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## In search of (lost) connection: organic architecture and bioethics

### The case of Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959)

#### ABSTRACT

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Taking bioethics not only as a (new) biomedical ethics but as the ethics of biological sciences (V. R. Potter) or a broader ethics related to all the aspects of *bios* (F. Jahr), is not without consequences: it implies the questioning of our existing knowledge and understanding of other forms and images of modern society. Although architecture plays an important role in our culture, it has unjustly been ignored by bioethics as an integrative discipline with a pluri-perspective approach.

The answer to the question what architecture is, can hardly be reached within one paper, if one would like to take into account the technical and the functional, but also the esthetical and the cultural aspects of architecture. Like institutions, architecture works as a mediator, providing *shelter* and delivering the fulfilment of other needs (safety, privacy, the home-sweet-home feeling, services, etc.), but it also limits the freedom and intervenes with the intrinsic relation between man and nature.

As a reaction to the changes and challenges of modern science and society, the 20th-century architecture has provided several original concepts. Following the main ideas of the organic architecture, this paper aims at finding out its major relations to bioethics, especially having in mind the life and work of Frank Lloyd Wright, deeply enrooted in Wisconsin, the state where V. R. Potter's bioethics was born.

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## Introduction

Let us pretend that at least we, the students of bioethics, agree upon its definition: bioethics is not only „new medical ethics“ dealing with modern biomedical and research conundrums; bioethics is, like Fritz Jahr and Van Rensselaer Potter wanted it to be, a much broader discipline addressing the matter of life in all its abstract and concrete forms and aspects. If so, every human activity may be, can be, or even should be judged from the bioethics perspective, particularly if it results in changing human life. Why, then, architecture has been devoted so little bioethical attention? Perhaps because the definition of architecture may sound as complex as the one of bioethics itself.

## Architecture for non-architects

While considering architecture, one inevitably departs from construction as a technical activity oriented to the protection and improvement of life. Obviously, this is miles away from architecture, going step further and developing a new, artistic and cultural value. Architecture uses material elements for the creation of a non-material reality (Pađan, 2004, p. 94), or, in the words of Andrew Ballantyne, „buildings are constructed to solve practical problems, but often they do so much more – when this happens, they become architecture and reach cultural dimension“ (Ballantyne, 2004, p. 22).

## Architecture and bioethics: building (historical) connections

Like in many other disciplines, the 20th century brought a turning point both to architecture and to bioethics. The reasons for this might have been the same. The 18th-century Enlightenment period replaced the rhetorical and reflective mode of thinking by the scientific one (Lim, 2011). Until that moment, architecture had only remained within the sphere of interest of the educated minority, acting simultaneously as the creators and the users of the only „good style.“ The following industrial revolution, however, changed social relations in various aspects, including the emergence of interest of citizens for the esthetical (Richards, 1955). That gave impetus to the rise of social reflection of architecture, developing from the 1920s on (Schumacher, 2012, 730) – at the same period when Fritz Jahr was conceiving bioethics. And still, according to mid-20th-century architectural theory, the modern history of art has omitted the systematic codification and validation of the social history of architecture, taking into account only its „technical and constructional

elements“ (Šegvić, 1955, p. 8) and forgetting that architecture has always been reflecting social and current trends. The architecture is never a feature of a building, but of a building reflecting a culture (Ballantyne, 2004, 32).

If in the past architecture might have disposed of a programmatic strength in **constructing** life settings (a good example of this is Petar Hektorović's Tvrđalj from Stari Grad, the island of Hvar, Croatia, with its use of natural elements resulting in a newly shaped harmony), nowadays, architecture often has to reconcile with the ambition of **sanation** of disturbed life settings (Šegvić, 1995, p. 9). One more time, the logic of architecture draws nearer to the logic of bioethics, and the protagonists of modern architecture may easily become the protagonists of bioethics. Precisely this was the case of Frank Lloyd Wright.

## Architecture in the Wright eyes

Frank Lincoln Wright was born in 1867 in Richland Center, Wisconsin, to the family of Welsh origin. He was exposed to religious and musical influence of his father William Russel Cary Wright and to the Fröbelian pedagogical approach of his mother Anna Lloyd Jones (Gelmini, 2008, pp. 21-27). After his parents had divorced in 1885, he changed his second name from Lincoln to Lloyd. His early childhood was strongly related to the natural landscapes of Wisconsin, and later on transformed into his general view of life, living, and the world. Due to his lack of interest for schooling, in 1887, he left higher education and started to work first as a drawer, and later as architect in several offices in Chicago. After the great fire in 1871, Chicago became the place of rapid development (De Long, 1997, 2), which included the emergence of progressive architectonic ideas. After he had learned from Louis Sullivan (1856-1924), Dankmar Adler (1844-1900), and others, in the early 1890s, Wright decided to open his own office, first making projects for his relatives, and later for the most powerful Chicago businessmen. Wright's projects were not radical (some 400 projects were realised during his lifetime, and almost 400 others remained in sketches): on the contrary, his solutions were considered too conservative, going back to the American traditional family-house values. In 1894, he published on the Prairie House style:

Simplicity and repose are qualities that measure the true values of any work and art; There should be as many kind (styles) of houses as there are kinds (styles) of people and as many differentiations as there are different individuals. A man who has individuality (and what man lacks it?) has a right to its expression in his own environment. A building should appear to grow easily from its site and be shaped to

harmonize with its surroundings if Nature is manifest there, and if not, try to make it as quiet, substantial and organic as She would have been were the opportunity hers. Colors require the same conventionalizing process to make them fit to live with that natural form do; so go to the woods and fields for color schemes. Bring out the nature of the materials, let their nature intimately into your scheme ... No treatment can be really a matter of fine art when there natural characteristics are, or their nature is, outraged or neglected. A house that has character stands a good chance of growing more valuable as it grows older ... Buildings like people must first be sincere, must be true, and then vital and gracious and lovable as may be. Above all, integrity (Brooks Pfeiffer, 2008, pp. 35-36).

In his early ages, Wright is under strong influence of some European influences (1909-1910 he spends travelling around Europe, specially to Germany and Italy, *absorbing* Greek, Byzantine, Roman and Gothic forms). Wright explains this phase by the argument that the true art of architecture can only be seen as reflection of indigenous structures, cultural, but natural (that is also what American modern architecture need to establish). Several years later, he lives in Japan, looking for new esthetical inspiration and producing some of his famous works (Yokodo Guest House, Jiyu Gakuen Girls' School - called the House of Tomorrow, The Imperial Hotel, 1915-1922). For Wright, beauty within the Japanese culture is a pure moral experience:

Go deep enough into your experience to find that beauty is in itself the kinest kind of morality – ethical, purely – the essential fact, I mean, of all morals and manners – and you may personally feel in these esthetic abstractions of the Japanese mind the innocent and vivid joy which, by reason of obviously established sentiments, is yours in the flowers of field or garden (Brooks Pfeiffer, 2008, p. 66).

Nature certainly remained one of Lloyd Wright's five crucial inspirations (beside his dear master Louis Sullivan, music – especially Ludwig van Beethoven, Japanese art, prints and buildings, and the Froebel Gifts). For the last decades of his life, his home and studio was Taliesin in Spring Green, Iowa County, Wisconsin, only about 60 kilometers West from the place where a few years later Van Rensselaer Potter will conceive his bioethics.

Although many claim Wright is the author of the term „Organic Architecture,“ this is not confirmed. There is no doubt, however, that Wright used the term „organic“ to explain his own philosophy, having in mind Nature as the ultimate model and

following its main principles – kinship of building to ground, decentralisation, natural character, tenuity plus continuity, and the view of the third dimension in depth (Brooks Pfeiffer, 2008, pp. 17-18). In Wright's own words,

nothing can live without entity. Now, organic architecture seeks entity, it seeks that completeness in idea in execution without is absolutely true in method, true in purpose, true in character, and is as much the man who lives in it as he is himself... (Meehan, 1992., 49).

## Toward a conclusion

Like in many other cases in history, the major thinkers – of bioethical architecture and of architectural bioethics – lived so close to each other that the cloud of their ideas must have overlapped: showing us a very similar ways to restoring humanity.

There is no better way of thinking bioethically than to work and live bioethically. Frank Lloyd Wright most probably never knew of the term bioethics: he must have met Van Rensselaer Potter, however, in several occasions - as a member of the same Unitarian Church, and witnessing Potter's (vain) engagement for the realisation of Wright's project of the Madison Menona Terrace Convention Center (realised only in 1997). Hosting a long list of environmentally sensitive minds, from John Muir and Aldo Leopold, to Frank Lloyd Wright and V. R. Potter, Wisconsin proved to be the crucial meeting point of bioethical ideas, deeply rooted in the native voices of pre-Columbian cultures.

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