peoples were being colonized and displaced from their lands. In addition to believing that indigenous imagery and designs could free American architecture of the baggage of European historical models, Wright was associated with several clubs and groups that incorporated native-inspired rituals into their programs, and his circle included prominent supporters of American Indian rights.

In an unrealized project for the Nakoma Country Club (1923–24), near Madison, Wisconsin, Wright appropriated native architectural forms, such as wigwams and tipis, using them interchangeably despite the fact that they belong to distinct indigenous cultures. The design demonstrates how, like most of his contemporaries, Wright tended to romanticize and generalize American Indian culture. The complex picture that emerges is one in which Wright's interest in American Indian imagery exists in tension with prevailing racial stereotypes and imperialist strategies.

From his early exposure to Froebel blocks—part of the educational system of abstract design activities created by Friedrich Froebel, the inventor of kindergarten—to the establishment of his own apprenticeship program, the Taliesin Fellowship, in the 1930s, Wright explored the relationship between the spaces of education and the process of learning. In 1928, he proposed what remains a little-known design for a practice teaching school for African American students on the campus of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia. The new building was to be funded by the Rosenwald Foundation, created by Julius Rosenwald, a co-owner of Sears, Roebuck and Co., as part of an ambitious project to subsidize the construction of rural schools for African Americans throughout the South, which, by this time, had already erected some four thousand schools.

Wright's design would have reoriented this program of schools for the segregated South from traditional clapboard schoolhouses to buildings as innovative in their construction methods as in their architectural style. As with all of the Rosenwald schools, the students were expected to help construct the building, making hands-on labor an integral part of education. As much as the unrealized design reflects Wright's progressive views on education, comments in correspondence, interviews, and letters suggest that he still believed that black Americans should be educated separately because of what he considered innate racial differences.

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# DRAWING IN THE STUDIO

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Wright's architectural drawings are some of the most renowned of the twentieth century, remarkable for their artistic quality and signature style. Throughout his seventy-year career, he published and exhibited his drawings in order to advance his architectural ideas to the broadest possible audience, understanding graphic expression to be a tool for branding and publicity as well as an element in the design process. In his studio, first in Oak Park and later at Taliesin and Taliesin West, the drawings were produced by the ever-changing cast of draftsmen, students, and apprentices, many of whom left their own imprint on Wright's legacy. Close analysis provides clues about how Wright's practice operated, the personalities involved, and the processes and materials employed at various times. The influence of Japanese prints, engagements with European modernism, and shifts in professional practices can all be read in Wright's drawings. Together they reveal a parallel history to that of the architectural projects themselves, one that involves a multitude of artists, differing techniques, enduring friendships, and shifting circumstances and priorities. The tables in this gallery are inspired by the drafting tables in Wright's Taliesin studio.

# — WRIGHT ON TELEVISION

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Wright seemingly never refused an opportunity to make an appearance on television during the 1950s, when the medium became more widely available. Most famously, he appeared on two popular American programs: *What's My Line?*, on June 3, 1956, and *The Mike Wallace Interview*, on September 1 and 2, 1957. These broadcasts bracket Wright's own spectacular design for television: the huge antenna crowning his design for a mile-high skyscraper, whose upper stories were to house television recording and broadcasting studios. He revealed the project at a press conference in October 1956 that was not televised, as he hoped it would be, although it did command many newspaper headlines.

Even at eighty-nine years of age Wright charmed viewers as the mystery guest on the long-running game show *What's My Line?*, where his profession was given as "world famous architect," his fame only enhanced by the fact that he was beamed into so many households. On interview shows like those hosted by Mike Wallace and Hugh Downs, Wright revealed his complex and critical stance toward many aspects of American politics and popular culture. In 1958, a year before his death, he reputedly told Ed Sullivan that television was "chewing gum for the eyes."

# H READING “MILE-HIGH”

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Wright’s proposal for a mile-high skyscraper—for which there was neither a commission nor a client—commanded headlines when he released his design during a press conference at Chicago’s Hotel Sherman on October 16, 1956. But it has never occupied a large place in architectural history, despite Wright’s ambitions. Nor have the inscriptions—a genealogy of pioneering engineers—that occupy the upper half of one of Wright’s very tall drawings of the project been “unpacked.”

With his plan for The Mile-High Illinois, Wright took to an extreme the structural “taproot” system he had originally developed for a 1927–29 apartment high-rise design proposed for a site next to the Church of St. Mark’s-in-the-Bouwerie in Manhattan. In both buildings, the floors would be cantilevered from a single central mast anchored deep in the ground. One drawing for the Mile-High project depicts Wright’s hypothetical structure in relation to famous monuments that likewise endeavored to achieve daring new heights, placing it in a timeline of progress since the Great Pyramid of Giza. Even today the tallest building in the world, in Dubai, is but a half mile high.

Wright envisioned that this tower would culminate in seven stories of television studios, even as he himself was becoming something of a TV personality, first as a mystery guest on the game show *What’s My Line?* and then on *The Mike Wallace Interview*. While striving to reach a mile high, he was also aiming to shape his image through this new medium for publicity and to secure his place in history.

# I URBANISM

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Wright's rarely studied Skyscraper Regulation project for a nine-block area of downtown Chicago (1926) reveals the broad reach of his ideas about the city and serves as a window onto his career-long efforts in urban design. Intended to relieve the congestion caused by unchecked skyscraper development and by the massive increase in vehicular traffic, his scheme opened up the city grid by creating internal courtyards with below-ground parking and by raising the sidewalks to separate pedestrians from cars and trucks. Numerous parallels exist between Wright's design and solutions offered around the same time by both traditionalist and modernist designers.

Wright had experimented with new approaches to neighborhood planning decades earlier. Between 1896 and 1913, he proposed several subdivision schemes that reimagined groupings of houses to preserve privacy while creating a sense of community. In the final decades of his career, he turned to the design of civic centers, cultural centers, and mixed-use developments that revitalized the heart of the city in an era dominated by the automobile and the suburb. Large projects, often megastructures incorporating roadways and parking, were designed for Madison, Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C., and Baghdad. These are quite distinct from the earlier Broadacre City (1929–35), his theoretical proposal for a dispersed urbanism, on display at Columbia University's Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Gallery September 9–December 17, 2017.

Although Wright's name is often equated with spectacularly singular residential designs such as Fallingwater and Wingspread, he also engaged various aspects of industry—from factory production to do-it-yourself systems—in order to design replicable houses that would be affordable to middle-class Americans. Long fascinated with the emancipatory potential of the machine—the great forerunner of democracy, as he described it in his seminal 1901 lecture “The Art and Craft of the Machine”—Wright hoped to harness industry to advance both his architectural and social ideals.

The American System-Built Houses he designed in 1915–17 relied on factory production of building components, mail-order distribution techniques, and licensed contractors to ensure an affordable, high-quality product. By the early 1950s, Wright developed a do-it-yourself process called the Usonian Automatic system, which enabled individuals to build their own houses using self-cast concrete blocks. The competing systems, which used entirely different materials and modes of production, operate as veritable bookends, bracketing decades in which Wright responded to the shifting economic and labor conditions of the Great Depression and postwar periods by alternately embracing mass production and handicraft in his quest to advance both his architectural brand and his democratic vision.

Wright continually searched for systems of design that could both control all elements of structure and space harmoniously—something he believed could be found in the underlying laws of nature—and generate form. Early on in his career, the rectilinear grid served these purposes in his work, but over time he experimented with less rigid systems based on polygonal forms, notably hexagons, enjoying the opportunity they offered to better integrate architecture with the landscape. From the 1930s, these organizational systems of angular forms gave way to more dynamic ones based on circles and arcs, which Wright utilized to engage and shape perceptions of the environments that surrounded his structures.

Starting with the design of a suburban residential development in Galesburg, Michigan, in which Wright took an unusual approach by using a series of tangent circles as the basis of the layout, this gallery traces the evolution of the architect's circular geometries at a range of scales, from the community plan to the individual house. Circular planning changed a building's engagement with its setting and the viewer's experience of space. Extended to the layout of whole communities, it had the potential to change an individual's relationship to the collective.

# L NEW YORK MODELS CONSERVED

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Wright often used meticulously detailed building models as publicity tools aimed at persuading both clients and the broad public of the genius of his work, rather than as aids in the design process. And they were central to the many museum exhibitions that he organized to showcase his work, including one that toured Europe in the early 1930s and numerous ones here at MoMA. As projects changed or his ideas evolved, he and his assistants frequently updated models, rebuilding parts, repainting, and changing vegetation. Wright wanted viewers to occupy the projected building virtually, even creating scale furniture and artwork to decorate the model interiors.

Made of light wood and cardboard painted in bright colors, the models were easy to transport but inherently fragile. They were frequently repaired and bear traces of their travels and travails. Initial conservation efforts at MoMA have focused on Wright's two best-known projects for Manhattan: St. Mark's Tower (1927–29) and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1943–59). Few records about the models existed, so the countless decisions on how and how far to restore them required extensive archival research, discussions with experts and curatorial staff, and close observation of their physical fabric, aided by X-rays, paint analysis, and digital technologies. This work—documented in the two videos displayed here—resulted in different treatments for each model, demonstrating the spectrum of approaches possible in contemporary conservation practice and presenting new insights into the working methods of the architect and his studio.