Design for a Frank Lloyd Wright Visitors’ Center: A Tale of Two Sites

David and Gladys Wright House, Phoenix, AZ
Conrad and Evelyn Gordon House, Silverton, OR

Introductory Statement:
As one of the first American proponents of environmental architecture (what today we might call sustainable architecture), Frank Lloyd Wright was passionately committed to design with nature using the term “organic design” to describe his explorations in this vein. Included in his portfolio are over 500 built works and over 1000 unexecuted projects that provide a reservoir of ideas that amplify this theme. These projects include virtually every building program imaginable from the dwelling to the work place and to the sacred and civic spaces designed for the larger community. The variety of scales range from intimate rooms and furniture to flowered gardens and vast landscapes.

The Frank Lloyd Wright Conservancy, the David Wright House and the Gordon House board members all have recognized the desirability for students, historians and the general public to have access to the exquisite examples of American environmental architecture under their stewardship. Therefore they have endorsed the idea of a visitors’ center for each house, where individuals can learn about Wright’s principles of architecture in an atmosphere that respects and enhances the original building and landscape and enables an interpretive understanding on both a practical and aesthetic level.

This double studio challenges students to design a visitors’ center for two distinctly different sites and built projects that embody these ideals in very different ways. Choosing one of these two master works associated with his Usonian period, each student will be asked to create an interpretive center that will act as a place of welcome for visitors to learn about Wright’s environmental principles that include passive solar heating and cooling, daylighting, and landscape design among other important issues.

Both of these structures, one in the American Southwest, the other in the Pacific Northwest, are designed with different climatic and environmental issues in mind. The comparative analysis of these sites and design solutions, which will be an integral part of the studio, will help inform each student’s approach to their visitors’ center. As the class designs for these different climatic and environmental settings, the comparative strategies and solutions for each will become more readily apparent.

The general program guidelines suggest:
- Meeting and orientation space for visitors
- Display/gallery of Frank Lloyd Wright’s architecture in general; and, the history and particulars of each house (David Wright and Gordon houses)
- Office space and administration
- Library and media center
- Archive
- Gift shop and café and kitchen with capability for catering special events
Landscaped garden to complement the house and visitors’ center

Services

Field Trips
The class will have an opportunity to visit the Gordon House in Silverton as the guest of the Gordon House Conservancy. This will allow students to become intimately familiar with the site and benefit from the knowledge provided by the staff and board members. Similarly, students will have an opportunity to study the David Wright house from afar, but still benefit from recently published materials about the house as well learn about possible plans for an interpretive center adjacent to the Wright House.

There will be a Northwest Frank Lloyd Wright Tour in Seattle on April 4 through 6 sponsored by the Frank Lloyd Wright Conservancy. Tentative plans are being made to allow students to participate in this field trip.