

Organic Architecture

Beside all the housing schemes and blocks of flats, there are many unique and beautiful buildings. These buildings take their inspiration, not from what is the quickest way to build a house, but from their natural environment.

Fallingwater is such a building. It was designed and built by Frank Lloyd Wright, a renowned American architect, in the 1930s and is considered by many to be a work well ahead of its time. Fallingwater is situated on a rocky site above a waterfall, and is surrounded by trees and streams. Its basic construction is from a native stone, with concrete for the horizontal elements. These two completely different materials, the smooth pale yellow concrete against the darker, rougher stone, provide a contrast which helps the house to blend in with its environment, as well as being pleasing to look at.

Frank Lloyd Wright once said of Fallingwater, 'Fallingwater is a great blessing — one of the greatest blessings to be experienced here on earth.' Some would think that this may have been rather pretentious of him, but we only have to look at the house to see what a uniquely astounding building it actually is.

Fallingwater is a prime example of Organic Architecture, which is the term Frank Lloyd Wright used to describe his approach to architectural design. The basic aim of Organic Architecture is to set each individual building into its own environment, in other words, to make it seem as though the building was naturally occurring in its environment. To do this, Frank Lloyd Wright had to take all the inspiration for his buildings from the environment in which they were going to be set.

And he could not have found a more interesting or varied environment than he did for Fallingwater. All the elements of nature are present in that single landscape — water, stone and wood are all plentiful, and gave Wright the opportunity to design an amazing building. Fallingwater was born. And we can see that it meets Wright's organic ideals perfectly — the stone used in the building is at one with that found by the stream, the concrete blends in perfectly with the light greens of the trees surrounding it. Fallingwater sits in perfect harmony with its environment, and almost compliments the forest, rock and stream surrounding it.

Another building, which is based on the same principles as those which Frank Lloyd Wright used when designing Fallingwater, is the Maggie's Centre, by the famous architect Frank Gehry. The Maggie's Centre was designed in 2003 as a care home for those suffering from cancer. The philosophy behind the Maggie's Centres is that your immediate environment affects your well-being, and that these intimate buildings will be the first step in helping many cancer sufferers manage their fears.

Architecture is critical to the concept of the Maggie's Centre, which is 'a reaction against the institutional environment of hospitals and a determination to create a friendlier place in which sufferers can personally deal with the disease.'

Gehry said of the Maggie's Centre, 'I hope the architecture won't override the purpose of the building, but compliment it and take it to a higher plane of comfort and beauty.' Which, in my opinion at least, it does.

The first thing that you notice about the Maggie's Centre is its remarkable roof. Surprisingly, Gehry based his design for this amazing structure upon a shawl he once saw on a woman in a portrait. He went to see the portrait with Maggie Jencks, who was a close friend of his, and was also the Maggie the centre is named after, as she died from cancer.

The roof is constructed from a latticework of Finnish Pine, with stainless steel plates on top. These reflect the clouds drifting past, and also bring out the colour of the Tay Estuary behind. The complex roof is jagged like grey mountain peaks, and each pitch and angle of it is different. Another unusual feature of the roof is that it has no gutter. Instead the rainwater cascades off the roof into specially designed 'soakaways' in the ground.

Another distinguishing feature of the building is the white tower, for which Gehry based his design on a lighthouse. The smooth white tower in contrast with the dark sharp roof makes a building which is totally unique.

These two buildings are both similar in that they both blend in perfectly with their environment, and are both incredible examples of Organic Architecture.

Fallingwater is the perfect addition to the streams, rocks and forests of its setting, while the mountainous roof of the Maggie's Centre blends so well into the hills behind it that it seems to be part of them.

These, in my opinion, are two of the most beautiful buildings on the planet. They show us that by listening to the environment, we can become part of it, and that we can do good for the world around us, if only we try.

Reference:

- ◆ www.arcspace.com
- ◆ Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, Frank Lloyd Wright, 2004, Taschen