

Wright - His Oak Park Studio

Frank Lloyd Wright operated his Oak Park studio between 1898 and 1909. He wrote in an autobiography that he was able to build the 'workroom' next to his "little Oak Park dwelling-place" by receiving an engineering consulting contract from the Luxfer Prism Company of Chicago. An early announcement of Wright's practice states that he could be reached "at 1119 Rookery from twelve to two P.M." and "at the corner of Forest and Chicago Avenues, Oak Park: Eight to eleven A.M. Seven to nine P.M."

The draftsmen who entered the studio were drawn to Wright by his design aesthetic, philosophy, and growing reputation. According to Wright's *In the Cause of Architecture* essay (Architectural Record, 1908), "fifteen good, bad and indifferent" architects passed through his Oak Park studio. More than twenty architects are documented as having been present in the studio at some point between 1898 and 1909. Architects and artists came and went with no official record of their name, contribution, or length of stay. Unlike Wright's exclusive contract with Adler and Sullivan, the working relationship in the studio allowed the designers to come and go, working on their own or other architects' commissions.

The number of people in the Oak Park studio at any one time typically ranged from five to seven.

Approximately one-fourth of Wright's life's work was carried out in the Oak Park studio.

From 1905 to 1909, he received more than 125 commissions, including Robie House (1908-10), the Coonley Residence (1907), and the Meyer May (1908) residence. Wright's clients were, in his own words, "businessmen with unspoiled instincts and untainted ideas...Most were self-made managers of small or medium-sized companies located in the Chicago Loop". They tended to be Republicans who practiced liberal religions like Unitarianism and Christian Science in varying degrees and who also enjoyed music and golf.

In Wright's later published accounts of the Oak Park studio, he states that he had to train the draftsmen. While some people like Barry Byrne had no previous drafting experience, others, including Marion Mahony, Marion Chamberlain and Walter Burley Griffin, arrived with architectural degrees in hand. Byrne, in a 1963 AIA Journal article, wrote that he was indebted to Drummond and Griffin for the counsel and assistance they gave him in his early days at the studio. Wright, he added, "gave me no attention, condescending or any kind".

Wright was unable to supervise every detail of each project, and, with the arrival of numerous commissions, delegated responsibility to the draftsmen. Byrne was a quick learner and eventually was handed rough preliminary designs to develop into working drawings. Griffin increasingly took charge of running the office and became the office manager and a job superintendent.

For some commissions Wright stated that he "carefully conceived" a project, then assigned a draftsman to follow "its subsequent development through all its phases in drawing room and field, meeting with the client himself on occasion, gaining an all-round development impossible otherwise, and insuring an enthusiasm and a grasp of detail decidedly to the best interest of the client." In other projects, like the Harvey P. Sutton Residence in McCook, Nebraska (1905-1908), at least six people were involved in design and the

construction process (Wright, Griffin, Drummond, Tobin, Byrne, and Roberts).

According to John Lloyd Wright in *My Father Who is on Earth*, the studio architects wore “flowing ties and smocks suitable to the realm”. The draftsmen worked on the main floor and artists including Richard Bock, George Niedecken and Wright’s sister Maginel, created on the balcony. Maginel Wright remembered the studio members going on expeditions to collect interesting grasses and leafy branches, which decorated the studio along with Japanese prints, miniature casts of classical sculpture, and numerous vases and bowls. One of the best early descriptions of the studio is an article by Alfred M. Granger published in the December 1899 issue of *The House Beautiful*.

Wright’s numerous changes to the studio are documented by physical evidence, in historic photographs and in two letters written by Charles E. White, Jr., to Walter Wilcox. In November 1903 White wrote to Wilcox that Wright “is certainly the most impractical man—is way behind in his work, but calmly takes seven weeks to alter his office.” The following May he added that “Twice a year Mr. W. rearranges and changes the different [studio] rooms. He says he has gotten more education in experimenting on his own premises, than in any other way”. When Wright departed for Europe in the fall of 1909, he turned over the commissions in the studio to Hermann von Holst. Projects close to completion were finished by Van Bergen and Isabel Roberts. Wright briefly returned to Oak Park and in 1911 altered the studio into a home for his family.