

Design icon...

# Frank Lloyd Wright

Words **Luke Tebbutt**

Widely regarded as the father of modern open-plan living, Frank Lloyd Wright's influence on architecture is still felt to this day; and it seems that his personality was as resilient as his work

**Ask any architect** what most clients want and it's a fair bet they'll say light-filled, open-plan living spaces, kitchens that merge with the living area and a blurring of boundaries between indoors and outdoors – all concepts pioneered by Frank Lloyd Wright. In a career spanning more than 70 years, he profoundly influenced the way we live today.

'He had this sense of respecting nature,' says Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, who was one of Wright's apprentices during the last ten years of his life, and is now director of archives at the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation in Arizona. The first of his three-volume book exploring Wright's work is published this month.

Wright was born in 1867 in Wisconsin, and his mother – a strong matriarch – had already mapped out his career path. After a spell at the local engineering school, Wright headed for Chicago where he landed an apprenticeship with architect Louis Sullivan, inventor of the skyscraper. While Sullivan and his peers built up, Wright was more interested in building out, and used the new materials – steel and glass – to build an emphatically horizontal home in suburban Oak Park for himself and his first wife, Kitty. With an open-plan layout and wide overhangs to shield the walls from rain, wind and excessive sun, it was a radical departure from the tall Victorian houses of the time.

'He was the first person here in the US to make a domestic architecture that was not based on European styles,' says Brooks Pfeiffer, and people loved it. Soon he was taking commissions to build similar houses – one of which, for Edwin and Martha 'Mamah' Cheney in 1903, was to end in tragedy.

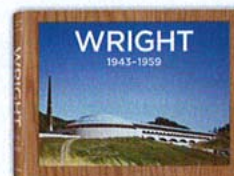
Just as Wright turned conventional architecture on its head, so he did with conventional morality. He and Mamah fell in love and the two escaped to Europe in 1909, leaving Kitty behind with six children. Eventually they moved to rural Wisconsin, building a home that Wright named Taliesin. It was here in 1914 that a servant set the living quarters alight and murdered seven people with an axe, including Mamah and her two children. Incredibly, Wright was able to move on and marry twice more. 'He never looked back. It was an amazing quality of his,' says Brooks Pfeiffer.

In 1932 he set up a fellowship for apprentices, as a way of keeping his ideas alive. Many of them cut their teeth on what Wright called 'Usonian houses' – his anti-urban vision for America. These were smaller, system-built houses, designed for middle-income workers, employing ideas that seem remarkably prescient now: native materials, passive solar gain, and underfloor heating.

Wright also designed public buildings, most notably the Guggenheim Museum in New York, completed just after his death in 1959, but it is his visionary houses that are his greatest legacy – the most famous one being Falling Water, which was commissioned by Edgar J Kaufmann, the father of one of his apprentices in the late Thirties. Built on top of a waterfall in Pennsylvania, it has become a symbol of what Wright called 'organic architecture', gracing its environment, rather than disgracing it.★

## Reader offer

*Wright 1943-1959* is published by Taschen, priced £120 hardback. *Grand Designs Magazine* readers can order at the special reduced price of £96 plus free UK mainland delivery by calling 01903 828 503 and quoting reference Taschen 006. Offer available until 1 August 2009.



## YOU MAY NOT KNOW...

**1** Wright loved cars, and once remodelled one, covering over the rear window. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer says that when he was asked why, Wright – ever the forward thinker – replied: 'Where I've been is of no consequence. It's where I'm going that matters.'

**2** Frank Lloyd Wright was born Frank Lincoln Wright. His name was changed after his parents divorced, when Wright was a teenager, to honour his mother's large family, the Lloyd Joneses.

**3** Wright was also a dealer in Japanese art, particularly woodblocks, which he discovered after travelling there in 1905. 'He loved the Japanese culture,' says Brooks Pfeiffer. 'I don't think it influenced him. I think it confirmed him.'