

RESIDENTIAL DESIGN GUIDELINES FROM FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959) made numerous efforts during his long career to publicize good design and to describe what he considered to be good design practices in terms that could be applied by others, whether professional designers or owner-builders. Some of the early examples date from prototypical house designs published in national magazines during the early prairie house period, immediately after the turn of the century. Several examples date from the last decade of Wright's life, during the 1950s.

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THE SMALL-SCALE MASTER BUILDER

In 1956, *HOUSE AND HOME* magazine (September, 1956, pp. 136-141) carried an article titled "This rich and rhythmic house expresses 32 simple and basic design ideas of Frank Lloyd Wright. This article is reprinted in John Sergeant's *FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S Usonian Houses: THE CASE FOR ORGANIC ARCHITECTURE* (New York: Whitney/Watson-Guptill, 1976, pp. 157-158). The article, led off by a photograph of Wright in his porkpie hat, is illustrated with photographs of Zimmerman House, Manchester, N.H., 1951. The 32 guidelines presented are divided into four groups:

A. To make a small house look bigger outside:

1. Stress horizontal design lines by stretching the roof line, keeping the fascia in one unbroken line except when good reasons cause it to be broken, and by keeping a strong middle line, for example at window sill height.
2. Don't design a large roof overhang on the north, where it is not needed, and don't be bound by the assumption that both sides of a sloping gable roof have to have the same slope.
3. Keep the roof line low, for example, at the 6'-9" plate line for framing door openings.
4. Don't punch window holes in a wall plane, but instead, build walls to window sill height and then superimpose a horizontal band of windows.
5. Make the scale of the entry door appropriate to the scale of the wall; don't put a small, "dinky" entry doorway in a large wall surface.
6. Don't stick a small, "toy" chimney in the middle of a large roof area.

B. To make a small house look bigger inside:

7. Emphasize a horizontal line at a lower than normal ceiling height, for example, 6'-9", to dramatize a high ceiling.
8. Make the living room ceiling height seem higher by contrasting it with a low ceiling in the entry hall.
9. Use a strong design element perpendicular to the width of a room to make it seem wider. Massive columns of brick between windows were used to illustrate this concept.
10. Create changing patterns of light on the ceiling by using a glass gable with no overhang.

11. Use built-in furnishings around the perimeter of a room to free space in the center of the room and make the room work as though it was wider than it is.
12. In using a flowing open plan, let the space flow around corners so that not all of the dining room and open kitchen space can be seen from the living room space.
13. Carry the indoors into the outdoors, making outdoor space seem part of the indoor space, for example, by carrying planting through the glass, maintaining the same floor line inside and outside, using ceiling glass to let the ceiling carry through to the outdoors, and using the ceiling pattern both inside and outside.
14. Use mitre-glass corner windows to de-emphasize the corner as a boundary of the space.

C. To make a small house work better outside:

15. Make the driveway large enough to serve as off-street parking.
16. Don't landscape the grounds in such a way as to require expensive maintenance.
17. Provide privacy for the house from the street, for example, by setting the house back from the street (some of the most successful Usonian houses of Wright did just the opposite, incidentally), by facing glass areas to the back yard, and/or by means of planting.
18. Raise the level of planting boxes and place a faucet in each box, to aid in watering and so that the gardener won't have to stoop.
19. Make the terrace or patio large enough to serve as a usable outdoor space or "room" so that it won't be used merely as a path.
20. Raise the terrace above the lawn for drainage.
21. Face houses in cold country toward the sun and away from cold winds and storms.

D. To make a small house work better inside:

22. Place utensils and dishes in the kitchen on open shelves within easy reach.
23. Make the kitchen ceiling high to allow cooking odors to rise.
24. Provide a means for keeping kitchen mess in an open kitchen out of sight.
25. Light an interior bath through the roof.
26. Provide a large mirror in the master bath, and light it all around it's edge.
27. Make the low ceilings in the house serve also

- D. 27. (continued): as light troughs for indirect lighting.
28. Use low-maintenance natural materials where possible.
29. Make the shelves part of the decoration.
30. Extend entry hall length to provide privacy for the living room, and provide a coat closet large enough to be useful.
31. Place the kitchen at the heart of the house, even if this requires an interior position for the kitchen (Wright often designed interior kitchens with clerestory windows under a high kitchen ceiling).
32. Use a large fireplace as the pivot point for the house, and hide the mechanical space behind the large fireplace.

In October, 1959, HOUSE BEAUTIFUL, the magazine that Wright co-founded, and that was originally published in the carriage house of Wright's Winslow House, published a special issue in commemoration of Wright's death in April of that year. The special issue was sub-titled, "Your heritage from Frank Lloyd Wright." One of the articles in the special issue was "Exploding the Box to Gain Spaciousness," by Elizabeth Gordon. In this article, a further set of guidelines was provided, illustrated with examples designed by members of the Taliesin Associates and by architects who had served as apprentices at Taliesin.

Some of the guidelines illustrated were:

1. While keeping ceiling and roof interesting, always maintain these as sheltering elements. Provide both dark, cave-like areas for retreat, and lofty, bright sunny areas, to suit differing moods.
2. Bring light in at places where structural elements meet, and by other means than merely punching holes in walls.
3. Work towards a continuous flow of space among adjoining interior spaces, using wide openings and continuous floor planes and un-interrupted materials; avoid thresholds and moldings that define the end of a space.
4. Use oblique and diagonal lines, and geometric figures such as diamonds and curves to avoid right angle corners.
5. Avoid symmetry and axes to avoid boring planning and to create a free feeling. Let spaces flow beyond what can be seen, so that the mind must complete the space.
6. Use the smallest possible number of materials; use one dominant material and make the rest subordinate to it.
7. Avoid defining the structure as a barrier by letting structural elements flow out into the landscape. This can be done with walls, low walls, and paving materials. Instead of framing views

of the outdoors, bring the outdoors in. It is better to make the indoor-outdoor transition in several stages than to make it abrupt. Examples mentioned are secluded terraces, and walls and walks of the same materials as the house, extended into the landscape.

Examples shown in the article include triangular windows in gables, the use of diagonals in plan to make longer design lines within a small building site, the use of obtuse angles in plan and in section/elevation to increase sense of openness, the use of design elements to distract attention to the glass wall as a barrier between inside and outside, and the use of interior courtyards to confuse the sense of what is inside and what is outside, helping to dissolve the sense that the boundaries of the house are barriers.

Some of the more arresting visual features of Wright houses are found in the means that he used to bring in light from above, including skylights, clerestory windows, gable-end windows, and long, slim horizontal windows located at the intersection of wall and ceiling, with the soffit outside in the same plane and of the same material as the ceiling inside.

The interlocking of site and structure is also a feature that recurs over and over in his work, in such things as the location of a building slightly off the crest of a hill, and the creation of dominant design lines at low elevations to make the house "hug" the site. Continuous use of the same material inside and outside is exemplified at Taliesin North where a 60' stone walkway approaching the house is carried into the house, so that the same stone is the floor material in the entryway and sitting room and is also the material out of which the piers between windows are built. Mr. Wright said, "Architectural association accentuates the character of the landscape if the architecture is right." (HOUSE BEAUTIFUL, October 1959, p. 327).