

Building the Good Life: The Intersection of Architecture and Political Thought **Hayden Redelman, Class of 2024**

My research this summer investigated the relationship between the work of the architect (i.e. the built environment) and the lives and actions they facilitate. Omnipresent in modern life, buildings become constitutive of the *environment* many of us most frequently inhabit. Reflecting on even the most mundane of experiences at Bowdoin (e.g. the sociability of the Smith Union ramp, the conversational intimacy of a Moulton Union Dark Room booth), the constructed environment is not neutral; it seemingly favors, facilitates, argues for certain choices. The question then arises: how does one investigate the life facilitated by a building?

The work of the 20th Century Moderns were identified as especially ripe for such an investigation due to their intended break from social and historical conventions towards a ‘rational’ and ‘true’ expression of architecture. While originally intended to investigate Mies, Le Corbusier, and Frank Lloyd Wright, the extensive writings, lectures, and essays of Wright proved rich enough to narrow in on. I gravitated towards his domestic spaces, allowing for an investigation of his views on the family-unit, the role of work, and the privacy of the individual.

Duncan Bell and Bernardo Zacka’s *Political Theory and Architecture* proved indispensable for forming the paradigm through which Wright would be interpreted. Their work “begin[s] from the premise that architecture is not merely a backdrop to political life but a political force *in its own right*” (Bell and Zacka, 1). Further, Jan-Werner Müller’s work within the volume on the distinction between “representing” and “facilitating” greatly steered the direction of the project (Bell and Zacka, 29). Two questions led the remainder of the summer: 1.) what is the life Wright strives to facilitate, and 2.) how does the form of his work do so?

I read extensively from Wright’s corpus, including *The Living City* and his *Autobiography*. Both proved illuminating of Wright’s unique, Democratic project for society. Ultimately, I decided to narrow in on his Usonian homes – buildings designed to be attainable for the average American. Specifically, I narrowed in on the Jacobs House, the archetypal Usonian. Having toured the Miller House by Eero Saarinen earlier in the summer, I opted to build a comparison of the two, serving to clarify the architectural decisions of both designers. The relationship between and presence of certain ‘zones’ in each house was closely studied. For example, the presence of a ‘Nature’ zone at the Jacobs House (and the lack of it in the Miller House in place of individual space for the children-unit and parent-unit) become reflective of Wright’s transcendental influences and vision for life.

Ultimately, the Jacobs House emerged as an attempt to modify or revolt against contemporary industrial conditions in the United States and to move towards a uniquely ‘Usonian’ (Wright’s word for the United States) way of life. Saarinen at the Miller House became a mere continuation of American consumerism in the 20th century. Wright’s unique meaning of “Democracy” and “Capitalism” become but part of a broader social project that starts with the domestic space.

I am incredibly grateful to the supporters that make the Hughes Family Summer Research fellowship possible. This summer’s research has been a topic of much contemplation, ever since my first class with Prof. Pearlman my first-year. I certainly hope to build off it in the coming years, investigating not just ‘how’ an architect facilitates but ‘why’ it be impactful (and necessary). I look forward to expanding this work with the help of Prof. Pearlman & Franco, who continue to share generously the gift of architecture and political theory.

Faculty Mentor: Jill Pearlman

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References

Bell, Duncan, and Bernardo Zacka, eds. *Political Theory and Architecture*. London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.