

## Don H. Choi    **The Influence of Japan on Frank Lloyd Wright**

Although a topic of longstanding interest to scholars and admirers of Frank Lloyd Wright, Kevin Nute's *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan: The Role of Traditional Japanese Art and Architecture in the Work of Frank Lloyd Wright* is the first book-length treatment of the subject.<sup>1</sup> Previous opinions about the degree and kind of influence that Japan had on Wright range from Clay Lancaster's emphasis on the importance of the Ho-o-den, the Japanese building at the 1893 Colombian Exposition in Chicago, to Henry-Russell Hitchcock's assertion that Japanese woodblock prints, not Japanese architecture, were in fact the primary influence.<sup>2</sup> Wright's own written references to Japan varied greatly in tone and content, and he frequently denied any influences. "Resemblances are mistaken for influences," he wrote, claiming that Japanese architecture served as a demonstration of his principles rather than a model for his work.<sup>3</sup>

Nute makes two major contributions to the debate. First, he explicates the specific avenues through which Wright came to know Japan. Each of the first eight chapters treats one theme or episode in Wright's experience of Japan, including the Ho-o-den and the woodblock prints, plus Wright's visits to the country and his acquaintance with the work of art historians Ernest Fenollosa and Okakura Kakuzo; Edward Morse,

**FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT AND JAPAN: THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL JAPANESE ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN THE WORK OF FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT, Kevin Nute, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1993, 224 pp., illus., \$60.00.**

author of the widely read 1886 book *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings*; and Arthur Dow and his theory of composition. For example, in chapter two, "Japanese Homes: The Japanese House Dissected," Nute observes that several passages from Wright's 1932 *An Autobiography* (revised edition, New York: Horizon Press, 1977) bear a strong resemblance to the descriptions of Japanese houses in Morse's book. Nute further compares the horizontal, door-head level wooden rail (*kamoi*) typical of Japanese domestic interiors to the horizontal rails in the living room of Wright's Francis Little House. He also notes the similarity between the Japanese straw *tatami* floor mats and the planning module evident in Wright's later house designs, concluding:

As the most detailed source of information on Japanese domestic architecture available to Wright prior to his first visit to Japan, then, it seems that *Japanese Homes* may well have exercised a formative influence on his perception of the Japanese house—to the extent that by the time he finally saw the real thing in 1905 many of his views on the subject would appear to have already been firmly established.

Nute's clear and copious drawings effectively convey his points but his chronological correlations are less convincing. For instance, he compares a house plan from Morse's 1886 book with a house design by Wright published in a 1938 issue of *Life* magazine. Moreover, the fifty-

year lapse between the publication of Morse's book and Wright's autobiography does not prevent him from comparing statements found in each. By the time Wright's views on Japan found their way into his writings, any number of sources could have contributed to them.

Nute's second major contribution appears in the last section of *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan*, in which he considers Wright's appropriation of specific Japanese architectural elements. Perhaps the most striking is his comparison of Wright's Unity Temple (1905) with the Taiyu-in-byo, a mausoleum structure built at Nikko in 1653 to commemorate the *shogun* Iemitsu. Wright designed the Unity Temple just after returning from Japan, and Nute describes certain remarkable conceptual and formal resonances between the two. He notes that Wright seems to have arrived at a deeper level of interpretation, writing: "In fact, far from simply borrowing, or even 'adapting,' these forms, he seems to have been generally engaged in abstracting analogous form-ideas: a quite distinct process carrying with it an implicit awareness, albeit imprecise, of the essential concepts which these form ideas embodied."

Nute thus goes beyond delineating influence based on superficial similarities to examine the shifts in the basic process by which Wright learned and designed. Japanese design was relevant to Wright because it supported what Wright already knew: "Like so many Westerners both before and since, then, Wright appears to have seen in Japan essentially what he wanted to see," writes Nute.

Yet there are some problems with Nute's book, stemming from its structure. By devoting each chapter to a different topic, Nute addresses a wide range of previously slighted issues, but each essay remains essentially independent, reading as discrete parts that don't add up to a

greater whole. This fragmented structure makes it difficult for Nute to evaluate the changes in Wright's overall attitudes towards Japan, which are revealed in the many contradictory comments he made over the course of his long career. Nute provides both the historical context and several concrete examples of the role of Japan in Wright's work but ultimately presents a set of snapshots rather than a comprehensive assessment of this course of development. Still, it is possible that Nute's failure to produce a unified text may be blamed on Wright himself, who displayed a maddening perversity in his life and career. After all, what is one to make of a man who could proclaim, in his *Autobiography*, about the Japanese: "Such people! Where else in all the world would such touching warmth of kindness in faithfulness be probable or even possible?" and then three hundred pages later warn, "the fanaticism and cruelty of Orientals is something we can stay away from but that we can't change by fear of us or of our power any more than we can level their eyelids to a perpendicular with their noses?"

#### NOTES

1. The question of Frank Lloyd Wright's relationship with Japan arose as early as 1900; see Robert C. Spencer, Jr., "The Work of Frank Lloyd Wright," *Architecture Review* 7, no. 6 (June 1900).
2. Clay Lancaster, *The Japanese Influence in America* (New York: Walton H. Rawls, 1963); Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *In the Nature of Materials* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1942).
3. Frank Lloyd Wright, *A Testament* (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), p. 204.

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