

Houses and Selves

The self structures how we live, how we compose ourselves in the world.

A house, being a reflection of the owner, is like a self.

A house reflects a way of being in the world, a style if you will. The style of a house makes a statement. It is something like this: this building is my primary way of engaging nature and culture. For example, I engage nature by the way my house meets my biological needs for shelter, and I engage culture by the ways the design, and the spaces created by the design, offer comfort and awaken beauty.

Ideas are to a self like parts are to a house and its surroundings. Ideas are not the materials, but the kitchen, the dining room, the garden and so on. Ideas are the ways the house is organized into rooms with different functions.

The ideas found in one's head (not all of them, but some of them) make up the self that runs the person's life. The ideas in the head are like the rooms in the house. In the kitchen for example you expect to find a stove to make a meal. In the self/other part of a head you expect to find a notion of reciprocity for engaging others. A head without that notion would be like going into the kitchen of a house without a stove; you would think something important was left out.

A theory is an overarching principle that structures a particular set of ideas. Without the theory organizing the ideas they, the ideas themselves, would just be random. For example, a Victorian house uses a theory for interior house design requiring many little rooms with high ceilings, tall windows, elaborate ornamentation and so forth. A Craftsman house uses an open theory for room arrangement stressing structural elements and a style of ornamentation celebrating natural materials and joinery. The theory of the house is the design itself, and the way the design elements are related to each other.

That's what Wright was especially good at, coming up with theories, and even creating his own design elements. Because Wright recognized the essential fluidity of ideas, and the necessity of certain fundamental ones, he could invent new designs. Totally new, so powerful as to become new forms altogether. Included among these fundamental ideas are (a) closure towards public street to answer the need for privacy, (Zimmerman House) (b) letting in natural light as motion, (Wingspread House) (c) using natural materials from the site or region (Minotaur House) (d) geometrical order in design elements derived from nature enabling complete interior detailing including furniture, light fixtures, etc to match the design theory (Robie House). The interior of a Wright house is not empty space, but an elaborate style of living created by the architect to fit the particular customer.

A person's home should be seen not as composed of a series of still and frozen moments like a Pissarro painting, but an action shot of a living self as it moves about through real space during a lived life. This what happens when I walk about my house and property enjoying its unique features like the tree house in the back yard hanging between four big trees, three of them plums, and the other a fat elm tree that seems to be enjoying its old age immensely as it drops its willowy limbs, languishing and flourishing in its sunny and protected spot.

What I, Daniel Duncan, bring to a building or a writing project is my particular self-knowledge derived from my reading combined with a certain life experience which I love to articulate as clearly as I can, and sometimes turn them into good designs, whether writing or building projects.

This resembles Wright who was not shy about articulating either his theories or bragging about his buildings. But Wright had this advantage: he had a solid late 19th century rural childhood with middle class parents who had artistic aspirations. Wright's mature ideas were turned into beautiful forms that filled all his buildings. My childhood by contrast occurred in a family of divorced working-class parents in a city with a shallow self-definition which left me with a feeling of absence, not substance. The only authentic trait I share with Wright that I can see is a willingness, an insistence even, to see things my own way. But Wright had a lot more in his tank than I ever did as a builder. For one thing I was driven to rediscover the past while he worked hard to transcend the past because he had already lived it fully, and even as a youth he wanted to move on to original work.

So what's the point about a self and a house, ideas and rooms, theories and styles? And what as this to do with the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright? Just this. We should not regard the self that runs a life as a fixed, finished entity any more than we regard a house as a fixed, finished entity. Indeed, both are stable entities, but a self is, or can be, a work in progress, too, just like a house is, or can be, a work in progress. They are both subject to remodeling. Nevertheless neither of the two is a totally fluid realm. We are dealing with a certain set of fundamental ideas and theories. Just as some elements are essential and some arrangements are beautiful, and others are unnecessary and ugly, we should seek the one type and avoid the other type.

Applied to the self specifically, theories organize ideas coherently so that behavior is rational (has a point) or at least looks like it to an observer. The structure of theories in the mind is the structure of that self. Did the individual person build a good self, a functional one, or did the one that landed there (as a result of unconscious drives and reactions) end up being a dysfunctional one? Does that self function to meet actual needs of the person? Does it have flaws that need immediate attention? Flaws can be attended to, and a self can be changed, re-built, as it were, to serve the user and provide for a life with more order and beauty and better service.

With regard to one's house, it is unlikely that it will ever be as coherent and beautiful as a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. But the great architect's ideas are transferable and the challenge of his conceptual schemes can be met. Staying close to

nature, opening rooms to light and space, not cheating with materials, these are always good. Also, never forgetting about the whole, and how the individual parts, if altered, affect the whole, that principle works in both a self and a house. You don't have to be wealthy to follow such ideas: just careful with what you have and make the most of the hand you have been dealt.