

# Karsten Harries' Natural Symbols and Frank Lloyd Wright's Natural Houses

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**I**N *THOUGHTS ON A NON-ARBITRARY ARCHITECTURE*, phenomenological philosopher Karsten Harries (1983) speaks of a rediscovery of a language of natural symbols. This language might help create buildings that “are experienced as necessary rather than arbitrary” (ibid., p. 18). These natural symbols, says Harries, “can be derived simply from an analysis of man’s being in the world. They are not tied to a particular culture or region” (ibid., p. 17).

In fact, these symbols are said to express the essential patterns of human existence in the world – up/down, front/back, left/right, dark/light, and so forth. Though these symbols are highly related to our everyday life, they are somewhat intangible in architecture. It is difficult to imagine an architecture that expresses these experienced qualities without using specific materials and forms. As Harries emphasizes, this vocabulary of natural symbols is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the creation of buildings that are non-arbitrary (ibid., p. 18).

Harries’ article leaves us with several questions that relate to this considerable gap between a vocabulary of natural symbols and real architecture. For example, what does a non-arbitrary architecture speaking with natural symbols look like? Are there any modern buildings that might be related to a non-arbitrary architecture? Is

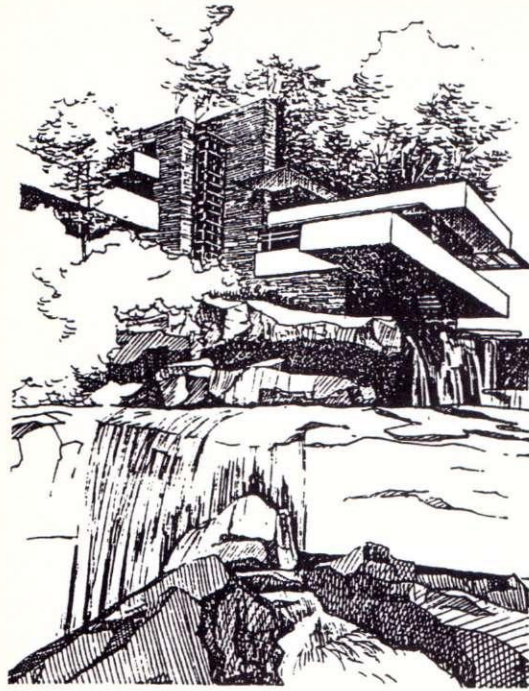
there any way to bridge the gap between meaning and material expression and thereby achieve a non-arbitrary architecture?

As I study Frank Lloyd Wright’s buildings, I become more and more aware that the uniqueness of his architecture lies largely in its expression and interpretation of nature and people’s existence in the world. One can say that natural symbols are the basic vocabulary of Wright’s language of organic architecture, especially in his house designs.

In this article, I seek to present Wright’s philosophy of house design in relation to Harries’ theory of natural symbols and non-arbitrary architecture. I seek to demonstrate that Wright’s “natural house” is one way to achieve a non-arbitrary architecture. Especially, I draw on *The Natural House*, written by Wright in 1954 and providing a detailed picture of his philosophy of house design.

## **Architecture as Meaningful Order**

A key task of architecture, says Harries, is “interpreting the world as a meaningful order in which the individual can find his place in the midst of nature and community” (Harries, 1983, p. 16). Harries also argues that “the less nature and culture determine what we have to be, the greater our freedom; the greater also the dread of arbitrariness” (ibid., p. 11).



These two statements indicate that, for Harries, architecture – or more precisely, a *non-arbitrary architecture* – is an expression of a certain order. In turn, this order involves two elements – *nature* and *culture* – that mark the essence of human life. Arbitrary architecture is accompanied by a certain freedom from these two elements, while non-arbitrary architecture is constrained by them in some way.

Wright, like Harries, also refers to architecture as an expression and interpretation of the essence of human life. Wright always sought to find the inherent reality of a certain structure, and this reality is what he called a *natural law*. Wright believed that both the starting point as well as the end of this natural law is *nature*. In regard to house design, for example, he says that a dwelling should express

a natural performance, one that is integral to site, integral to environment, integral to the life of the inhabitants. A house integral with the nature of material ... all the elements of the environment go into and throughout the house (Wright, 1954, p. 134).

This statement suggests that, for Wright, the first way to express natural symbols that support dwelling is by integrating the house with site, which is literally the *root* of any particular shelter. Wright insisted that people should live close to nature. In this regard, he designed his houses to be inseparable from the landscape and the topographic feature of the site.

Perhaps he best achieved this groundedness in Fallingwater, a house in which one sees nothing but the firm “root” of the dwelling. The stone chimneys and walls are vertically anchored to the rocks and point toward the sky. One also sees that the building’s horizontal spaces project outward in three directions to receive the gifts of nature.

In these architectural gestures, the inside of the house flows toward the outside, and the outside penetrates inwardly. This fusion of inside and outside through the architectural expressions of verticality and horizontality best expresses Wright’s idea that people should live with nature.

Wright’s second consideration concerning the natural house is his belief that nature offers a reservoir of exemplary architectural forms and relationships. In other words, nature is a “practical school in which a sense of proportion may be cultivated” (Wright, 1955, p. 23). As one sees in Fallingwater, the hard square rocks provide the original forms for the rectangular terraces and chimneys of the house. These forms are so naturally born from and attached to the physical environment that they become an inseparable part. In other words, they are not added to the site arbitrarily but, rather, grow with it and gain their being *exactly through* these natural forms.

Third, Wright insisted on a particular way of using materials: that they should be allowed to be themselves. He tried to see brick as brick, wood as wood – to see all things honestly as themselves. He never covered natural materials with extraneous color, since he believed that such artificial hues did not belong to the inherent qualities of the original materials. Further, he sought to use local materials as much as pos-

sible so that the houses had a sense of belonging to the site (Twombly, 1979, p. 309).

In his Pew House, for example, Wright used wooden balconies to echo the surrounding woods. In Fallingwater, he employed concrete slabs to express respect for the rocky site. These considerations allowed his houses to have a physical, material bond with the earth. In this sense, the houses have deep roots into the ground and convey stability, strength and security – all important qualities of the human need to dwell.

Fourth, Wright emphasized the relationship of the house to the natural climate, which is an integral part of the natural environment in which people live. Whenever possible, he faced his houses south to provide a natural heat and light and thereby provide residents with more direct bodily contact with nature.

His decisions in regard to the use of particular architectural expressions are also bound to local weather requirements. One example is his Walker House, which he called a “cabin on the rocks.” Here, he used a large window surface rather than small window holes to join the house visually with the sea and to allow for ventilation and light. The glass wall became a permeable membrane to adjust the relationship between inside and outside and between human life and the world of weather.

### **The Question of Culture**

The above four considerations demonstrate how Wright’s natural house design is bounded by *nature*. His architectural expressions are so deeply and harmoniously rooted in the natural environment that one can hardly question their necessity and appropriateness.

But what of the cultural dimension of Wright’s natural house? His residential designs were mostly for upper- and middle-class American families—teachers, professors, doctors, rich businessman, and so forth. Later in his life, Wright realized that the many different “individuals” for whom he designed were the center of his houses. He insisted that there should be as many different kinds of houses as there were different

kinds of people. He sought in his house designs to express the wills of these many different individuals who carry on the culture of their time and society. Wright hoped to articulate this culture architecturally and to suggest improvements through a better built world.

Wright considered American culture as fragmented “cash-and-carry” salesmanship and boosterism (Twombly, 1979, p. 323). One way to shift the selfish materialism of American society, Wright believed, was to model human life after nature,

where everything took its proper place, nothing was superfluous, structure was absolutely harmonious, yet where each component asserted individuality, namely, self-expression within an all-encompassing unity (Wright, quoted in Twombly, 1979, p. 332).

In other words, Wright sought to substitute nature for culture. He believed that culture might be realized by calling for a learning from nature. In this sense, one can argue that, for Wright, the inherent structure of architectural reality is that *nature and culture should be one*. Tightly bound to nature, his natural houses would also, therefore, reflect an ideal model of culture.

In fact, Wright was so interested in Oriental culture that he admitted that his organic architecture looked more Eastern than Western (Wright, 1954, p. 218). It also appears that Wright’s understanding of the architectural inside/outside relationship was derived from the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, who was perhaps the first thinker to realize the importance of the “with-in” of a building:

We turn clay to make a vessel; but it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the vessel depends. We pierce doors and windows to make a house; and it is on these spaces where there is nothing that the usefulness of the house depends. Therefore, just as we take advantage of what is, we should recognize the usefulness of what is not (Lao Tzu, quoted in Waley, 1956, p. 155).

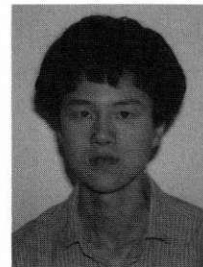
Wright came to believe that the spirit of Oriental architecture – the great sense of shelter enclosing the “inside,” and the close relation with nature from inside out – describes an essential architectural truth. This spirit encouraged him in his search for a natural expression in his house designs.

In this sense, the cultural dimension of Wright’s architecture is not limited to a particular place, time, or society. Instead, he believed that a design in tune with culture is an understanding of the whole natural world grounded in how human beings live. His preference for Oriental philosophy and architecture was not a fashionable interest in stylistic novelty but, rather, a deep and genuine concern the truth of architecture itself. He concluded that “it is true that the wiser, older civilizations of the world had a quiescent sense of [the truth of architecture] long before we of the West came to it” (Wright, 1954, p. 219). In this way, the more nature-bound Oriental culture became a foundation for Wright’s vision of modern Western culture and architecture.

## Conclusion

In Wright’s houses, one does not find literal translations of symbols of the past – what Harries calls “conventional symbols,” that is, meanings derived from handed-down historical and cultural traditions. Instead, Wright’s natural houses, involve the riches of nature – forms, materials, structures, sounds, and the unity of human life and the natural world. This architectural experience is not grounded in any specific time or place. Rather, this quality is linked to the shared qualities of human existence.

The architectural expressions of Wright’s houses are timeless and full of life. These built qualities are necessary and could not readily be otherwise. One can conclude that, if Harries interpreted Wright’s “natural houses,” he would more than likely suggest that they are one example of a non-arbitrary architecture. These houses are one powerful expression of natural symbols brought down to earth through vision and design in tune with human dwelling.



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