

The Monday After: McKinley museum exhibit goes inside Frank Lloyd Wright homes

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Keller Gallery exhibition explores the ‘Architecture of the Interior’

“Any building should be complete, including all within itself. Instead of many things, one thing. ... It is the first principle of any growth that the thing grown be no mere aggregation.”

-- From “Frank Lloyd Wright: An Autobiography, 1931”

The new Keller Gallery exhibition at Wm. McKinley Presidential Library & Museum, “Frank Lloyd Wright: Architecture of the Interior,” explores the creative side of a man who is familiar to most who will view it.

We’ve seen his work -- from “Fallingwater” in Pennsylvania to houses that Wright designed that are even closer to home.

And that’s precisely why Kimberly Kenney, McKinley museum curator, brought in the traveling exhibition, which opens March 2 and will be on display through April 29.

“I feel that whenever we do pop culture artists like the Norman Rockwell exhibit a couple of years ago or this Wright exhibit, it piques people’s interest,” said Kenney, who said that the exhibition is scheduled to make no other stops in Ohio this year. “Because it’s familiar, people know enough to be interested, but not so much that they don’t want to learn more.”

Visitors will learn about the “inner beliefs,” so to speak, of architect Wright, and how his personal designing doctrine influenced his design of homes that are spread throughout the country. Three houses that have been called “Wright homes” are in Stark County, although details about those homes are not a part of the exhibition, which was curated by Virginia Terry Boyd, emerita professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and installed at McKinley museum by Kenney. The exhibition was organized by International Arts & Artists in cooperation with the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.

“The exhibit focuses on the interior spaces and how the interiors fit in to the architecture of each house as a whole,” said Kenney, who noted that the exhibit it made up of 10 photographs of the interiors of Wright homes and 19 architectural drawings. “The drawings offer an interesting glimpse into his design process and that’s unique to this exhibit.

“One of the reasons I like traveling exhibits is because they bring things into the community that we wouldn’t ordinarily see or we would have to travel to see.”

Man of vision

Wright (1867-1959), whose career spanned decades late in the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s, was an architect with a vision far ahead of his time, said Kenney.

He saw open “public” spaces with “clean lines and less clutter,” Kenney explained.

“What he was doing was drastically different than the Victorian era, which immediately preceded him,” said Kenney. “When you think of the Victorian era you think of big houses with carved up spaces and lots of rooms. You think of formal dining rooms where guests would gather, instead of going to the rest of the house.

“Wright was about opening all that up.”

Wright was one of the first architects to design what we now term the “open concept,” Kenney continued. The curator called it “a modern idea that he was doing 100 years ago.”

Citing examples

Kenney pointed to one of the images in the exhibition as an example of Wright’s designing style.

“The dining area opens to the living area, which means that the kitchen also was part of the public space.”

Since space is finite in any home, making large living areas also meant that “bedrooms and bathrooms are tiny,” noted Kenney, drawing attention to another exhibit image of a small bedroom designed by Wright.

“Since the bedroom is little, there are a lot of built-in storage areas to free up floor space,” the curator pointed out. “He also didn’t like what he called ‘underutilized’ areas, so his houses often don’t have basements or attics. That’s another thing people have to

consider if they're buying a Wright home. Maybe you might not go down there very often, but you still might need the place to put things."

Architect Of light

Another tool in Wright's architectural workshop was light.

"The exhibit shows how much he played with light -- both natural and artificial," said Kenney, noting how a picture of large windows in the Lloyd Lewis House, built in 1940 in Libertyville, Ill., show how light flowing through them provides what exhibit text calls an "ever-changing experience."

"The light changes through the day," said Kenney, "and it makes the space seem entirely different."

The expansive windows -- together almost wall-sized -- in many of Wright's homes, also assist in reaching the architect's goal of bringing the outside -- light and landscaping -- inside. A portion of the exhibit entitled the "Glass House Project," which Wright put together for Ladies' Home Journal in 1945, illustrates this aim in images and words.

"The name of this house," exhibit text explains, "indicates how fully he embraced the potential of glass to realize his concept of the organic whole, encompassing landscape, structure, and interior as one entity."

Wright also played with artificial illumination, initially with stained glass and later with light-filtering.

"He loved to do stained glass, but it was expensive," explained Kenney. "So one of the things he did was put light screens over lamps, so the light would stream just like stained glass, but it was less expensive."

Aesthetically pleasing

Wright was an architect interested in conforming to an American way of living that was becoming a "consumer-based lifestyle," exhibit text indicates.

"Rejecting the styles of the past, Wright used a vocabulary of abstraction and geometry based on forms found in nature to create a new contemporary visual language in his architecture and design. Wright used the term organic to convey this belief that structure, interior, furnishings and ornament should be as one. He conceived every feature of the house as a part expressing the whole -- from the overall structure and the interior spaces, to the smallest details of the decor," according to the exhibit.

Ironically, however, images and drawings in the Wright exhibition might show some visitors that Wright's concepts, like most creative ideas, are not necessarily favored by all homeowners -- no matter how beautiful the designs may appear.

"You have to be all in with Wright," said Kenney. "You have to like geometric shapes, with lots of lines.

"In many cases it seems to be form over function because much of what he designs looks aesthetically pleasing, but not particularly comfortable."



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