

Taliesin West: Wright Apprentices Celebrate 75 Years

Written by Written by David M. Brown

“Come when the spirit moves.” —Frank Lloyd Wright to apprentice Cornelia Brierly, 1934



Frank Lloyd Wright with (left to right) Bob Beharka, Mark Heyman, Jim Pfefferkorn, Kenn Lockhart, Eric Lloyd Wright, Joe Fabris, Tom Casey, Jack Howe and Arnold Roy, circa 1950's, at Taliesin West.

If they come, we will build it. And they did: In 1937, 20-plus Frank Lloyd Wright apprentices began construction of Taliesin West in the foothills of the Sonoran Desert in now-Scottsdale. Later, apprentices would add to the great architect's winter home and school as part of their learning experience with him until his death in April 1959. The 555-acre campus became a National Historic Landmark in 1982 and this year celebrates 75 years. In two years, it will be considered for World Heritage Site status.

In winter 1934/35, Wright and crew had caravanned West from Taliesin, his home, architectural studio and school in Spring Green, Wis. Here, in the 20's, he had consulted on the Biltmore Hotel in what is now Phoenix as well as in Chandler, working with city-founder, Dr. A.J. Chandler, on plans for the San-Marcos-in-the-Desert hotel—scrapped by the 1929 crash.

At least in Arizona, there was opportunity for study, work —and warmth. “It was a terrible winter in Wisconsin in 1934,” says Cornelia Brierly, 99, then a first-year apprentice at the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture, founded two years earlier at Taliesin, Wright's Wisconsin home and studio. “No one had any work either because of the Great Depression.”



Wright meets with (front row, left to right) Davy Davison, Jack Howe, Peter Berndtson, Svetlana Wright Peters, Cornelia Brierly, (back row) unidentified, Kenn Lockhart and William Wesley Peters, circa 1940, at Taliesin West.

Design by Doing

With a daughter, Indira, Brierly lives at Taliesin West, which she helped construct with other apprentices. These included accomplished draftsman Jack Howe; John Lautner, who went on to a distinguished architectural career in California; and Blaine Drake, later her brother-in-law. Brierly's other daughter, Anna, was named by Frank Lloyd Wright for his mother; Anna lived at Taliesin West for a number of years but now resides in Phoenix.

During those early years and after, she was joined by other female apprentices. John Lautner's wife, Mary Bud, was there, as was Brierly's sister, Hulda. And Lucretia Nelson, who later taught at University of California, Los Angeles, and Mary Thomas Thompson, wife of fellow apprentice Don Thompson. “Mr. Wright was a firm believer that the women should do everything the men did, so, in Wisconsin, we worked in the hay field threshing, quarried stone, sifted sand from the Wisconsin River and went out in the snow to cut logs in the forest,” she says, noting not liking lumberwoman duties at all.

Still, she had come to Taliesin because she wanted the experience of hard work, not just the traditional academic studies central to most architectural programs at the time. Brierly had written to Wright in spring 1934, disenchanted with this Old World architectural regimen at Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon University) in Pittsburgh, near her birthplace on a farm in outlying Mifflin Township. He replied by letter: “Come when the spirit moves.”

Moved by that spirit as incorporated in buildings like the Robie House and Unity Temple in Illinois and the Imperial Hotel in Japan, she came, as would succeeding apprentices,

“to Learn by Doing” while also experiencing the fine arts as components of good architecture. “Most American university programs then followed a classical and unimaginative paradigm,” says Victor Sidy, dean of the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture, the academic component of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, which also owns Taliesin and Taliesin West. “They were importing and extolling the architecture of Europe,” he adds. “But Wright said there was an alternative, an opportunity for a true American architecture, not divorced from life and work. He said, ‘Let's build buildings that are self-sufficient, nonderivative and representative of the New World spirit.’” Wright was the Emersonian ideal of the American Scholar turned Architect.

Of the 100-plus living Wright apprentices, Brierly is one of the those who remain in Arizona, decades after their desire for an education with him brought them here. Also living at Taliesin West are Arnold Roy, John Rattenbury, Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, Heloise Crista, David Dodge, Dr. Joe Rorke and Frances and Stephen Nemtin.

Other apprentices in Arizona are Kamal Amin; Pete ‘Pedro’ Guerrero, Wright's last photographer, living in Florence, just south of Phoenix; Nick Devenney; Gary Herberger; Tom Olsen, who winters in the Valley; Bill Slatton; architect and community planner Vernon Swaback, FAIA;

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and writer/urban philosopher Paolo Soleri, who lives and works at Cosanti Foundation, his Paradise Valley school and studio.

"At Taliesin and Taliesin West, you learned about the nature of materials by collecting the materials," Brierly says, pointing behind her to the concrete-embedded igneous rocks that constitute Taliesin West walls. "We gathered the rocks and the sand from the washes and learned how to put them in forms," she says, noting that at Taliesin West-hosted reunions, apprentices always proudly point to areas of the building they worked on many years ago.



They Come from Egypt, Italy, New England

Kamal Amin was at the University of Cairo in Egypt when he read one of Wright's books. "I was astounded by the work," he says from his Phoenix home. "I knew then that my destiny was connected with Mr. Wright's."

In 1951, he wrote to Wright, who responded with an invitation to visit him in Arizona where he remained an apprentice until Wright's death; he stayed with the Fellowship until 1977, when he set up his practice in Phoenix. "Mr. Wright was the greatest influence in my life," Amin says. "To this day, I am filled with joy that I walked the same earth and breathed the same air as him. He was the last of the founding fathers; he planted self-identity for this country's architecture and gave all of us permission to explore everything."

Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer enjoyed 10 "exhilarating and inspiring" years with Wright, 1949 to 1959. "To watch him at the drawing board pour forth one remarkable idea after another was a rare treat for a young apprentice," says Pfeiffer, who became the archivist of his work and art collections. "He seemed possessed of a sense of youth and excitement that was timeless."

About the same time, in 1952, New Englander Arnold Roy joined the Fellowship. He welcomed the opportunity of living in a tent at Taliesin West while designing a more-permanent structure for living—a standard rite of passage at the school. "One of the reasons you came here was to get your hands dirty," Roy says. "Mr. Wright also knew that if you were going to build shelters for a living, the best way was to experience living in one on site. Your experience at Taliesin West was a microcosm of your life as an architect."

For Roy, as with Brierly and the other apprentices, Wright's teaching begins with understanding the place where you are building. Wright called this organic architecture—a foundation of today's sustainable or "green" design.

Celebrating the desert by using on-site materials, working with the climate, daylighting, sun-protective overhangs, building for people's needs with elegance and efficiency: These and other principles of design make him a "green" visionary and a teacher of generations of architects, including those he did not teach directly.

Even those he taught but who took a separate path acknowledge the influence. Soleri spent 18 months with Wright in 1947 and 1948, after completing studies for his Ph.D. of architecture at Politecnico di Torino. "Mr. Wright and I were of different generations and came from different places," says Soleri, 93, author of 20 books, superlative bridge designer and creator of the Arcosanti Urban Laboratory at Cordes Junction 60 miles north of Phoenix.



Soleri believes that Wright, perhaps unintentionally, created today's "car-suburbia plague," with its sprawl and hermitization because of his concepts like Broadacre City, which he developed in the early years in Arizona.

Still, Soleri reaffirms the vitality and legacy of his teacher: "A group of people whose lives and work are infused with the same spirit of exploration and possibility that guided Mr. Wright himself."

Swaback agrees: "Wright set the stage for all architects. The difference for apprentices is one of having experienced not only his work but his life at such close range that it enriches my every thought." And that has infused the culture of his distinguished Scottsdale firm, Swaback Partners. "Architecture is far more than a profession," he says. "It is a way of life, a calling."

Today, Taliesin graduates are reaffirming the Wright tradition. Says Chandler architect Michael Rust, a student and teacher at Taliesin West from November 1982 until November 1993: "Through organic architecture, people's lives can change for the better. Homes and workplaces are designed with nature and natural materials, creating a quality of space that is truly enjoyed and hopefully inspired by those who experience the space created."

Builders share the inspiration: "Frank Lloyd Wright has greatly enhanced our desire to encourage our clients to engage artist and craftsman in developing the vision for their homes," says Ron Steege, co-principal, with Tim Larson, of Scottsdale's La Casa Builders. He particularly credits

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Wright apprentice John Rattenbury with being a primary influence on his life and his company's work.

Balancing the beautiful and the practical is the essence of the Wright genius—as continued by the work of his apprentices, the later graduates of the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture and everyone influenced by them. In this spirit, Steege quotes Wright, from 1954: "I believe a house is more a home by being a work of art."

Take a peek at a few bonus photos.



Construction continues at Taliesin West, with apprentice Arnold Roy on right, 1956. Courtesy A. Roy.



David M. Brown interviews Cornelia Brierly at Taliesin West, July 11, 2012. After a brief hospitalization, Cornelia died Aug. 24.



Frank Lloyd Wright apprentice Kamal Amin and Iovanna Wright (Wright's daughter) on Johnny Walker, 1950s. Iovanna lives in Pasadena, Calif. Courtesy K. Amin.



Michael Rust home in New York, Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired. Not a FLW apprentice, Rust is a graduate of the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture and practices in Chandler. Courtesy M. Rust.

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Mrs. Wright and an apprentice, circa 1950's.



Taliesin West, morning light. Credit Judith Bromley.



Taliesin West. Credit Judith Bromley.



Swaback personal home, bungalow, at night. Swaback was a Frank Lloyd Wright apprentice. Photo Swaback Partners.