The Business of Art/The Art of Business

by Sylvia Bokor

This issue: How Architecture Is Art

It's easy to see why architecture is a business. It provides a utilitarian product. And it's easy to see why it's essential to man's life and progress. To exist without shelter in any climate other than tropical would be exceedingly difficult. To live qua man without shelter would be impossible.

But it's not so easy to see why architecture is an art, nor how it is made so. One of the reasons is that our experience of such architecture is very limited. In proportion to the millions of buildings dotting the planet, very few qualify as art. Many buildings have imposing façades, sometimes striking, sometimes bizarre, most quite commonplace. Some buildings which qualify as art are debased as time passes, by thoughtless additions, hideously "re-modeled" interiors. Other buildings, such as houses, are quite lovely piece-meal. But a statement, if any, comes from what the residents have put into the building, its interior decor. It is the residents' values which give meaning to the place. If you look for a sign of the architect's idea, you more than likely won't find one. In short, the vast majority of buildings, whether home or business, are little more than an arrangement of foundation, walls and roof. Such buildings offer little or no esthetic experience.

"Architecture," Ayn Rand wrote, "is in a class by itself because it combines art with a utilitarian purpose and does not re-create reality, but creates a structure for man's habitation or use, expressing man's values."[1]

In order to express values, an artwork does not merely present an assortment of percepts. Rather, the combination of choices and emphases adds up to something other than the parts. An automobile does not in itself *express* the pleasure of independent, private transportation. We bring that value to the object. Its value is in our operation of it. But even to an atheist, the interior of the Cathedral at Chartres (France, 1194-1220) expresses man's aspiration for the best and highest possible. Even to those who love city-life, Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Water (Bear Run, Pennsylvania,1936) expresses the value of serenity offered by the beauty of running waters amid dramatic landscape. These buildings bring values to us. We need do nothing but contemplate them.

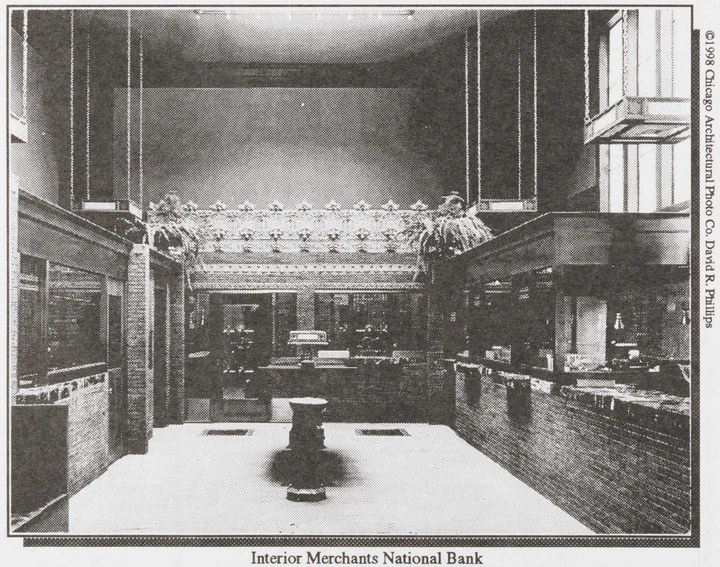
Still, unless you've experienced a building the way you've experienced other of the arts, the issue of *expression* in regard to architecture is rather difficult to understand. Because certain questions arise, such as, *how* can an arrangement of space convey some abstract meaning or express values?

The fundamental principle which answers this question was first identified by Louis Henri Sullivan (1856-1924): "form follows function." Mr. Sullivan held that the function of a building must be considered first; its form should follow; that it is its function which is the key to the central idea of a building and that all parts of a building must be true to that central idea.

Mr. Sullivan's design for the Merchant's National Bank Building (Grinnell, Iowa, 1914) is a good example of this principle. For over a hundred years, there had been a tradition of crypt-like style in bank architecture. Mr. Sullivan blasted that tradition to smithereens. He lifted ceilings high above the customer to stress the importance of the interior space. Broad vertical windows of softly rose-tinted glass soared to ceiling height. Additional natural light streamed in through a large skylight poised above the central public area. Electric lights descended on long chains from the ceiling to about nine feet above floor traffic. They were encased in simple rectangles of wood and tinted glass. The result was a splendid mix of natural and artificial illumination.

On the outside, the design of the "rose window" was repeated in the masonry design surrounding it–a very elaborate design combining geometric and organic motifs. The same design was repeated on the inside in the large gilded clock above the entrance and in the three-dimensional gilded reliefs emphasizing the solidity of the vault.

Sullivan contrasted rich textures using natural materials: "verde antique marble counter tops; hickory stained wood; speckled buff salt-glazed Roman brick veneers; and pinkish-gray Tennessee marble floors."[2] He used color and texture lavishly, balancing



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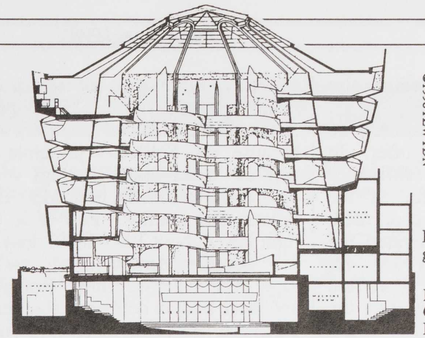
Interior Merchants National Bank

greens and pinks in his marble choices with the rose tint of the vertical windows and the warm glow of gold leaf; he used richly burnished woods for writing tables, casements, doors, and simple but prominent molding features against plain walls of exposed brick. The "rose window," a large circle of stained glass, was composed of blues and greens with contrasting tones of orange and red. The contrast with the gilded reliefs, clockwork and brass-lined teller windows was sumptuous. "On the side elevation he gilded the window colonnettes, matching the brilliance of the gilt winged lions that frame the main entrance."[3] The combination of spaciousness, rich textures, colors, an extensive use of gold leaf and unrestrained illumination created an ambiance of secure comfort suffused with golden light. Few things better express the value of wealth and money.



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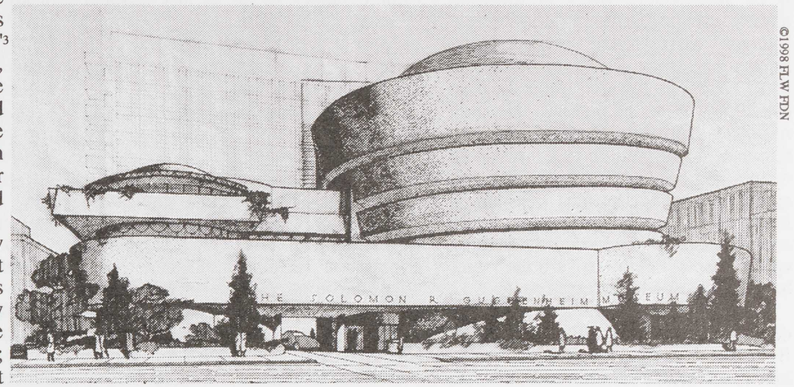
Left: Section through main gallery and dome.

Below: Drawing of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum by Frank Lloyd Wright, 1956.



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This is architecture as art. How was it accomplished? The architect integrated the elements of his building by stressing with every choice his central idea. He allowed no extraneous features; he rejected anything that did not express or help to express his central idea. What were the means?

Essentially, there are three attributes of a building's design that are used to express values in architecture: its structure, its materials, its plan.

The structure of a building is concerned with such things as elevation, footings, foundation and the actual construction of the building. For example the thickness of the insulation, the arrangement of the girders or joists and truss, the space between the ceiling and the roof, the fenestration, the set backs. These things can make a difference in how the building will control light, sound and moisture. Such choices result in an overall sense of the building. The building's structure also involves how the walls are supported, whether by flying buttresses as in the days previous to steel, or wood frame on a beam and concrete foundation as for example in a house, or by steel girders as for example in a skyscraper, and so forth. Structure also concerns roofing, whether it's cantilevered, pitched, flat, multi-leveled or domed.

The materials of a building involve not only what the building will be made of, but also the materials to be used in the interior, such as flooring and wall covering, style of lighting, fixtures, and so on. Every choice, from the smallest detail such as selection of pulls to more dominant features such as the choice of doors, will make a difference in the final product.

Although the façade, fenestration and elevation are usually discussed as part of the structure, they result, at least in the case of most modern buildings, from the plan.

The plan is concerned with the function of the building, that is, what the building is going to be used for. This entails consideration of traffic, storage, maintenance and the like. The plan also lays out all interior apparatus for appropriate functioning. For example, electrical conduits, waste disposal, heating and cooling ducts, and so forth.

The plan is probably one of the most difficult of the architect's many tasks. But there is one harder still: integrating all aspects of the building to express man's values. An example of such integration is the Guggenheim Museum in New York (1957, Frank Lloyd Wright, architect). Ignoring the current content, the building has the most exquisitely simple and convenient plan for a museum ever built. By elevator the visitor is whisked from the main lobby to the top floor. From there he may stroll at his leisure down a comfortably graded, spiraling ramp allowing him to view easily the museum's exhibitions. The interior's spiraling ramp is suggested in the façade and is the major structural feature of the whole. No windows puncture the finely brushed poured concrete as it swirls downward in diminishing levels. Instead, bands of glass invisible from the street are re-cessed around the perimeter at each level. Natural light floods the ramp through the domed roofing. Artificial illumination pinpoints each exhibit. Materials chosen are predominately marble and finely brushed poured concrete. Textures are smooth, held to a minimum, avoiding distraction from the exhibits.

Site is not an attribute of a building. However, since the career of Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959), most architects have come to consider it an integral part of the design. Mr. Wright insisted on what he called "organic architecture." He held that "A building should grow easily from its site and be designed from inside out."[4] Falling Water is an eloquent demonstration of that idea. It is not a building adapated to nature. It was shaped to use natural rock formation and waterfalls in such a