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## Review of "The Wright Space: Patterns and Meaning in Frank Lloyd Wright's Houses" by Grant Hildebrand

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**The Wright Space: Patterns and Meaning in Frank Lloyd Wright's Houses.**  
Grant Hildebrand. Seattle, WA: University of Washington, 1991. 192 pp.  
Photographs, illustrations, notes, and bibliographies. \$29.95 paper (ISBN 0-295-97005-7).

This book by architectural historian Grant Hildebrand is a search for the special quality that makes Frank Lloyd Wright's houses so well liked, both

by their owners and general public. Hildebrand calls this special quality a “pattern”—that is, a repetitive configuration of architectural elements that, although uniquely expressed in each house, is an underlying motif in all of them. Hildebrand believes that this pattern involves the spatial dialectic of inside and outside as expressed through repeated architectural parts—the entry, the fireplace, ceilings, solid and windowed walls, terraces, and openings from the house to the outside, especially immediate spaces. Hildebrand’s aim is to establish the experienced qualities of this inside-outside motif as it is expressed architecturally. “I want to examine,” he declares, “correspondences between Wright’s pattern and the characteristics that we now believe human beings, preconditioned by nature, select in their habitations” (p. 28).

There are many conceptual routes for exploring this relationship between architecture and human experience. Unfortunately, as his phrase “preconditioned by nature” intimates, Hildebrand chooses an interpretive path—the sociobiological theories of geographer Jay Appleton—that reduces the multidimensioned experiences of Wright’s houses to the human animal’s hunt for environmental security and advantage. In his *The Experience of Landscape* (1975), Appleton developed what he called the “prospect-refuge theory,” which argues that an environment is pleasurable for people when it allows one to see (what Appleton called “prospect”) without being seen (“refuge”). This pleasure arises not from any “higher” human impulses such as an innate aesthetic or spiritual sense but, rather, from humankind’s prehistoric origins as hunting animals that selected their living sites on the basis of natural instinct and survival.

Using Appleton’s theory as his conceptual hub, Hildebrand concludes that the power and magic of Wright’s houses are nothing more than an architectural expression of the lingering biological need in human beings for refuge and prospect. In this line of reasoning, Wright’s central, comforting fireplaces and low, sheltering ceilings and roofs do little more than establish a privileged, secure heart from which extend controllable passages and views to threatening surrounds. As Hildebrand summarizes the pattern in regard to Fallingwater, “we are invited to savor danger from a haven of safety” (p. 96).

In seeking to demonstrate Wright’s architectural use of refuge and prospect, Hildebrand proceeds chronologically, beginning with several early

Chicago-area houses (chapters 1-3), then moving to Taliesin (chapter 4), five California homes (chapter 5), Fallingwater (chapter 6), Taliesin West (chapter 7), and several Usonian houses (chapter 8). Chapter 9 summarizes the prospect-refuge pattern in Wright's houses and considers if and how other twentieth-century architects have used the pattern.

Hildebrand's interpretations of individual Wright houses are often excellent and, in places, lyrical and moving (for example, his description of Fallingwater's ability to provide visual order and resolution as well as continual movement: "All the verticals are stone; from them the tan trays pinwheel, all in rectilinear shapes, all of identical vertical dimension, identical detail, and identical coloration, all separated by an identically dimensioned stratum of void" [p. 96]). Hildebrand's perceptive firsthand encounter with Wright's houses, however, is ultimately compromised and derailed by the arbitrary, reductive straightjacket that the prospect-refuge theory requires. One example is Hildebrand's torturous conclusion in regard to architectural concealment and mystery in the Ennis house (Los Angeles, 1923-24) as evoked by a spatial sequence that involves textured columns (claimed by Hildebrand to express trees) and a brightly lit loggia (claimed to express a natural clearing):

The appeal of such a sequence of conditions appears to have its basis once again in biology. For the behavior induced has a survival value. Either danger or delight may lurk in the suggested but unseen environment, and it is useful to the creature to find out which it is. The stimulus is the suggestion but not the immediate revelation of distant spaces. The response is exploration to seek knowledge or information about those spaces. Thus the information-seeking component of our makeup is brought into play, driven and rewarded by the pleasure we find in deploying it (p. 91).

Certainly, the literal refuge and prospect qualities that Hildebrand identifies may be a genuine part of the uniqueness of Wright's houses, but the error is to claim that these qualities—declared *a priori* and determined biologically—are the only ones. At the start of his book, Hildebrand briefly

draws on a radically different conceptual tradition that would offer a much more fruitful theoretical path in regard to Wright's houses—namely, the phenomenological work of architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz and philosopher Gaston Bachelard. In fact, the existential vantage point of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and similar interpretive understandings would provide a much more agreeable and revealing way to explore the wonder, specialness, and attraction of Wright's homes. For example, the ideas and conceptual guidance of philosopher Karsten Harries and architects Thomas Thiis-Evensen and Christopher Alexander, to name only three, would provide a much richer and much more humanly complete vision for understanding the foundational pattern of Wright's designs.

As Hildebrand's book stands, it is a useful journey through individual houses, especially because of the exceptional photographs and plans. But the conceptual vice of the prospect-refuge framework distorts the magic of Wright's houses and make them seem little more than fire-lit caves looking out on a threatening, uncaring wilderness devoid of any higher human or built qualities. One can only imagine Mr. Wright's indignant response! **David Seamon**, *Department of Architecture, Kansas State University*.