

Rhetoric of things

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Building from the ground up: Frank Lloyd Wright as an architect of language Budowanie od dołu do góry. Frank Lloyd Wright jako architekt języka

Abstract

F.L. Wright's written and oral statements are discussed with a view to showing the connection between his principles of "organic" architecture and the rhetorical efficacy of his verbal expression. His calculated, eloquent and dexterous enactment, or performance, of various communication strategies is presented as fully contiguous and consonant with his architectural thinking and substantiation of ideas through action. This makes him an important precursor of postmodern consciousness and praxis.

Ustne i pisemne wypowiedzi F.L. Wrighta są omówione tak, by podkreślić związek między zasadami jego „organicznej” koncepcji architektury a retoryczną skutecznością języka, jakiego używa. Jego elokwencja i sprawne wykonanie („performance”) przygotowanego zamysłu, wykorzystujące różne strategie komunikacyjne, przedstawione jest jako w pełni spójne i zgodne z jego architektonicznym myśleniem i realizacją jego idei w działaniu. To właśnie sprawia, że jest on prekursorem postmodernistycznej świadomości i praktyki.

Key words

Frank Lloyd Wright, architecture, verbal expression, communication strategies, performance

Frank Lloyd Wright, architektura, wypowiedź językowa, strategie komunikacyjne, performance

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Building from the ground up: Frank Lloyd Wright as an architect of language

“I would much rather build than write about building, but when I am not building, I will write about building—or the significance of those buildings I have already built.”
(Wright 1992a, 315)

“Language, of course, difficult as it is, is comparatively easy to use; it will always be easier to phrase an ideal than to build it.”
(Wright 1993, 305)

While contemporary critics and theorists have expanded the conception of what renders a “text” rhetorical to include non-verbal arts and even entities that are not products of man’s design and action, such as nature or the body, comparisons between verbal and non-verbal codes seem as problematic as ever. Thus, for instance, interartistic analogies, already debated in ancient discourses, are viewed with ambivalence because they are drawn without adherence to one definitive methodological model employing a fixed set of analytical tools. Many critics, including Suzanne Langer, Wendy Steiner and W.J.T. Mitchell, agree that these doubts persist largely due to the absence of agreed-upon criteria for determining what constitutes the basis of comparison—for instance, whether similarities *and* differences should be treated as equally relevant.

Take the so-called parallel of the arts theories. Intent on exposing affinities while ignoring dissimilarities, they inevitably rank the various arts in relation to perceived differences in their persuasiveness, which results in defining their relations vis-à-vis one another in terms of difference. Both the axiom *poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens* (poetry is a speaking picture, painting a silent poem), attributed by Plutarch to Simonides of Ceos, and the later proposition of Horace, formulated in *Ars Poetica*, that painting and poetry be considered “sister arts” because “as is painting so is poetry” (*ut pictura poesis*) employ rhetorical figures which expose this paradox. Simonides’s antimetabole and Horace’s chiasmus relied

on transposition and inverted parallelism of related structures, which anticipated, and in fact determined, the fate of all future critical discourses on such relations: comparing the two arts was almost always predicated on valorization of one at the expense of the other, even though in the Aristotelian taxonomy the verbal art of poetry is situated next to and on the same level as music, dance, painting, sculpture, and architecture. For many scholars, this very element of competitiveness, implicit in so many considerations on interartistic relations—from Leonardo da Vinci’s speculations about the superiority or inferiority of one art versus another (the so-called *paragone* of the arts) to Mitchell’s (1986) definition of the “war of signs” (47) as a congenital condition—is the main hindrance to devising a universally accepted method of analysis. Mitchell’s position illustrates this quandary: although he argues, in his study *Picture Theory* (1995), for a radical, “pictorial” turn in the humanities, contrary to what the title suggests, he does not, as J. Hillis Miller (1996) points out in reviewing the book, propose “any new commanding theory that might transform the field,” but only offers a series of detailed case studies, doing so, as the renowned scholar acknowledges, “with flexibility and pragmatic common sense” (18).

Inspired by the example of Mitchell, who demonstrates how to avoid the pitfalls of the interartistic comparisons mentioned above while tackling specific instances of visual artefacts that permeate and are permeated by texts, and mindful of many contemporary rhetoricians who advocate for “moving away from totalizing theory” (Condit 1993, 178-190), I propose a reading of written and oral statements by visionary architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who practically demonstrated the efficacy of rhetorical devices both in his voluminous writings and his numerous public interviews and debates. These demonstrate that for him “architectural thinking” constituted the basis of all conceptualization and discursive logic. It might be argued that architects’ communication strategies naturally derive from their architectural imagination and experience and as such are imbued with a spirit of “design,” but Wright is unique for a number of reasons. As an author and speaker, he developed a way of thinking about architectural design and urban planning that embraced all the arts as well as many other aspects of man’s experience in the world. Wright’s notion of *organic architecture* is, so to speak, built into his verbal lexicon, semantics, syntax, and rhetoric. His innovative and unorthodox architectural ideas and solutions were often misunderstood and criticized—for instance, his last major project, the iconic Guggenheim Museum in New York, was derided for resembling a massive washing machine—but he resolutely defended the rationale behind his designs, persuasively elucidating and arguing for his revolutionary ideas. He did so with poise and panache, impressing audiences and interlocutors with his eloquence and rhetorical dexterity. This often carried over

to discussions unrelated to architecture, making him as effective a communicator as he was an architect. Just as Wright's architectural expertise and vision guaranteed that his structures (he designed more than 1,000) met the functional and aesthetic criteria for successful design, which is harmonious but not monotonous and compatible with the setting in its form, materials and scale, his communication skills—manifested in his adroit admixture of specialist and colloquial language, as well as terse and catchy figures of speech, often enhanced by illustrations in his printed texts and controlled gesticulation and vocal delivery in public speaking situations—guaranteed that his written and spoken utterances were coherent, logical, and verbally accurate. The connection between rhetorical efficacy and architectural innovation and refinement is in Wright's case even more striking when one considers his entire written output and recorded statements within the context of his development as an architect and designer. As Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (Wright 1992a), editor of the massive five-volume collection of his writings, asserts, "Wright's ability to describe his architecture as well as his insights into American culture grew more lucid as his architectural work matured" (7).

Although Wright claimed he would rather express what he had to say with materials used at construction sites rather than at writing desks, his disclaimer in fact proclaims a communication strategy that forces his readers or interlocutors to recognize and acknowledge the close affinity between his astute verbal constructs and his innovative architectural designs.¹ Even in heavily technical texts, one finds instances of self-reflexiveness and even playfulness, which foreground language as "construction material," especially through the use of "action" words such as doing, making, framing, constructing, of which the present essay's first epigraph is a characteristic example, deliberately reiterating the word "build" in its several meanings and grammatical forms. This feature of Wright's rhetorical style justifies using the term *performance* to describe enactment of his communication strategies. As a postmodern concept, performance is a more inclusive category than its conventional traditional dramatic definition would suggest as it encompasses a wide variety of acts, actions and activities, physical and mental, an aspect best represented by Wright's verbal expression, examples of which include talks addressed to students at Taliesin and other universities and general audiences, both locally in Chicago and nationally on TV networks. I am aware that the usefulness of the category of performance today is marred by critics' squabbles regarding the origins, possible meanings, implications and

1. Wright's position brings to mind the famous motto of American Imagist poets, the words William Carlos Williams wrote in the 1927 version of "Patterson": "No ideas but in things" (Williams 1992, 6).

applicability of this concept in critical theory and practice.² But I contend it is still functional both in its literal and metaphorical meanings, which were the basis for its currency in critical thought half a century ago when so-called performance studies evolved out of the theoretical considerations and new practices of artists who saw theatricalization as a significant common thread linking diverse developments, taking modern art and philosophical thought toward what was then described as the postmodern turn. Many terms coined then, including *postmodern* and its derivatives *postmodernity* and *postmodernism*, eventually proved to be passing fads, but some demonstrated significant staying power, especially when cleansed of the dubious associations they accrued as multipurpose critical tools. Performance belongs to the latter category, especially when its theatrical roots are recognized. One example of the term's usefulness is Jerzy Kutnik's (1986) study of the innovative fiction of Raymond Federman and Ronald Sukenick, titled *The Novel as Performance*, in which it is employed as the metaphorical locus of a network of associations through which Kutnik attempts to identify what he considers the gist of the postmodern outlook: mental and physical acts that function as manifestations of (self)awareness. Another example is a recent dissertation that combines contemporary feminist thought, theater history and rhetoric, Susan M. Adams's "Rhetorical Performance: Inscription, Embodiment, and Resistance in the Work of Nineteenth-century Actress/Writers" (2007). In both cases, analysis and description of various strategies of (self)(re)presentation—from relatively narrow aesthetic (e.g. literary or dramatic) contexts to broadly social ones—is accomplished thanks largely to the enduring efficacy of the concept of performance.

Frank Lloyd Wright's communicative strategies, whether written or spoken, initially offer examples of performativity in which his unique mindset manifests itself as quintessentially modern; and yet, toward the end of his long life (he died in 1959) Wright evolved, gaining recognition as one the most important

2. J. Hillis Miller offers a comprehensive treatment of the current controversies surrounding the concepts of performance and its derivatives, performative and performativity—from their introduction into language study by J.L. Austin to their adaptation, appropriation, modification and transformation in other disciplines. The literary scholar first cites the example of Lyotard, who, he says, replaced Austin's performative speech act theory with the notion of performativity as "legitimation by an exercise of power, whether by denotative or prescriptive utterances." Then he focuses on Butler's "exappropriation" (Derrida's term) of the concept in her theory of performativity, which, he points out, in many ways appears to turn Austin's notion into its very opposite. Similarly, but quite obviously with a *différance*, Miller writes, Derrida dismantles Austin's theory by expanding its scope of meaning to include in it what Austin excluded—what the French thinker described as parasitical or etiolated performatives. But the most important thing about Miller's "exercise at disambiguation" is that it is ironically paradoxical through-and-through. Having shown the contradictions and inconsistencies of others' performative notions, he on the one hand emphasizes that it is of utmost significance to be aware of and discriminate between them "to avoid confusion of thought." He then cleverly avoids admitting his virtual failure in this respect by declaring: "After all my efforts of disambiguation, I must nevertheless assert that these various forms of performativity, different as they are from one another, have a family resemblance, in the Wittgensteinian sense of that phrase." To put it differently, he shows that although aiming at clarity of thought and accomplishing it may not be the same thing, his exercise of disambiguation is not entirely futile, either. His final conclusion strikes an optimistic note: "All of these examples show the power of words or other signs to do something, to act" (Miller 2007, 219-235).

progenitors of the newly emerging postmodern era. His intellectual vanguardism is the subject of Jerome Klinkowitz's *Frank Lloyd Wright and His Manner of Thought* (2014), in which the author argues that, while being unquestionably one of the 20th century's pre-eminent architects, Wright has also "suffered the fate of many great artists," being "looked at but not always listened to" (13). Although a renewed interest in his accomplishments was sparked by several commemorative projects, such as exhibitions and publications occasioned by his 150th anniversary in 2017, many of these new contributions to Wright scholarship are still, as was the case in the past, concerned mainly with his work in the field of architecture and much less so with his broader ideas about human culture and man's relation to nature. Wright's voluminous writings are mostly studied by those interested in their biographical and/or technical content. Klinkowitz, a literary scholar, stands out. While acknowledging that Wright is "difficult for theorists to deal with" (13) and that his work is "sui generis at best and idiosyncratic at worst" (xi), Klinkowitz approaches Wright's ideas using the same interpretive perspectives and techniques he successfully applied in his studies of innovative fiction and literary and cultural criticism. Looking at Wright first as a writer who was also an architect, rather than the reverse, Klinkowitz shows him as an intellectual who substantiated his ideas through action, producing architectonic structures of monumental significance. Among the outstanding things about Wright, he contends, was that although he was educated and matured as an architect in the nineteenth century, his thinking about design from the outset radically departed from Victorian standards. While chronologically he was a *precursor* of modern architecture, as Klinkowitz notes, Wright "had much trouble with modernism and modernists had even more problems with him" (xi). According to the critic, Wright's mind reached beyond the modern perimeter of knowledge and custom and toward a new era, one Klinkowitz dubbed "postcontemporary" in order to expose the limitations of the merely diachronic outlook implicit in the more popular terms of postmodernism or postmodernity. Klinkowitz writes: "Though no one would claim Frank Lloyd Wright foresaw the thinking behind this new era, the era has definitely embraced him, his work, and his ideas" (xi). What he really seems to be saying is that Wright's ideas not only anticipated those of the next generation of visionaries but that their true significance can only be appreciated by looking back at his legacy from a perspective that, like his thought, aspires to transcend the present and to view it from an envisioned future vantage point.

This does not mean that Wright was out of touch with contemporary reality, that the concerns of the society in which he lived eluded him and that, conversely, his concerns were socially inconsequential and incongruous when viewed from the perspective of his own time. Quite the contrary, over the years, he became a celebrity of sorts, an eccentric genius commanding attention because of his

shrewdness, wit and stylish demeanor. When in 1957 Wright appeared for the first time on *The Mike Wallace Interview*, a popular and sometimes controversial ABC show (the second interview with the architect would be broadcast, by popular demand, four weeks later that same year), the program's host introduced his guest by quoting conflicting opinions about him. Admitting that "admirers of Frank Lloyd Wright hail him as a man one hundred years ahead of his time," Wallace also cited a story from *Life* magazine in which "fellow architects have called him everything from a great poet to an insupportable windbag" (ABC 1957). The interview, aired nationally during Sunday prime time, gave the eighty-eight-year-old Wright, already well known outside his own field, an opportunity to address a mass audience and discuss his views on a variety of topics—from architecture to politics, religion, ethics and culture—via a medium of communication whose unprecedented growth in the 1950s he correctly predicted some twenty years earlier in a university lecture.³ When he appeared on Wallace's show, America was fast approaching the 90% mark in terms of the number of households possessing a TV set. The nation was hungry for news, entertainment and informed opinion, and interviews with important and glamorous people were a staple in network programming. Welcoming Wright to his show, Wallace promised a real treat: viewers were about to witness an unrehearsed and uncensored exchange between the host, known for his straightforward, no-holds-barred and nothing-but-the-truth approach, and his guest, presented by the journalist as "in the opinion of some, America's foremost social rebel." Wright did not disappoint, delivering a scintillating and memorable performance and displaying his persona with poise and controlled verve.

At first blush, the architect, seated at the back of the TV studio with Wallace occupying the foreground, does not strike one as particularly unconventional or daring—we just see a composed, gray-haired, elderly man. But the moment the camera zooms in on him as he begins to speak his presence immediately comes across as arresting and charismatic, not only on account of his frankness but also, equally importantly, because of the manner in which he spars with the interviewer. Speaking calmly, Wright commands the viewers' attention and does so without reliance on the usual eye-catching props of the era's most iconic pop culture non-conformists and dissenters, such as Marlon Brando's biker cap and leather jacket, James Dean's disheveled appearance, a cigarette nonchalantly dangling from his mouth, or Elvis Presley's jet black, greased hair, ice-blue eyes and suggestive pout. The austerity of Wright's appearance, an effect heightened by the colorlessness of black-and-white television, is fully consonant with his upright posture, with no

3. In the same lecture, titled "The City," Wright also envisioned the emergence in the future of a need for a new communication technology that in his description looks very much like today's internet (Wright 1992b, 76).

signs of frailness, and his calm countenance, animated by an occasional enigmatic smirk. At the same time, the close-up brings into view signature details of his attire, a silk scarf covering the lapels of his jacket and a flowing bow-tie, small decorative touches which contrast with Wallace's dutifully bland journalist's uniform.

Wallace, wanting to make the most of the half-hour allotted by the network, has a long list of questions, many designed to provoke unrehearsed answers without giving his guest much opportunity to elaborate upon his responses. Quite often, the interviewer is so determined to execute his script that, when the conversation takes an unexpected turn, he bluntly interrupts Wright and tries to redirect him. Unfazed and always charmingly polite, the architect conforms to the show's formula and delivers the "capsule opinions" Wallace expects. But it should be noted that Wright is not unassertive. He frequently signals that he expects precise, clear questions. Sensitive to subtle differences in words' meaning, he carefully composes his sentences to ensure they accurately convey his thoughts. He openly condemns the tendency in the mass media to fabricate disputable generalizations for mindless consumption by the public.⁴ Whenever he feels Wallace's question is based on a misguided premise or uses empty rhetoric or unreflective language, Wright comes forward with a corrective. The need to sometimes parse a questionable concept or disambiguate the meaning of a word or phrase by placing it in several different contexts brings out the architect and engineer in him, a constructor attentive to even minor details as well as the quality and suitability of the material at hand. He knows that his appeal as an authority requires not just knowledge and common sense but also a demonstrated self-reflexivity that invites his listeners to share his sensitivity regarding the use and misuse of words in effecting communication. For instance, when asked his view concerning euthanasia, he simply says: "If it's mercy killing, I am for it." The terseness of the response does not satisfy Wallace, who persists: "When you say 'it's mercy killing,' you mean?" Wright then clarifies: "Well, I think if killing is merciful, why not kill? But be sure that it is merciful." The explanation is really a reiteration of the first statement as no new information is added but the emphasis makes all the difference. As the exchange continues, Wright augments his position, distinguishing between morals and ethics vis-à-vis the issue of legality in medical practice when Wallace asks if "a doctor, for instance, who understands the situation, has the right to take the life of a patient

4. In the second part of the interview, Wright launches a scathing attack on the low quality of contemporary journalism and especially on the public's thoughtless consumption of what the press market has to offer: "The whole country now lives in the newspaper. Everywhere you go, their nose is in something to read. Well, how is it that we became so literate all at once? How is it now that we are fed, spoon-fed, everything from A to Z, by reading this and reading that, by this newspaper, that newspaper, this magazine, that one. We don't seem to have any life at all except by reading something. We learn nothing except by reading. . . . I think you should not read spasmodically. I don't think you should read just for the sake of reading, either. I think that if you are going to read, you should read something that'll feed you, build you up, strengthen you, and be what you need to know."

under those circumstances.” Wright then nonplusses his host by asking if he is speaking “legally.” The experienced journalist quickly rebounds: “Am I speaking legally? No, I’m speaking morally.” For Wright, this is the perfect opportunity to drive his message home and he does not miss it, taking the initiative: “Morally, I think he would have the right. . . . But morally isn’t the question, my dear Mike. Morally isn’t enough. There is a great difference between morals and ethics. The question is ethically does he have the right, so far as I’m concerned. Morals are only those of the moment, the fashion of the day. What is a moral today, won’t be moral the day after tomorrow and the day after that.” Wallace can only accept Wright’s terms, as he does by asking: “Ethically you believe he has the right?” Wright answers: “Ethically I would say he has the right to end intolerable suffering. If there was no hope.” The lesson learned, the journalist switches to another subject.

Throughout the whole interview Wright keeps turning the tables by posing his own questions, forcing Wallace to react. Some of his (counter-)questions, as the previous example indicates, have a maieutic character—after all, he was a dedicated pedagogue all his life—and some are ratiocinative. But the most interesting are “rhetorical” questions which help him challenge the premises of some of the assumptions Wallace unreflexively makes and thus draw the show’s audience to his side. For instance, when Wallace asks: “Mr. Wright, you don’t have much faith in the mob, and yet I’m told that you have a good deal of faith in the nation’s youth? . . . How do you square one with the other?” Wright fires back: “Why? Is the nation’s youth a mob?” He handles several other topics similarly. When Wallace asks if he has heard of Charlie Chaplin’s anti-Americanism, he clearly wants Wright’s opinion about the great actor and director; but the architect refocuses his question in a way which catches the host off guard, asking: “What do you mean by anti-Americanism?” Wallace politely evades answering by saying: “Sir, if we were to start answering that question, in as much as we only have three minutes left, chances are that we could talk just about that for three minutes” and attempts to return to Chaplin, but Wright nails him with another question: “Is there anything more anti-American than McCarthyism?” Flabbergasted, Wallace tries to extricate himself, but words do not come easily. He stumbles: “Is there anything... anything more...?” but there is no way out. The question can only be finished the way Wright asked it. Despite Wallace’s protestation, there is indeed enough time for an informed response, and Wallace knows it. To his own detriment, he continues down the political path, raising the subject of Communism in the context of Wright’s sympathetic view of Russian society, expressed after his 1937 visit to the Soviet Union. The journalist asks: “How can you explain this enthusiasm for a country which even then, and certainly now, has instituted thought-control by

terror, political purges by blood, suppression of intellectuals?” To which Wright retorts: “Do you ever disassociate government and people?”

Such agonistic crossfire is just one of many examples of both men engaging in a kind of contest, such competition implicit in and in fact required by the format of the show, which is just that—a show, a game, theater. While each combatant vies for the viewers’ attention and approval, the blows exchanged are gentlemanly and refined. Wallace, described by Scott Tobias (2019) as a “gotcha” journalist with “an instinct for good theater and a no-nonsense hunger for the bottom line” who “[is] going to get his answers or make his subjects sweat profusely through their denials and dissembling,” has the advantage of being an experienced media personality appearing on his own turf and dictating the terms and content of the interview. But his guest is well versed in both defensive and offensive tactics. With a long career behind him as a teacher and public speaker on the one hand and on the other as a professional with the outstanding self-promotional skills needed to elicit the interest and support of individual and corporate clients, Wright is in a league of his own when it comes to knowledge, wisdom and vision, and is well equipped with the verbal skill and mental attitude required to deal with communicative challenges. Yet, while the high caliber of his mind comes through in many of his observations and remarks, he carefully avoids flaunting his intellectual superiority over his host even when Wallace teases him, as he does when asking: “What are you showing us tonight, Mr. Wright? Are you showing us more armor than character, more shell than substance? . . . Every word that you say, you say because you believe or do you say, sometimes, for calculated effect?” Wright’s pointed response is utterly serene: “I think everybody must speak sometimes for a calculated effect, and I wouldn’t deny so speaking. But I have never misrepresented myself, anything in connection with me, consciously or deliberately.” Later in the interview, when Wallace, possibly with a touch of sarcasm, refers to him as “an intellectual,” Wright vehemently denies being one, explaining that he does not like intellectuals “because they are superficial, they are up top. They’re from the top down, not from the ground up. And I’ve always flattered myself that what I represented was from the ground up.” He then preemptively asks if his words “mean anything” to the journalist, to which the latter succumbs disarmed: “I’m trying to figure it out.”

Here the difference between the postures of the two men could not be more glaring. Wallace is a professional performer, an actor whose performance—sometimes scripted, sometimes spontaneous—relies upon his ability to “figure out” the meaning of words before he speaks them in order to sound convincing in his role. Wright is a professional conceptualist capable of precisely expressing what he intends to communicate. A closer look at the connection between Wright’s elocution and his manner of thinking reveals several traits which determine how

his mental disposition impacts his expression. First, as a speaker, he exudes confidence due to his proven capacity to convey his thoughts clearly and concisely. Second, when he speaks, the structure of represented thought is inseparable from its sense—they are organically united; not surprising for an architect. His words are precisely and not arbitrarily chosen, ones which Wright employs in many of his recorded remarks and written statements, especially when talking about his understanding of what constitutes good architecture. For instance, when in a different interview (NBC 1953) he is presented with the challenge of planning and building an entire urban complex, he explains this would primarily require thoughtful “use of and sympathy with the site,” that is, consideration of “the nature of the ground and the purpose of the city or town or whatever it might be, and of course the character of the inhabitants.” As such, the project “would be a native and natural performance. Organic architecture is a natural architecture.” Instead of sentimentalizing nature like so many others—to whom, as he put it, “nature is cows in the fields and the winds and the bees and the trees, unfortunately” (quoted in Meehan 1984, 234)—he looks for the “spiritual essence” of forms in nature’s structuredness, citing crystals as “proof of nature’s architectural principle” (Wright 1992a, 270).⁵

What is particularly interesting in the present context is how the notion of organic architecture pervades all of Wright’s thinking, in keeping with Wittgenstein’s observation: “Remember the impression one gets from good architecture, that it expresses a thought” (1984, 22). This is true of his thoughts expressed both in writing and orally, though the dynamics differ with each mode of communication. What matters is that the performative, or rhetorical, efficacy of his communication is a function of his unique, idiosyncratic handling of words as carriers of thoughts. Especially in his written texts, rather than merely articulating in conventional diction ideas he has developed in connection with his work as an architect, he often uses language to generate new ideas and experiences which did not preexist their verbalization, a strategy reminiscent of postmodern literature. This quality of his style is discussed extensively by Klinkowitz, who notes that while Wright’s early use of linguistic categories is reminiscent of his contemporary Ferdinand de Saussure, it also prefigures what would in the decades following the architect’s death be called literary postmodernism (Klinkowitz 2014, 48). Significantly, too, while Wright’s approach to verbal communication is informed by his sense that a deep affinity exists between composing texts and designing buildings, it is by no means limited to exploring analogies between writing and architecture. Very often, when he describes working at a drafting table or a construction site, he also references the performing and the plastic arts. Emphasizing the commonality of

5. Wright says much the same thing in *An Autobiography* (2005, 89).

certain qualities of artistic practice irrespective of medium or form, he asserts that all works of art, whether visual, musical or theatrical, have an intrinsic structure governed by rules of “grammar” and “syntax” unique to each of the arts but whose underlying logic is universal to all of them.

In many of his writings, when speaking emphatically as an “artist,” the word he spells with a capital “A,” Wright expounds a philosophy that goes beyond the concerns of architecture.⁶ For instance, urging other architects to pursue in their work what he defines as organic (or intrinsic), he addresses much broader issues of creativity in all kinds of media, including language. In one lecture, written in 1939, he formulates his creed thus:

So here I stand before you preaching organic architecture; declaring *organic* architecture to be the modern ideal and the teaching so much needed if we are to see the whole of life, and to now serve the whole of life, holding no “traditions” essential to the great TRADITION. Nor cherishing any preconceived form fixing upon us either past, present or future, but—instead—exalting the simple laws of common sense—or of super-sense if you prefer—determining form by way of the nature of materials. (1993, 303)

Referring to the grand narrative of tradition (appropriately, though perhaps ironically, also spelled in capital letters), Wright asserts that an “honest” work derives its true nature primarily from its medium as it is used to create an “architectonic” structure. In architecture, this means that a building’s form must not be imposed “from without” but that it should grow “from within.”⁷ Contrary to what his mentor, Louis Sullivan, known as the father of the skyscraper, claimed, Wright believed that form does not follow function but *is* function and that the organic unity of the two is the key to spatial harmony and functionality. One obvious consequence of such thinking is that architecture moves away from the ideas of illusionism central to earlier notions—for example, the neo-classicist or neo-gothic concepts of grand public architecture imitating ancient models. Accordingly, as Wright has it, “a bank will not look like a Greek temple, a university will not look like a cathedral, nor a fire-engine house resemble a French château.” Crucial to organic architecture is “exalting the simple laws of common sense” to serve “the whole of life” (1993, 303).

Wright’s practical application of his organic principles often meant abandoning the requirement of presenting the client with a structure to peruse, some “preconceived form” sketched with a view to the intended function of the building to be constructed. It was the actual experience of inventing its form on

6. Wright referred to himself as “Artist” as early as 1896 in “Architect, Architecture, and the Client” (1992a, 27-38).

7. Wright reiterated these concepts throughout his texts, lectures and interviews. See, for instance, “A Philosophy of Fine Art” (1909), “Modern Architecture, Being the Kahn Lectures” (1931), “Two Lectures on Architecture” (1931), “An Organic Architecture” (1939), among others (Wright 1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1994, 1995).

the drawing table that was to be the foundation. The architect thus regarded his work in equal parts as conceptual and performatory, with the goal of uniting ideas with experience. Similarly, as a writer he did not treat the task of putting ideas into words as merely a necessary but subservient or instrumental part of the process of communicating conceptual content. Quite the contrary, composing essays and lectures was considered by him an autonomous creative activity governed by the same rules he applied in his studio, calculating proportions of forms and producing complex structures. In this connection, it seems appropriate to consider how his writing experience may have affected his architectural practice. The sheer volume of his literary output—five massive tomes of *Collected Writings* plus his extensive correspondence and transcripts of some 300 talks and lectures—might be seen as a result of a condition, a kind of verbal reflux, but while many of his texts repeat and rework the same ideas clearly for pragmatic (pedagogical or business) purposes, they all testify to his urgent need to continuously articulate, in written and spoken performance, his thoughts and feelings. Wright was an extremely busy and productive man and it seems that a large portion of the energy he needed to stay active was generated in the process of their verbalization. It provided him with a mental superstructure out of which he developed the unique ability to think in terms of what he called “the third dimension.” It not only became his trademark but clearly set him apart from his contemporaries, most of whom “ignored or suppressed” the kind of awareness of the nature of creativity and invention it entailed.⁸

As Klinkowitz argues, traces of this disposition are present in Wright’s holistic ideas about architecture and environment. They are also crucial to his writing. Most of his texts are utilitarian in nature—meant to present, elucidate, and disseminate his ideas—and so their conventional formalism at times thwarts Wright’s natural impulse to be creative, inventive and innovative. Some, however, display a heightened level of intellectual and artistic self-awareness, typical of thought and discourse in the postmodern era, an era which the visionary architect portended but did not live long enough to become one of its icons. His 1932 *Autobiography* is exemplary in this respect as a verbal record of both his intellectual development and his labor with words as building blocks from which an edifice to house his thoughts was constructed. The book is a very idiosyncratic record, but even when, as Robert Twombly notes, Wright’s writing is not “especially fluent or polished . . . rambling, with garbled syntax making his prose and his meaning . . . difficult to fathom,” it is strikingly “honest” (2009, 21), experientially true and authentic.

8. Wright’s most complete discussion of the third dimension as a “quality of ‘at-one-ness’ or integral nature in anything or everything,” can be found in “In the Cause of Architecture IX: The Terms” (1992a, 310-16).

Wright is certainly a self-conscious writer, but it is easy to misconstrue his self-awareness. He sometimes acknowledges he feels ill at ease with language, as he does in opening his 1930 six-part Kahn lecture series at Princeton University, when he announces: “In this effort I suppose I am to suffer disadvantage, being more accustomed to saying things with a hod of mortar and some bricks, or with a concrete mixer and a gang of workmen, than by speaking or writing” (1992b, 20). Yet, this “disadvantage” was not a stumbling block but rather a challenge he knew he had to meet. For one thing, at that time, when commissions ran out because of the onset of the Great Depression, Wright literally, as Klinkowitz puts it, had “no alternative but to write himself back into existence” (2014, 30). For a while, then, writing and lecturing were for him the main sources of income, but he did not treat them as hackwork or a temporary diversion from his career as an architect. On the contrary, he made sure there was continuity between these two types of occupation. In a 1930 essay titled “Confession,” he wrote: “So there is little to be done except write one’s best thoughts (if one has thoughts) and, as may be, build that best thought whenever and however it can be built” (1992a, 346).

The building metaphor is absolutely crucial for a proper understanding of his approach. As an architect, he always began by “qualifying” the material at hand “from within” and considering what he could “do with it,” remembering that to “modify it externally is not enough.” Similarly, as an author he began by first establishing the definitions of terms crucial to constructing his discourse before proceeding to write. Without that, words could not effectively communicate meanings. One example he cites is that of the word *organic*, which, he says, “if taken too biologically, is a stumbling block” (1992b, 32). Another is the word *radical*, which, he points out, in his terminology does not suggest extremism but refers to the root of a thing (1992b, 92). Yet another is a term he frequently uses in formulations such as “conventional representation,” where *conventional* does not stand for *ordinary*, *standard* or *traditional*, but instead describes the intellectual process of isolating the basic nature of a thing. To *conventionalize* in Wright’s lexicon equals to “abstract” (1992a, 43). Thus, when encouraging other architects to conventionalize forms of nature instead of imitating them, he means revealing and extracting their essence before they can be translated into the grammar and syntax of designing.

Reflecting on the meaning(s) of many apparently self-explanatory concepts—such as poetry, nature, romance and machine—Wright notes:

. . . our English vocabulary is poor at best in all the words we have with which to express shadings of qualities or of our feeling in dealing with qualities. . . . Nor do we speak a common tongue in the use we have come to make of these main words. We may pack into each of them more or less, and differently than another would dream of doing, or could do. So it is well to clean them up. (1992a, 310)

The impulse “to clean up” is a postmodern reflex, springing from the realization that, as Wright says, “action is a form of idea and idea is, as surely, a form of action,” whether in architecture, literature, theater, or, for that matter, life. That is why for him “a conscientious study of materials and of [the tool] that we must use to give shape to our ideals” is a universally applicable and expedient principle. As an architect he defines his aims in this way: “I want to show you that bricks and mortar may lie to you, that everything in the front parlor may be calling every other thing bad names, not only that but calling you bad names to your very face Many people nowadays live in ‘houses’ instead of homes” (1992a, 20). Klinkowitz is onto something very important when he observes a parallel here between Wright’s approach and Derridean deconstructionism. He writes:

Admitting that a belief is nothing but an assumption is a revolutionary idea, growing slowly from the notion first advanced in anthropology that one culture’s reality is simply a description or an account, and that any valuation can be made not in universal terms but only in judging the persuasiveness of that account. Deconstruction applies this method to beliefs that have stood as absolute, often finding that behind these absolutes are the most conventional of assumptions. It is just these assumptions that Wright uncovers in his study of how an inorganic architecture has been resisted for what he calls literary reasons. (2014, 49)

Among the many postmodern traits present in Wright’s thought and writing, his theatrical leanings are particularly relevant in this context. Not only did he design theaters, but he possessed a profound passion for drama and theatricality. As Judith A. Sebesta observes, “many architectural historians and critics have posited the theatrical nature of both his life and work” (2001, 291), a view corroborated by the way Wright, especially as a lecturer and a writer, took on and combined different roles and spoke in different voices depending on the occasion. He might set himself up as a reformer, a doctor, a teacher, a poet or an artist, a visionary, a romantic, a rationalist or a minimalist. He realized that elocution is not necessarily the architect’s natural facility, therefore, before he speaks he might well consider taking a walk, like Demosthenes did, “by the oceanside with the histrionic pebble in his mouth.” Yet, acknowledging tongue-in-cheek that he did so with “painful misgiving” (1992a, 27), he wielded his pen with confidence and flair. Because he tended to take his authority for granted, he had a natural inclination to pontificate. With a wink to the audience, he explains his penchant for preaching in this way:

My family has been preaching since the days of Reformation in England. . . . Well now you mustn’t let me preach to you. I don’t want to. I don’t want to be a preacher. It is in my blood, I can’t help it, I get that way. Sometimes when I am talking on the platform I feel that sort of thing—I catch myself at it. (1992a, 8)

“Catching myself at it” is the key phrase here as it highlights two crucial characteristics of his manner: self-awareness and unpremeditatedness, traits very clearly manifested in his *Autobiography*. Having started working on it, Wright quickly abandoned longhand and hired an assistant to do the typing while he recounted the story of his life. Rather than acting according to a preliminary plan, draft or outline, he preferred an extemporaneous approach to the verbalization of his thoughts and memories. According to Kenneth Frampton, the result is a “somewhat rambling record . . . some of which, if we are to believe [Wright], was dictated on the run” (1992b, 6). While it is true that Wright “misconstrued facts, altered dates, and wrote incorrectly concerning the incidents in his life” (Wright 1992b, 103), what really matters is the experiential veracity of the act of remembering the past.

To those looking for factual accuracy, Wright would have this to say: “Innumerable are the various collaterals, diagonals, and opposites that went into the place where this book might have come from but did not. I said at the beginning that the real book was between the lines” (2005, 561). It is from that liminal place that it emerges as an “honest work of art,” one that is “true to the conditions of its existence,” as he has it in his essay from 1900 titled “A Philosophy of Fine Art.” In it he points to an important analogy between art and any creative act, or action:

A painting must be a thing made with a brush, dipped in paint and applied to canvas . . . it is not a piece of literature to tell a story, regardless of the conditions of its structure. And if you see a picture in which perhaps a cow is looking out at you “real,” so “lifelike,” rather buy the cow. . . . A picture should be more than an imitation of a real object and more than a pretended hole in the wall through which you see a story about something, or the winter in summer, or the summer in winter! (1992a, 42)

More than anything, a book, like a building or a work of art, Wright asserts, is about itself, about how it came into being as a story which had to be acted out and given a meaning through a process for which the “actor” had to invent a language and a syntax, a medium and a structure within which to express himself. It is what he calls thinking in the third dimension and what today is defined as postmodern performance. He writes:

In this matter of supplying the needed term as the third dimension I may be found guilty of making a language of my own to fit my necessity. Perhaps that is true—although it seems obvious enough to me that the quality lacking in the thought of our modern world where creation is concerned, is simply expressed in this way. I should be thankful for a better, more evident expression of this subjective element. (1992a, 315)

Such self-consciousness may seem rather un-postmodern but it could not be otherwise. After all, Wright lived and worked before postmodern theories were

formulated that would give legitimacy to his kind of thinking. He also knew that, as he insightfully asserts, “philosophies and theorems follow performance in Art” (1992a, 149). His own performance, whether he expressed himself in mortar and bricks or words, was consistently convincing, or persuasive, because he meticulously observed the rules of effective communication. The way he approached complex and challenging issues, in both architectural design and oratory, is encapsulated in his recipe for difficult questions from his students he divulges to Wallace: “The answer is within yourself. Within the nature of the thing that you yourself represent as yourself.” This is not mere rhetoric. It is rhetoric at its most cogent.

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