

American Dreams

Frank Lloyd Wright and the Netherlands

A researcher once kept a tally of the age at which renowned architects produced their first and last famous works. He came to the conclusion that for centuries the glory days of most architects were from their thirty-third to their fifty-eighth year. This was certainly not the case with Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), who went on much longer and was working on what is perhaps his most famous building, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, while in his seventies; it was completed six months after his death in April 1959. In spite of this, Wright attracted the most attention in architectural circles with the work he did between his thirtieth year – starting with a series of houses in



Chicago – and his sixtieth, when he designed the head office of the Johnson Wax company (1936-39) in Racine (Wisconsin), built the Falling Water House (1935-37) in Bear Run, not far from Pittsburgh, and started on his own house, Taliesin West (1937) in Scottsdale (Arizona). At the start of the twentieth century, Wright developed what is called the 'Prairie Style', in houses with enormously projecting eaves and masonry walls with large areas of brick, foremost among them being the Robie House (1908-10) in Chicago. And it is primarily the work from this period that was also highly regarded in the Netherlands, in fact especially in the Netherlands. This is partly due to its promotion by H.P. Berlage, who

had seen the American's work with his own eyes in 1910 (though he did not meet Wright himself) and who subsequently brought Wright's work to the attention of his fellow architects on several occasions.

Wright appealed to architects of various persuasions: both of the Amsterdam School (including H.T. Wijdeveld) and of De Stijl (R. van 't Hoff), and he influenced W.M. Dudok, Jan Wils, Jan Duiker, Gerrit Rietveld and a whole series of now lesser-known architects who, in the twenties and thirties especially, showed a preference for an architecture in which one can sometimes find an extraordinary number of visual similarities to Wright's work.

In architectural history, the notion of influence is a slippery concept, and this is what the book *American Dreams* (Amerikaanse dromen) is all about. The influence that may be exercised by certain ideas is hard to trace, because ideas can take many forms or even remain unseen. On the other hand, people will often quickly conclude, on the basis of external similarities or a few complimentary words that someone once put down on paper, that the object praised was an inspiring example, or was directly imitated. This book will certainly not have the last word on the exact nature of Wright's influence on the Netherlands, how Dutch architecture made off with Wright's work, and why it should have been the Netherlands that took such an interest in Wright.

American Dreams is a follow-up to the concise exhibition the architect and architectural historian Herman van Bergeijk organised for the Hilversum Museum in 2005. Van Bergeijk also edited the book, which is published half in Dutch and half in English and comprises several articles on Wright and the response he found among Dutch architects. It also contains reprints of two articles on Wright originally published by Jan Wils and J.J.P. Oud in 1921 and 1925 respectively.

One of the articles, by the Wright specialist Anthony Alofsin, inveighs strongly against the often rather un-subtle way architectural historians interpret influence: '*Historians have tended to rely on simple visual analogies that reduce the phenomenon of making architecture to a crude transitivity: if A looks like B, then B has influenced A.*'



Frank Lloyd Wright, just months before his death in 1959.

Although Alosin argues for a more nuanced approach, with its wealth of illustrations this book shows that in this particular case there really is a convincing argument for these simple visual analogies. The pictures show an often striking similarity between Wright's work and the numerous Dutch projects from between the wars that can hardly be called anything other than 'Wrightian'. Exactly what influence Wright had is left somewhat open in this book – but how could it be otherwise – but it is crystal clear that his work was an important visual reference point for many architects working in the Netherlands between the wars.

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