One Minute Modernist: Machines and Gardens

In 2017, the University of Cincinnati demolished its Frank Lloyd Wright-style Faculty and Alumni Center buildings. Cincinnati architects Cellarius & Hilmer designed the 1969 Faculty Center; in 1986, Glaser, Myers & Associates added the Myers Alumni Center in the same style, creating two, consistent buildings around a central, garden courtyard. Though not by Wright himself, the buildings were an homage to him and his American brand of Organic Modernism. They were finely constructed of brick with low, hipped roofs, recalling Wright's Midwestern "Prairie Style." The Faculty Center patron was Cincinnati politician Murray Seasongood, a great admirer of Wright. Seasongood appreciated Cincinnati's landscapes and, as Mayor (1926-30), helped found the Hamilton County Park Board. He may have given some impetus to the many, Wrightian-style buildings found in Cincinnati's parks.

Left: University of Cincinnati Faculty Center by Cellarius & Hilmer, 1968 - 69. Photograph by Elizabeth Meyer. 2016.
Right: University of Cincinnati Myers Alumni Center by Glaser, Myers & Associates, 1988. Photograph by Elizabeth Meyer, 2016.

Wright's influence in Cincinnati is extensive, though his own buildings in the city are late and few. Wright designed three houses here between 1954-59 but his pupils, the Dombar brothers, designed hundreds of local houses and buildings while Wright followers such as Park Board architect Carl Freund sensitively integrated Wrightian-style buildings into Cincinnati's varied topography. Wright's personal scandals early in his career may help explain why he himself received so few commissions in Cincinnati, but local landscapes seemed to call for his natural compositions and materials.

Wright's "success" (he is posthumously America's most famous architect and has been much emulated) seems difficult to explain purely in terms of his brilliant designs and his knack for self-promotion. In his time and today, Wright's buildings are perceived as a warmer and more natural "alternative" to the technological coldness of International Style Modernism. Leo Marx, in his famous 1964 book, *"The Machine in the Garden,"* proposed that a central conflict in the American psyche resulted from the industrialization of the unspoiled, Eden-like landscapes of the new world. Wright's Organic Modernism perhaps allowed 20th-century Americans to unconsciously feel that they could "resolve" that conflict by living in harmony with nature, while International Style Modernism and its machine-like buildings perhaps pointed too directly to the tragedy of industrial capitalism's despoiling of the environment.

The UC campus once presented both of these clear, Modernist alternatives: the Wrightian-Organic of the Faculty-Alumni Center and the International Style of architect Woodie Garber's Sander and Procter Halls. Both ends of the Modernist spectrum are now gone and with them the potential learning opportunities that they offered. UC has been an equal-opportunity destroyer. If the University has learned from Wright, it seems to be the shallower lesson of his—and America's—obsession with celebrity, resulting in the phenomenon of "starchitecture."

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