

WRIGHT'S LATER WORK

Wright's significant work did not stop with the Prairie style houses. It continued in an even stronger personal style, showing further experimentation and growth on his part. (For a more detailed listing of Wright's work, see Henry Russell Hitchcock: *In the Nature of Materials: The Buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright, 1887–1941*.)

System Plans (1913–1916)

This was Wright's first attempt at a low-cost house for the average American. It involved ready-cut and partially prefabricated units that could be assembled in different ways to build modest single-family, duplex, or apartment houses. They were designed for the Richards Brothers in Milwaukee, but Wright broke with the firm and withdrew from the project. Some were eventually built without his supervision but the buildings never realized the full potential of the concept.

Textile Block Houses (1923–1930)

In this system, concrete blocks are cast with integral patterns and laid up with vertical and horizontal reinforcing rods like the warp and woof of a fabric—hence the name “Textile Block.” The first house built using these blocks was the Mrs. Alice (George Madison) Millard Residence (1938) in Pasadena, California. With its flat roof, it is quite different from the Prairie houses, but it follows the same principles: it rises from the edge of a ravine (not a prairie) so the entrance comes in at the second floor, and the deep textured surfaces are particularly suited to the brilliant sunlight. Interior wall surfaces are the same plain and textured block used on the exterior. It is a spatial solution for a difficult site.

Usonian Houses (1936–1959)

Wright used the term “Usonian” to label what he planned as the ideal low-cost house for the average American. These houses, which used common materials and a standard grid system, became as significant in Wright's later career as the Prairie houses were to his years in Oak Park. The first Usonian house was designed in 1936 and was realized as the Jacobs First Residence the following year. Between 1936 and 1959, Wright designed approximately 170 Usonian houses, of which 140 were actually built.

Wright attributed the term Usonian, his name for the United States, to Samuel Butler's novel *Erewhon* where, in fact, it does not appear. In a 1961 paper on Wright's massive Broadacre City project, George Collins suggests that Wright derived the name during his 1910 trip to Europe from talk calling the United States, ‘Usonia’ to avoid confusion with the new Union of South Africa. Usonian came to represent the newly reformed American society Wright envisioned and tried to create during the last 25 years of his career.

Usonian houses include common brick walls that are exposed both inside and outside. Wood walls of horizontal board and batten are screwed to a wooden core, forming both interior and exterior wall finishes. This eliminated the need for plastering and wall decoration. Rows of glazed floor-to-ceiling doors and bands of casement windows form several of the walls. Floors are red-colored concrete, with heating pipes embedded in gravel below the concrete.

Unlike a conventional house, the Usonian house has no basement and no attic. Roofs are usually flat (as on the Jacobs First Residence) or, if pitched, the ceilings follow the slope of the roofs. There are no gutters or downspouts. There is no garage—Wright employed the carport as an extension of the roof providing adequate shelter for the modern car. To save space, bedrooms, baths and kitchens are modestly sized and efficient, allowing the living/dining area to be quite spacious. On the rear of the house, tall glazed doors extend the living/dining area and the bedrooms to exterior concrete terraces and the garden beyond. High clerestory windows on the street side of the house provide cross ventilation and

light without sacrificing privacy.

Lighting fixtures are incorporated into the architecture by way of indirect light shining upon the ceiling from lower “decks” or by recessed lights shining down through patterned boards. Conventional heating fixtures are done away with because the whole floor becomes a radiant panel via the steam or hot water pipes embedded below the slab.

Both the design and the execution of a Usonian house are based on a standard grid or unit system (a 2 foot x 2 foot square, a 2 foot x 4 foot rectangle, a hexagon, or a triangular grid.) This led to standardization and economy in designing and building these houses. Many parts could be prefabricated in a shop or on the site. The grid was inscribed in the concrete mat both as an aid to the workmen and to give a sense of proportion of the part to the whole.

There are few solid corners—openings to other rooms or mitered glass corner windows dissolve the sense of confinement without losing the sense of shelter provided by the wide overhanging roof. No room is a simple box. The living area, dining area, and kitchen all flow together as one space with breaks in the walls, alcoves, brick piers, and built-in furniture providing visual privacy without interrupting the flow of space. Even in the small bedrooms, built-in furniture, walls that jog, and different ceiling levels help the space to break out of a box-like confinement.

Writings and Projects (1929–1959)

During the Depression, Wright spent much of his time lecturing and writing. In 1932, he published *The Disappearing City*¹ in which he turned his attention from individual houses to the whole environment in which people live and work. In 1933, the Taliesin Fellowship was opened for tuition-paying apprentices, and the buildings of the Hillside Home School were remodeled to accommodate them.

The apprentices worked on the remodeling and also on the Broadacre City project, which demonstrated Wright’s ideas on how to improve life for American citizens by building a series of self-contained cities. Edgar J. Kaufmann provided funding for this project. The model was exhibited in New York in 1935. It is interesting to see that some of the tower apartment houses shown in Broadacre City were based on a 1929 project that was never built. It had a central utility core with cantilevered floors that was considered fantastic then, but has a striking resemblance to Bertrand Goldberg’s Marina City Towers (Chicago) today.

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