

# Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture

For outsiders, the school's unusual practices can be shocking

Photos by Rod Searcey for CrossTalk

By Kathy Witkowsky

SCOTTSDALE, ARIZONA

**O**N A CHILL AND CLEAR desert morning at Taliesin West, Frank Lloyd Wright's renowned Arizona landmark, several tour groups meandered through the main building, as they do every day, learning about Wright's "destruction of the box" through cantilevers and open floor plans. Meanwhile, a small group of students at Wright's namesake school of architecture there were getting a literal lesson in destruction. Using shovels and pickaxes, they demolished the roof of a small outbuilding, chipping through the light concrete and foam insulation, then tossing the debris over the rooftop, where it piled up near a large saguaro cactus.

The roof demolition was the first phase of an expansion project for a school computer laboratory. It also was considered an essential part of the students' education—a chance for them to obtain hands-on construction experience.

During a short break, Sarah Murphy, of Clearwater, Minnesota, who said she decided to pursue her Bachelor of Architectural Studies degree at the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture because "it fit my personality better than the normal school," sipped lemonade and pointed out the blisters on her hands to fellow student Tony Walker. He was unsympathetic. After wiping the sweat from his forehead, he removed first one glove and then the other to tick off proof of his own efforts. "Blister, blister, blister," chanted the 32-year-old Master of Architecture candidate, jabbing at one palm before turning to the other and repeating the observation.

"Oh, I'm not complaining," responded Murphy cheerily.

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In fact, the 19-year-old said that she considered them "battle scars": proof of her commitment to the school's philosophy of learning by doing—a philosophy that is every bit as important to the school today as it was when Frank Lloyd Wright was alive. Widely heralded as America's greatest architect, Wright's

innovative building design overshadowed his contribution to education: an architecture school so dedicated to the integration of life, learning and work as to make them virtually indistinguishable. Think of it as a 24-7 exercise in interdisciplinary studies, a place where "anything you do is an educational opportunity—even taking out the garbage," said Arnold Roy, who arrived at the school in 1952 and now lives, teaches and practices architecture there as one of 27 senior members of the so-called Taliesin Fellowship.



Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West, near Scottsdale, Arizona, houses a school, a community and a commercial architectural practice.

For outsiders, the school's unusual practices can come as a bit of a shock. When an evaluation team from the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools visited Taliesin West in 1997, they were "blown away," said David O. Justice, who was a member of the team. "I suppose it's probably fair to say we were kind of appalled because there was nothing approaching what we had assumed to be the necessary components of a university," said Justice, vice president for Lifelong Learning and Suburban Campuses at Chicago's De Paul University. "There weren't classrooms and labs and the normal array of workstations... What we would associate with a normal university architectural school just wasn't there. And that raised all sorts of alarm bells."

But after three days of watching the school in action, the team was converted. "We became very sold on it," said Justice. In their subsequent report, the team not only recommended the school's accreditation be extended for seven years (which it subsequently was), they lauded it as one model for higher education, saying, "The Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture offers an important alternative approach to the education of architects and to higher education in general. It has the potential to influence and shape both professional and general education."

Justice has since joined the board of trustees of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, the umbrella organization that oversees the school, an architectural firm, the Fellowship, the campuses and the intellectual properties. "It's been wonderful," said Justice. "I've just learned more and more and gotten deeper into an understanding of the culture—which in some ways takes on an even larger life than the school."

That is by design. Wright believed that life and architecture



**Students and professional architects work together on drafting projects.**

were inextricably intertwined, that, in his words, “architecture is life; or at least it is life taking form.” So, in 1932, in an effort to teach that philosophy as well as raise some much-needed cash, he and his wife, Olgivanna, founded what they called the Taliesin Fellowship, a school and community for aspiring architects at his home in Spring Green, Wisconsin. The students, or apprentices, as the Wrights called them, were involved in nearly every aspect of what they envisioned as a self-sufficient community: from cooking and cleaning to growing food to quarrying the stone, mixing the mortar and cutting the trees used to build a new studio.

In 1937, Wright and the apprentices used native rock and sand to build Taliesin West, their winter camp outside of Scottsdale, which is now considered one of his finest architectural achievements, and they began to split their time

between the midwest and the desert. Critics compared the arrangement to a southern slave plantation, but the apprentices saw it as a golden opportunity to learn from a master.

Though Wright died in 1959, and his wife, who remained at Taliesin’s helm, died in 1985, the Fellowship lives on. There are about 20 apprentices, as the students are still known within the community. Roughly half of them are Bachelor of Architectural Studies degree candidates, and the rest are candidates for Master of Architecture degrees. They continue to travel back and forth between the two architectural landmarks, where they live with members of the Taliesin

Fellowship, 19 of whom studied with Wright himself. There are also about 120 employees—tour guides, architects, faculty and staff—who work, and in some cases live, at both Taliesins and a satellite architectural office in Madison, Wisconsin.

Just as their predecessors did, the apprentices continue to

immerse themselves in the three aspects of their education: construction, which provides practical training; studio work at Taliesin Architects, the on-site firm that descended from Wright’s practice, where they learn and apply theory and design skills; and community involvement, which, along with lectures, presentations and independent studies, is Taliesin’s answer to the liberal arts, and is considered a cornerstone of the school’s mission.

So, while Sarah Murphy might begin her day with a shovel in her hand, she might end it at a presentation about Frank Lloyd Wright’s residential homes, or a slide show about the future of office design, or huddled over a computer, learning how to use a computer-aided design program. In between, you might find her enjoying mid-morning coffee and egg-salad sandwiches with the rest of the Taliesin community at the apartment of Cornelia Brierly, who joined the Fellowship in 1934 and remains an active participant. Or, as part of Murphy’s maintenance duties, she might be cleaning and preparing a guest cottage for one of Taliesin’s frequent overnight visitors. At some point she’ll take a break to write in her journal, where, as part of the school’s emphasis on self-assessment, she’s expected to keep a list of her experiences and her sense of what she’s learning from each one. She will eat dinner—a simple buffet-style meal prepared with the help of an apprentice—with the entire Fellowship, then clear her dishes into the kitchen, where they will be washed by another apprentice.

And when she is ready for bed, she’ll brush her teeth in the women’s locker room, then venture a couple of hundred yards into the desert to her “shelter,” an eight-foot-square canvas shepherd’s tent where she’s meant to immerse herself in the desert environment. (At Taliesin West, all male apprentices are required to live in a shelter; women apprentices may choose to live in dormitory-style lodging.) After a year, Murphy can request to live in a more elaborate shelter that has been built by a previous apprentice and has since been abandoned. Or, if she chooses to pursue her master’s degree at the school, Murphy may design and build her own one-room shelter on Taliesin West’s 470-acre campus.

Originally a result of budgetary constraints, today these unusual living arrangements are a big draw for students as well as the public. Students say that being exposed to the elements of nature makes them better architects, and they love the challenge of designing their own environmentally sensitive space. Meanwhile, public tours of the innovative shelters have become so popular that proceeds have funded several school field trips.

Twice a month, Murphy will set aside her well-worn sweatshirt and jeans and put on a long gown for the school’s “Taliesin Evenings,” black-tie dinners that often include a theatrical or musical performance, either by apprentices or visiting guest artists. These Saturday night events are considered more than just a nod to a longstanding Taliesin tradition; they are yet another learning opportunity—in this case, for students to function in a formal setting—a skill they presumably will need if they are to be successful architects.

“What’s totally unique about Taliesin is it really does take experiential learning down to a life basis,” said Mark Hammons, an architectural historian, who is now assistant

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to the dean. “There is very little parallel in American or even European education.”

Dead now for more than 40 years, Frank Lloyd Wright is more popular today than ever. More than 120,000 architecture buffs toured Taliesin West in 1999, and 36,000 more toured the original Taliesin in Wisconsin. That same year, the licensing fees for Frank Lloyd Wright designs and the use of his name, image and archival materials reaped more than a million dollars for the Foundation. But Wright’s beloved school and Fellowship—the place where he integrated all his philosophies—remain relatively unknown.

“Frank Lloyd Wright is not recognized as an educator—or at least not as an educational innovator,” acknowledged Ari Georges, the school’s curriculum director. “His legacy in education is something we have yet to discover.”

For 26-year-old master’s degree student Fabian Mantel, that legacy meant a chance to help design and oversee the expansion of the computer lab. “At the beginning, all kinds of exotic pictures popped into our minds about what the studio could look like,” said Mantel, as he took off his dust mask and surveyed his colleagues’ progress on the roof. But then he and his co-designer realized that they had to respect the architecture of the entire campus—and that meant the new design had to tie in with the old one, he said.

“You want to respect the past, but you don’t want to copy it,” Mantel explained. “That’s really the challenge.”

And it’s the same dilemma facing the school these days: how to retain the ideals and philosophies on which it was founded, while also answering to a host of changing cultural, professional and financial demands so that the institution can remain viable.

For most of its existence, the school did not give degrees. Apprentices stayed as long as they chose, sometimes remaining permanently as members of the Fellowship. But as time went on, more and more states began to require a professional degree approved by the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) before they would allow architects to obtain a license. So in the mid-1980s, Mrs. Wright decreed that the school should begin the accrediting process. The school has since earned North Central Association accreditation for both its bachelor’s and master’s degree programs and NAAB accreditation for its master’s degree.

Accreditation has helped legitimize the school, and has forced it to articulate measurable goals and evaluation processes for its students. But some members of the Fellowship lament a downside as well. Just as the suburban sprawl of Scottsdale has begun to encroach upon the organic architecture of Taliesin West, so the pragmatism of modern-day students has washed up against the idealism of the Taliesin community.

“The love for work as process is not as strong as it used to be,” said Effi Casey, a longtime senior member of the Fellowship and the school’s director of assessment and music. “People want things fast, and because of the demands of the profession, which demands an accredited degree, the focus is very much on the degree itself. And so our challenge is to really make learning by doing the main focus,” said Casey, who was instrumental in the accrediting process.

There are still no classes, credits or grades at the school.

But in order to satisfy accrediting organizations, the school has developed a list of 38 skills and concepts, plus two additional ones for undergraduates, that students are expected to master. These so-called Knowledge and Abilities, or “K/As,” range from the practical (things like drafting and rendering, civil engineering systems, construction documents, and cost estimating) to the abstract (ethics, creative spirit, and self-assessment).

Twice a year (three times the first year), each student meets with his or her review committee. Together they review the student’s portfolio, a collection of drawings, projects and written reflections that provides a record of the student’s progression. The portfolio forms the basis for ranking the student on each of the K/As.

How apprentices achieve mastery of the K/As is up to them and their advisors, who guide them through what becomes a customized education. The school has developed a complex learning model that illustrates how the curriculum ties together, but even people at the school realize that it’s tough to appreciate or even understand it at first blush. “Our program comes across at the early stages as totally chaotic,” admitted Pamela Stefansson, school registrar and director of admissions. “And that’s not the way it is.”

Students can set up tutorials or independent studies with faculty, Fellowship members or firm architects. They can attend optional Group Learning Opportunities—GLOs, in the school’s vernacular—which can range from a one-time lecture to twice-weekly meetings over the course of several months and are the school’s answer to classes. Like the K/As, GLOs sometimes are directly related to architecture, but often the relationship is murkier—a recent GLO, for instance, featured a modern dancer performing and discussing an upcoming site-specific piece she was tailoring to Taliesin West.

Often the learning opportunities are more spontaneous. After a recent performance at Taliesin West by a jazz pianist, Dean Arthur Dyson and a group of students met with the musician to discuss the elements of jazz—discord, resolution, etc.—then discussed how those same elements function not only in architecture, but in dance, in cinema, in theater, even in cooking.

“In essence, all of the arts are fundamentally related, and the basic elements of composition are common to all of the arts,” explained Dyson, a former apprentice who splits his time between his duties at Taliesin and at his own architectural firm in Fresno, California. “So when the apprentices can see what they are in another discipline from another perspective, it’s easier to apply it to their own art.”



**Swiss graduate student Fabian Mantel came to the Wright School because it stresses holistic education.**

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Master's students, and occasionally bachelor's candidates, are expected to apply those elements by working with the professionals at Taliesin Architects. Twenty-three-year-old bachelor's candidate Jahmai Ginden, for instance, recently put together a presentation for a \$20 million sports complex. "It's the most pressure I've ever felt," he recalled. But the presentation went well, he said, and afterwards he was asked to assist on a residential design for a client in Michigan.

"It seems silly to take a class and then you [supposedly] know something, because you could take classes forever and never really have the experience," said Ginden. "But here, when they say, 'We need you to fill out a roof plan,' you just do it."

Twice a year, apprentices also present a "box project," a fully rendered architectural design, to the community. Both the name and the tradition descend from Mr. Wright's time, when apprentices presented him a gift of an elaborate box that contained their designs.

Perhaps most importantly, apprentices are expected to participate fully in community life. That means not only helping with maintenance and construction, but also taking part in cultural events, such as the plays the community produces twice a year.

"There's more here than just the teaching of architecture," said Hammons, assistant to the dean. "There's a transmission

of a way of living. And that is embraced in community."

The North Central Association evaluation team was enthusiastic about the school's holistic approach to education. But it also suggested that the school update its facilities and develop a recruitment and long-range strategic plan. In the past five years, average enrollment has dropped from 35 to 20, a problem the administration ascribes to increased competition from other alternative architectural programs, from a sense that Taliesin hasn't kept up with changes in modern architectural practices, and a notion among potential students that Wright's philosophy of organic architecture is an historical anachronism.

The National Architectural Accrediting Board also expressed concerns about the school's physical resources, as well as what it characterized as "a perception by the team that insufficient time is given to the academic component when compared to the other two endeavors (work in the commercial architectural firm, and participation in the community)." The NAAB report also encouraged the school to address Western architectural traditions and specific architectural standards and designs such as life-safety systems and building-code compliance.

The school has developed a draft master plan that begins to address these concerns; it will be considered by the Foundation Board this month. Some steps already have been taken, with the expansion of the computer laboratory the first of numerous construction and renovation projects in the works. After running a deficit at the end of 1999 and beginning of 2000, the architectural firm is once again making money. And the school is discussing how to ensure adequate and diverse enrollment (currently men outnumber women 17 to three) while continuing to offer rolling admissions and graduations.

## **UPDATE** **Frank Lloyd Wright** **School of Architecture** **July 2007**

**I**N RECENT YEARS, the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture has been engaged in a struggle for its survival. Although there was a hint of the troubles to come when *National CrossTalk* profiled the school in 2001, its accreditation seemed reasonably secure. But in 2005 the National Architectural Accrediting Board reduced the school's status to "on notice," and the Higher Learning Commission, an independent regional accrediting agency whose approval is necessary for accreditation by the national board, warned the school that it could lose its accreditation entirely.

The turmoil began in 2004 when a report became public saying that the school's two facilities—Taliesin West and a sister campus in Wisconsin—needed \$100 million for future development and restoration work (an estimate that later skyrocketed to more than \$200 million). The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, which operates the school, determined to make leadership changes, and fired the foundation's CEO. Dean John Wyatt resigned in protest, and most of the faculty subsequently left. Enrollment dropped from 22 to five.

In June 2005 the Higher Learning Commission issued its harsh

assessment, questioning the school's fulfillment of basic educational values, such as "acquisition of a breadth of knowledge and skills and the exercise of intellectual inquiry." The commission also leveled criticism at the school's governance and expressed doubt about its financial stability.

Big changes were needed.

The foundation hired Victor Sidy to be the new dean in August 2005. Sidy, who had studied at the school for five years in the 1990s and was well acquainted with its philosophy, said in an interview that he was hired "to help rebuild the organization." Sidy referred to the staff

resignations as "an event that really showed that the Frank Lloyd Wright organization was not healthy."

"What I did with my team was to evaluate the possibilities within the organization, to find ways of leveraging those possibilities to achieve success," Sidy said. "We streamlined the administration, we hired faculty, and we increased our enrollment. We clarified our admissions standards, developed strategic plans,

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A separate though equally difficult challenge is the aging of the original members of the Fellowship—those who received personal tutelage from Mr. and Mrs. Wright. That has created concern within the community about how their passing will affect the school's ability to fully grasp and live up to the Wrights' vision. "You don't have two charismatic leaders [anymore]," said Effi Casey. "So you have to rediscover what the basis of your intention is. You have to focus on your idea."

Still, it would be hard to overstate the influence Frank Lloyd Wright and his wife hold over life at Taliesin. Despite their public reputation as being difficult and autocratic, the couple remains so revered within the community that they are never referred to as anything other than "Mr. and Mrs. Wright." (To do so, even in jest, is to risk severe criticism from members of the Fellowship.)

Students are encouraged to familiarize themselves with Wright's extensive archives, sometimes even going so far as to trace his drawings. Many, if not most, have read Wright's autobiography. They listen to his recorded talks, and occasionally read and discuss talks given by Olgivanna Wright, who oversaw the community's daily life and spiritual and moral development. And the students are educated in buildings and on furniture Wright designed, so they're literally surrounded by his architectural philosophy.

"It's really neat to be able to live in a place like this," said Sarah Murphy, as she helped a visitor negotiate Taliesin West's complex floor plan, a typical Wrightian maze of hidden doors and low-ceilinged passageways. "It makes you think about a lot of things—like how things are put together, where the windows are placed, how the walls are leaning."

Yet school officials insist that they are not interested in turning out Wright clones. Although there is a strong



**Taliesin West student apprentices live in desert shelters of various sorts. They say being exposed to nature makes them better architects.**

resurgence of interest in Wright's work, "This is not about Frank Lloyd Wright revivalism," said Mark Hammons. "The clients are attracted to Frank Lloyd Wright," he admitted. "But the apprentices are attracted to the opportunity to carry forward that work—as opposed to being little Frank Lloyd Wrights."

Apprentices are encouraged to apply Wright's concept of organic architecture; that is, to create designs that respect and mirror their environment the same way that Taliesin West does. Its desert masonry and low flat roofs complement rather than dominate the landscape. The school faculty,

and we revamped our curriculum. A lot of it was in response to some excellent recommendations from our institutional and professional accrediting bodies in 2005."

Many of the changes put in place could be seen as "mainstreaming," but Sidy resists the use of that term.

"There are so many opportunities that are available to us as a result of our increasing openness," he said. "I would not call it mainstreaming, but rather taking the core values of the institution and interpreting them in a contemporary way. That word, 'interpretation,' has become a touchstone for us."

This summer, there was an important "benchmark moment" with regard to accreditation, and the school performed well. "Our 'on-notice' status has been removed," Sidy said. The Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture enjoys full accreditation once again.

The school currently has 19 students, five of whom are women, which represents a slightly more favorable ratio than in 2001. "We are now moving to a more balanced enrollment," Sidy said, noting that the gap between men and women in the architectural field is closing as well.

While the school still has no grades, there now are formal classes. And the 38 knowledge and ability areas (or "K/As") that students were

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expected to master have been reduced in number to 33, and are now called "performance criteria."

And students (the term is now used interchangeably with "apprentices") are allowed to take off-campus jobs. "We are now encouraging our students to develop internships—to work as interns in the architectural community beyond the walls of Taliesin," Sidy said, adding that these changes have been well received.

"We are also embarking on an aggressive building assessment and conservation program at both campuses," Sidy said. "The Frank Lloyd Wright organization expanded its studios, which are really the classrooms, the drafting studios, and there was a restoration of living quarters in Arizona, which is peripheral to the school, but important for the organization."

Annual tuition, which includes room and board, has grown from \$9,600 in 2001 to \$17,000 in 2007. The Frank Lloyd Wright organization, which continues to derive the majority of its funding from visitors to Taliesin and Taliesin West, is also providing funding for a push to increase the size of the school's endowment, which is "in the high \$500,000s," according to Sidy. "At the moment we are in the process of engaging in a capital campaign which we hope will substantially enlarge that endowment for student scholarships, faculty fellowships, and program initiatives," Sidy said. "We are hoping to celebrate our endowment's million dollar mark within the next two to four years."

—Todd Sallo



**As part of the “hands-on” educational approach at the Wright School, students wield a jackhammer in the early stages of expanding a computer lab.**

Fellowship members and professionals at Taliesin Architects (positions that sometimes overlap) are expected to mentor the apprentices in much the same way, encouraging them to live up to their fullest creative and professional potential.

That’s a welcome relief, said Fabian Mantel, who came to the school after earning a degree in art and economics from the University of Zurich, where he said there was too much emphasis on grades and not enough on the education itself. So even though he didn’t necessarily agree with the earful of constructive criticism he received at his most recent review

committee meeting, Mantel appreciates the constant challenge to do better. “They want to see progress. They want to get the best out of you,” he said.

Students say they’re motivated not only by their own educational goals but by their desire for respect from the rest of the Fellowship. That is particularly important since neither the students nor the Fellowship members have many other social outlets, and students are prohibited from holding off-campus jobs.

“You really have to do your best, because it affects your standing in the community,” explained student Jahmai Ginden, who sometimes puts himself on a 36-hour day—staying awake for 24 hours, then sleeping for 12—to manage all his responsibilities.

“The more you know, the more they’ll teach you,” said Ginden. So although the program is described as self-paced, what that really means is “as fast as you can go!”

The school only receives about 20 completed applications annually, but the vast majority of those are from highly motivated individuals. They would have to be: Things have changed since the days when Mrs. Wright single-handedly decided whether to admit someone based only on an interview.

Today, prospective students have to send a statement of purpose, a biographical essay, a portfolio of sketches and architectural drawings, three personal references, a high school and college transcript (bachelor’s degree candidates have to complete at least one year of prerequisites at another college), and a medical report to prove they are healthy enough to participate in the school’s intensely physical program. They also have to visit either campus for two days, during which time they are expected to participate in whatever activities happen to be going on, and are interviewed by an admissions committee as well as admissions director

Stefansson. (Foreign students are exempt from the visit, but must have an interview.)

By the time they finish the process, both the student and school officials know whether it is a good fit. About half of those who apply, matriculate. And in the past five years, only three students have left before completing their degree or predetermined time at the school, said Stefansson. (The school sometimes allows non-degree students to spend a year or a term there; it also accepts visiting students from a Thai university for several months each year.)

If the measure of a school’s success is its employment rate, the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture is a resounding triumph: Virtually 100 percent of its Master’s of Architecture graduates are employed in the architectural field. (The school’s Bachelor of Architectural Studies is a pre-professional degree which cannot lead to licensure.)

But unlike other institutions, the school needs to do more: It must provide graduates who will join the Fellowship and the architectural firm, since both are integral to the continued financial viability of the community and the school. (Proceeds from the school’s annual tuition of \$9,600, which includes room and board, cover only a small fraction of the cost of running it.)

Ironically, the same attributes that allow the apprentices to succeed at the school—a high level of motivation, tremendous talent and a strong sense of themselves—also lead many graduates to seek greater personal and professional freedom than Taliesin offers.

Frank Lloyd Wright was constantly renovating and changing the buildings at Taliesin and Taliesin West. So, too, the community he founded must continue to evolve or risk becoming an historical anachronism. There are debates within the community about what the Taliesin of the future should look like. But regardless of their vision for it, the people connected with the Fellowship remain dedicated to its educational, architectural and philosophical mission, and optimistic that it will survive in some form.

Perhaps that is because Taliesin’s appeal actually is much simpler than its high-minded and complex philosophy of holistic living might lead one to believe. Apprentice Tony Walker, for instance, hopes to remain at the Fellowship following his graduation in September. Why? Said Walker: “It’s just a fun life, doing what you really like to do.” ♦

Freelance writer Kathy Witkowsky lives in Missoula, Montana.

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