

# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Frank Lloyd Wright's Jacob House*

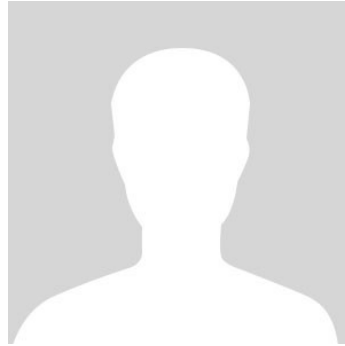
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### Links and References:

Bibliograph and Related Online Content

Music credits:

"Take a Tiny Train" from Ray Gun by Blue Dot Sessions "Pavement Hack" from Tyrano by Blue Dot Sessions

Main information sources:

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## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Frank Lloyd Wright's Jacob House*

Transcript

Welcome. This is To Be Frank, where we reexamine the work of Frank Lloyd Wright as it intersects with Settler Colonialism and Cultural Appropriation. We're your hosts Julia Medina and Taka Tachibe. We're two graduate students from the Princeton School of Architecture and today we're going to talk about the Jacobs House, or Usonian I as it was later called.

Frank Lloyd Wright, an architect who practiced in the late 19th to mid 20th century, is a canonical figure whose work in architecture and urbanism continues to play a major role in architectural history, criticism, and education. Wright's houses, especially, are considered paragons of American architecture, and his statements in essays and interviews suggest that he considered himself an innovator of American design and culture. In this podcast, we revisit the Jacobs House in an effort to contextualize the work within Wright's broader ideas about urbanism and even nationalism, and acknowledge the house's identity as a symptom of Wright's settler colonialist tendencies. To summarize, settler colonialism is a practice in which migrants essentially invade land that does not belong to them, usually as a method of building wealth. In the case of the United States, this act of colonization and the following acts of racialization, genocide, and oppression were devastating to indigenous Americans and continue to exploit people of color. Architectural symbolism and the attempt to produce a distinctly American style of building enforced settler colonial ideas about nature, land, culture, and identity.

Though Wright was a practicing architect and educator up until the mid-twentieth century and his vision of an ideal American suburb never came to fruition, the racial politics of his work still operate on the profession more generally today. Wright was able to appropriate aesthetic motifs and building technologies from other cultures because of the perception that they are cultural monoliths and, therefore, their design practices are decentralized without a singular author. When the Western notion of the architect as a singular author comes into contact with cultures with differing design practices, cultural appropriation can become normalized without intellectual property protections that typically serve those of the West.

Though Wright is emblematic of these culturally appropriative practices, he is only one architect among many who have been celebrated for it. As we continually examine the state of contemporary architectural practices that subsume the authorship of others and normalize exploitation, we should all remain vigilant and critical in order to create the equitable future that subjugated people deserve.

Usonia was Wright's preferred term for the United States. In his 1941 publication, Wright explains: "But why this term "America" has become representative as the name of these United States at home and abroad is past recall. Samuel Butler fitted us with a good name. He called us Usonians, and our Nation of combined States, Usonia." The concept of Usonia seeks to unify American citizens and their architecture into a singular identity that is free from past associations, imbuing this new national identity with political ideologies of freedom and democracy. Here's Wright speaking about his architectural work operating in this way:

PLAY CLIP: "...if democracy is ever to have a free architecture, I mean if it's ever to have freedom, have a culture of its own, architecture will be its basic effect and condition and I believe we have the centerline of that architecture. Architecture for freedom and for democracy."

In 1930, Wright presented Broadacre City as both a critique of American cities in the early twentieth century and a proposal for how they would decentralize to become more "natural" for human habitation.

PLAY CLIP: "If you were to plan and build an entire city, including the elements of shelter and work, recreation and worship as we were just talking about, what would you intend to accomplish in doing this?" "...it would be a native and natural performance. Organic architecture is a natural architecture?"

Ideologies of freedom and democracy become complicated when we try to specify for whom the architecture is designed and which American subjects become elevated to the status of "Usonian." In the essay "The Suburbanity of Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City," author Joseph Watson argues that American ideals of democracy are upheld in Broadacre City by centering the white male subject and privileging for him ideas of privacy, views to natural landscapes, and spatial accommodation for automobiles to exercise his freedom as a "manly man, in Usonia, living in manlike freedom." Wright here has not proposed a utopian model of urban development that replaces existing modes of the early twentieth century, but serves as a system of intensifying existing rapid suburbanization that reaffirms the privileged status of white subjects and subjugates nonwhite subjects to its segregated periphery. When Wright speaks about his city being native, natural and that his buildings privilege views to nature, ideologies of freedom and democracy necessitate that the American landscape is wild, uninhabited, and ready to be occupied despite the presence of indigenous people. Linguistic ties made to being newly native to the land in relation to the supplanting of native American populations are an inherent contradiction, one that is necessary to the processes of settler colonialism.

In keeping with his interest in a definitive American architecture, specifically in the domestic arena, in the 1930s Wright turned his attention to a series of small, affordable homes. These houses, numbered well over 100, were titled the "Usonian Houses." If Usonia is Wright's vision of a unified, dehistoricized America, and Broadacre City is his ideal urban environment which embodies his cultural ideal, then the Usonian Houses are the most basic components of this master plan. The houses are meant to be within reach of the "average" American and are designed around the needs of the white nuclear family, with carefully conceived carports and open plans that cluster together spaces for domestic labor. In Wright's efforts to design in a cost-efficient manner, these houses were built largely from materials that were cut off-site to reduce labor costs. Some were only assembled on site but wholly fabricated in advance in factories.

The Jacobs house, built in 1937, was an architectural prototype (component?) of a larger urban system designed by Wright that espouses his "Usonian" ideals in the form of Broadacre City in 1932. Built for a small family (two parents and one young daughter) with a modest budget, this house was an op-

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portunity and a challenge for Wright to create an architecture that was accessible to the point of ubiquity. While far from Wright's most famous work, the Jacobs house is considered emblematic of his Usonian period and thereby a key instance of "American Architecture." Of his construction of a uniquely American architecture, Wright promotes a "natural process" whereby the architect extracts a design from the environment, free of external influences.

PLAY CLIP: "Now what would a natural architecture be? It wouldn't be some eclecticism, something that you picked up somewhere by way of taste and applied to the thing. You'd go in to the nature study of the circumstances and come out with this thing from within, wouldn't you?"

PLAY CLIP: "would you recount some of the things which are fundamentally your own innovations in architecture?" "First of all came this new sense of space as reality of the building. There was the open plan instead of a building being a series of boxes and closets, it became more and more open, more and more sense of space, the outside came in more and more and the inside went out more. That went along until we had practically a new floor plan and it's been referred to always as the open plan."

Architectural historian Kevin Nute traces Wright's interest in the open floor plan to Japanese residential floor plans that appeared in Edward Morse's 1885 publication "Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings," where separate spaces flow into one another, organized by an 1x2 tatami grid known as the "ken" system. This 1x2 grid is also legible in the floor plans of the Jacobs house, which bear striking resemblance to traditional Japanese residential architecture.

PLAY CLIP: "the most important one was gravity heat, floor heat, where the heat is in the floor beneath the slab in a broken stone bed. And with a thick druggut on the floor you have a reservoir of heat beneath you so you sit warm, you can open the windows and still be comfortable and the children play on a nice warm surface and if your feet are warm and you sit warm, you're warm."

Despite Wright's proclamation that his "gravity heat" system implemented in the floor of the Jacobs house was fundamentally his own innovation in architecture, architectural historians would argue otherwise. Hyon-Sob Kim, a professor of architecture at Korea University, has traced back the origins of the "gravity heat" system to Wright's travels to Tokyo during the construction of the Imperial Hotel in the early twentieth century. There he would encounter a Korean "ondol" room where "heat of a fire outside at one corner of the floor drawn back and forth underneath the floor in and between tile ducts [...] the smoke and heat going up and out of a tall chimney at the corner opposite the corner where the fire was burning." This would enable the room to be heated by the floor with no visible heating device. With this in mind, one might argue that Wright here has not upheld his own standards for what comprises natural

architecture, that he engaged with eclecticism, picked up an idea from somewhere by way of taste and applied it to his own designs without acknowledgement of the intellectual labor provided by other cultures.

These innovations first implemented in the Jacobs House would have consequences in the subsequent Usonian houses that would further privilege white subjects by the exclusive nature of their designs. As architectural historian Michael Osman describes, "no Usonian houses were financed by the Federal Housing Administration under the National Housing Act of 1934.

One explanation for this is that FHA standards deterred banks from underwriting loans for the houses because of their unconventional building systems, such as the unique wall assembly or Wright's proposed method for delivering radiant heat through a concrete slab. Against the expanding availability of housing debt, these homes could only be realized with the combination of free design labor and freely available client funds." Without FHA-approved loans, access to Usonian ideals were reserved for those with wealth and those without resources were denied.

Thanks for listening to our podcast. As architects and historians, we are often fed a narrative that privileges one voice over all others, obfuscating the truth. Revisiting canonical works like the Jacobs House with a critical lens allows us to set the record straight.

Frank Lloyd Wright has undoubtedly influenced generations of architects, yet his flagrant appropriation of other culture's building techniques remains largely unremarked upon. In this podcast, we have touched upon his use of the Japanese Ken module and the Korean ondol room, but this only scratches the surface. Wright continuously stole (and we use "stole" here because he actively asserts that these are completely original) ideas, construction techniques, and design principles from East Asia, South America, Central America, and more - usually countries that largely comprise people of color. Somehow, his aversion to foreign influence only applies to Western European design, perhaps because he can not pass this work off as his own. His actions serve to perpetuate the settler colonialist agenda by pushing the notion of an "indigenous American Architecture," one that was emblematic of American ideals and culture, that was actually designed specifically for the upper-middle class, suburban, white nuclear family (even then privileging the male head of household), and which cribbed ideas from other cultures without any due credit. This served to lift privileged white Americans up by securing their status as the "ideal" residents of an American suburb and allowing them to purchase property at a relatively low cost and begin to accrue intergenerational wealth. Meanwhile, these same actions further erased the (often unwitting) cultural contributions of foreign cultures and othered people of color in the United States.

Thanks again for joining us. Please check the show notes for the books and articles we referenced, and the wonderful artists' whose songs we used.

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### Discussion Questions:

We offer these brief discussion questions as a potential guide for reflection and discussion among students who have listened to this podcast.

1. Part of Wright's intent in calling the United States Usonia was to promote a national, inherently "free and democratic" architecture, removed from past influences. What are some social/design issues that arise when architecture is linked to nationalism?
2. Wright intended Broadacre City as a suburban, "native and natural" alternative to the American city. How are ideas of identity and the idyllic suburb linked?
3. The Jacobs House is intended as a prototype of a "native" American architecture. We know, however, that Wright borrowed heavily from other, non-Western cultures to design important aspects of this house. What does this say about "American" architecture?
4. With the information shared in this podcast in mind, how might Wright's work be better discussed in architectural education? For example, should certain works be excluded or get more or less focus?