



Orway Building
Photo Credit: Ebyabe

Frank Lloyd Wright and Biophilic Cities Theory and History of Biophilic Design By Tim Beatley

Biophilia wasn't a word that Frank Lloyd Wright, arguably America's most famous architect, used or even knew of. But were he still designing today he would be an adherent to be sure. We owe much to Wright's ideas and innovative design, they were ahead of their time and they still inspire.

Fallingwater has become an iconic example of Biophilic Design, of course. But there are relatively few examples of Wright's work that apply his ideas beyond the scale of buildings. One remarkable, though still little known, example is his work, over a twenty year period, designing the campus and prominent buildings at Florida Southern College, in Lakeland, Florida. Some considerable serendipity and a bit of long standing curiosity led me (and my family) to visit to the College last December to see for ourselves

what Wright had created there. This is the largest single collection of Wright buildings (ten in total), and the only example of a Wright-designed campus. It is a remarkable ensemble of visually striking buildings, including the Pfeifer Chapel, the Roux Library, and the Water Dome. All connected by a network of covered walkways called the Esplanade, and each remarkable pieces of architecture in themselves.

UVA-trained architectural historian Dale Gyure, now a professor at the Lawrence Institute of Technology, authored *Frank Lloyd Wright's Florida Southern College* (2010). The book tells the story of Wright's remarkable twenty-year commission at the college. I interviewed Dale by phone about his research and some of the still unanswered questions about how Wright's ideas have unfolded at

Florida Southern.

The Annie Pfeiffer Chapel is especially compelling, and so unusual looking inside and out. Built from Wright's unique system of molded blocks, each is embedded with colored glass (red, blue, and yellow), adding a delightful subtle luminosity to the interior spaces with abundant daylight streaming in from five skylights as well as clerestory windows. Like many of Wright's buildings, the design was not perfect, especially in the eyes of users, who reported experiencing "hotspots," and the need to shift one's seating to avoid them. (None of these buildings were originally air conditioned, another admirable aspect of Wright's designs).

Opposite Page (Left and Middle):
Annie Pfeiffer Chapel; Photo Credit:
[airbus777](#)

Opposite Page (Right): Esplanade
Photo Credit: [Ebyabe](#)

"Buildings should seem to grow from the earth and belong as a tree belongs," Wright has said about his "organic architecture." As Gyure explains, "to Wright nature was everything." Organic architecture can be simply defined, as "architecture that exists in harmony with nature, uses as many natural materials as possible, and takes ideas from nature." Prospect and Refuge are found in most of Wright's designs, though the theory and language did not yet exist.

Where did this love of nature come from for Wright, I asked Gyure. Wright was a city kid, but did spent formative summers in the country. A strong Unitarian family was also an importance. "Throughout his career," Gyure tells me, "he would reference Ralph Waldo Emerson and the idea of unity, an idea that a drop of water contains the whole universe and that everything is interrelated." Many years of design tutelage under Louis Sullivan, who himself had interesting views on nature and architecture, and gradual exposure to the design traditions and heritage of Japan were also influences.



The collection of buildings designed by Wright is unique, and each one is a gem in its own right. But most interesting is what Wright had in mind for how these buildings would relate to each other and his larger vision for the campus. It provides at least an inkling of what a Wright-designed city, or smaller town or village at least, might look like. And it would be highly biophilic.

When Wright first visited the campus in 1938 he would have seen a large grove of orange trees on the site. There were probably more than 1000 trees, Gyure tells me, and he has collected and compared aerial photographs from the site taken over the years. Clearly, Wright was taken by the trees and envisioned a campus set in an orange grove. The master plan renderings show an expansive forest that fills almost all of the space between the buildings.

It is fun to imagine what it could have been like. Gyure describes how Wright likely saw a walk through the campus as a kind of mysterious journey -- no clear entrance, the esplanades would carry you forward in search of what might be ahead, buildings



that could only be partially spied, popping out in the distance above the trees, Mayan-like.

Today there are few trees and the look is more of a traditional clipped-grass college campus. How did this happen and was there an explicit decision somewhere along the way to give up on the "campus in a grove"? Gyure can't point to a specific decision, and believes it was likely a gradual shift, partly resulting from attrition as trees were removed or lost to storms. By 1968, Gyure says, most of the trees were gone. One of Wright's associates took over as campus architect at his death and likely he was less enamored of the trees, or not as willing to defend Wright's original concept for the campus. As Gyure says, it is hard to know for sure.

I wonder if it ever might be possible to return to Wright's vision and to replant the forest that has now been lost? Gyure notes that Florida Southern, ironically, is the home of the Florida Citrus Institute, and perhaps here lie (literally) the seeds (or shall we say the saplings) of a future biophilic campus restoration.

