

From Bach House research by Leila Edwards and Bill Kundert

Wright After 1909

If the years 1900 to 1909 are sometimes referred to as the “golden Oak Park period” in Frank Lloyd Wright’s career, the years from 1910 to 1917 must be categorized as a time of change, turmoil, and tragedy.

In 1909 Wright left for Europe in the company of Mamah Borthwick Cheney, the wife of a client. Shortly after it was discovered that Wright and Cheney were registered as Mr. and Mrs. Wright in a Berlin hotel, their elopement became front page news at home and caused a major scandal. In 1911 when Wright returned from Europe with Mrs. Cheney, who had remained in Germany until her divorce was obtained in the summer of 1911,¹ he did not go back to Oak Park and his family. Instead, he and Mamah (now Borthwick) left for Wisconsin to establish Taliesin, a new home and studio. In 1914 Borthwick, her two children, and four Taliesin employees were brutally murdered by another employee, and much of Taliesin burned.

Brendan Gill observes, “Wright had accepted the Imperial Hotel commission in the early, happy days of his liaison with Mamah Cheney; by the time the first set of plans had been prepared and the backers of the hotel were ready to begin construction, Mamah and her children had been murdered, Taliesin had been burned, and Wright had been pitched headlong into an altogether different stage of his life – one that was to be marked by incessant emotional turmoil and frequent despair.”²

Professionally, there was similar turmoil and dislocation. When Wright left for Germany in 1909 he had 10 commissions; the total dropped to three for each of the years 1912 and 1913.³ Regarding the sharp drop in new commissions, William Drennan notes, “But the scandal played a role, too, in the atrophy of Wright’s professional success. While the influential Wasmuth folio was attracting serious admiration in Europe, the ‘kind of fame [Wright] was getting in his own country,’ biographer Herbert Jacobs observes, ‘was not the kind that would bring clients to his door’ – certainly not clients for houses, Wright’s specialty to this point.”⁴ Robert Twombly observes, “It seemed as if his marital situation would no longer allow clients to entrust him with their family needs even though they continued to hire him for business purposes; from 1910 to 1914 he designed nineteen fewer houses than in the preceding half-decade, but only two fewer nonresidential buildings.”⁵

Several authors have also noted a change in the focus of Wright’s work. According to Edgar Tafel, a former apprentice, “By 1913, in his mid-forties, he had outgrown Oak Park and the Midwest, lost his taste for smaller work, and was looking for new horizons. He was aware that every diplomat and dignitary who visited Japan would stay at the Imperial Hotel and that the

¹ Meryle Secrest, *Frank Lloyd Wright* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1992), pp. 203, 207

² Brendan Gill, *Many Masks, A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Ballantine Books, New York, 1987), p. 265

³ Meryle Secrest, *Frank Lloyd Wright* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1992), pp. 213, 214

⁴ William R. Drennan, *Death In A Prairie House, Frank Lloyd Wright and the Taliesin Murders* (Terrace Books, Madison, WI, 2007), p. 77

⁵ Robert C. Twombly, *Frank Lloyd Wright, His Life and His Architecture* (Wiley, New York, 1979), p. 157

architect's name would be remembered by all.”⁶ Brendan Gill agrees, noting, “By 1913 and 1914, Wright had two of the most important commissions of his life within his grasp [the Imperial Hotel and Midway Gardens], and houses ... for the time being had lost their importance.”⁷

Twombly also agrees, adding, “Perhaps his feelings about the Prairie School had something to do with his disinterest. After 1911 he grew so disenchanted with his former associates that he attacked them publicly in the May 1914 *Architectural Record*, strongly enough, in fact, to sever all ties.”⁸

Wright was changing stylistically. Drennan points out that Wright's designs after the Taliesin fire were remarkably different from the designs he had produced before the tragedy. “For one thing, there were fewer of them: over the next seventeen years, Wright completed just thirty-three commissions, scarcely two a year. And all those designs, Twombly observes, clearly ‘reflected the frustration, suspicion, and reversals’ that had grown out of the catastrophe that had befallen him at Taliesin. The first casualty of that calamity was the Prairie house itself. ‘Wright's prairie period ended,’ says Twombly, ‘in 1914 with the death of Mamah Borthwick.’”⁹

After the fire, Wright's vision changed. What had previously been broad windows, open to the natural world all around, become slits; slab roofs often replaced low-hipped ones; horizontal lines became vertical blocks of poured concrete. The post-fire houses seemed to encourage interior isolation and solitude; they appeared to be secluded sanctuaries meant to shield and protect.¹⁰

Clearly these authors trace Wright's stylistic changes to the personal tragedies that had befallen him. But there are very likely other reasons as well. H. Allen Brooks traces the end of the Prairie period generally to 1914-1916, with the “nail in the coffin” being the onset of World War I. Brooks feels there are a number of reasons for this demise, an important one being cultural changes.¹¹ The apparent attention to privacy may have simply been due to the fact that many of the houses (including the Bach House) were in busy, urban locations. Also, Wright was beginning to experiment with Mayan themes around this time.

The Bach House thus emerges within a rather broad and changing context.

In 1915 Wright's focus was not on the small urban house. He was rebuilding Taliesin after the fire; he was continuing work on the Imperial Hotel; and he was in contact with Aline Barnsdall about her theater plans. The plan for the Bach House was, to a great extent, derived from the “Fireproof House” and the Suburban House Project of 1911. While the final plans were being

⁶ Edgar Tafel, *Years With Frank Lloyd Wright, Apprentice to Genius* (Dover Publications, New York, 1979), p. 98

⁷ Brendan Gill, *Many Masks, A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Ballantine Books, New York, 1987), p. 224

⁸ Robert C. Twombly, *Frank Lloyd Wright, His Life and His Architecture* (Wiley, New York, 1979), p. 158

⁹ William R. Drennan, *Death In A Prairie House, Frank Lloyd Wright and the Taliesin Murders* (Terrace Books, Madison, WI, 2007), p. 157

¹⁰ William R. Drennan, *Death In A Prairie House, Frank Lloyd Wright and the Taliesin Murders* (Terrace Books, Madison, WI, 2007), pp. 158, 159

¹¹ For a more complete discussion of this topic, see H. Allen Brooks, *The Prairie School, Frank Lloyd Wright and His Midwest Contemporaries* (W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1972, reissued 1996)

developed, Wright was in California.¹² No evidence has been found to suggest that he supervised construction, although his son John may have.

Yet, regardless of the motivations behind the design or Wright's construction involvement, the Bach House did break new ground. Elements of the first floor bore little resemblance to his past Prairie designs and would be even more fully realized in the Bogk House in Milwaukee (Frank Lloyd Wright, 1916). The second floor, with the expressive thrust of bedrooms "breaking the box," has more of a Prairie flair, but, again, the plan was not previously seen in Wright's work.

¹² Letters from Wright to Emil Bach, one dated February 18, 1915, and one undated. Letters courtesy of Harboe Architects.