A Study on the Concept of Prospect in Frank Lloyd Wright's Works

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze Frank Lloyd Wright’s concept of prospect. The characteristics of his concept are completely unique according to the interpretation of relationship between object and subject; land and building, nature and self, people and self, as one unit. This thesis can be summarized as follows;
1) In the composition of the basic form for the prospect, Wright used the 'box breaking' technique regarding the building and land as one unit on the basis of the organic idea of monism
2) Regarding the concept of exterior prospect, Wright's works have the space for refuge with prospect in the view of closer range.
3) Regarding the interior prospect, the visual sequence in Wright's works attain an emotional climax in the public space with other people.

Keywords: Frank Lloyd Wright; Monism; Prospect; Refuge

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Purpose of the study

The prospect in architecture can be defined as how all phenomena, both natural or artificial are perceived aesthetically through architecture, focusing on the psychological condition from the relationship between humans and the environment.

The concept is worth studying in that it contains theories of space, form and place. Modernism was a turning point in the changing concept of space as great architects pursued original design ideas. Since then architecture has assumed the role of dynamic action in building the prospect, which was developed from techniques for its formation depending on the natural landscape.

Monism can be a philosophical basis of organic architecture by emphasizing the unity between subject and object. Empirical prospect is a predominant factor in Monism. I will explore the concept of the prospect as it relates to the sense of refuge based on monism.

1.2 Scope and method of the study

In this study, the relationship of nature and self is translated into the concept of prospect and the process of study is as follows;
1) Define outlined concept of how the concept of prospect is embodied in architecture.
2) Overview of the basic form of process to create prospective space and analysis of the concept of prospect in relation to building and nature.
3) Exterior prospect; the prospect in relationship to the individual who resides in the building and the outside landscape.
4) Interior prospect; visual sequence of the interior space.
5) Through case studies, confirm the concept of prospect.

2. Prospect and Refuge Concept of Frank Lloyd Wright

2.1 Monism as Architectural Thinking

The spatial characteristics of Frank Lloyd Wright's works are closely related with Prospect - Refuge theory. This theory was referred to first by the landscape architect, Jay Appleton who illustrated the concept of Prospect - Refuge as the relationship between 'prey acquisition' and 'concealment from animals of prey'. His notion regarding the 'Refuge' was the empirical space like that in which someone can conceal himself from animals of prey. On the other hand, the notion concerning 'Prospect' was an attribute of human vision observing the potential prey or animal of prey's access.

The concept that is analogized from the image of primitive caves can be explained as follows. Humans, due to their physical condition, not only needed to be protected in places such as caves but also required an outdoor prospect through which they could watch for possible attackers. This means that the interior of the...
cave took on the role of tactile space while the outdoor space worked as a visual environment where food and water could be obtained.

As a result, the Prospect-Refuge theory means sequential and simultaneous space such as the relationship of the inside and outside of the cave. The prospect includes the characteristics of bright, extended landscape as the outside of the cave, whereas the space of refuge is a dark and narrow place like the inside of the cave. Frank Lloyd Wright pursued the concept of the Prospect-Refuge in almost all his works in that the prospect which is the extended space in spatial scale and the introduction of light and refuge, the compressed space, appear in sequence enabling us to experience dynamic movement.

I assume that this Prospect-Refuge theory, according to which two controversial spatial concepts appear to be in sequence, is derived from Wright's Monism in his architectural thinking in that the prospect and the refuge are closely related to each other. The prospect stands for an object; some thinking or action toward objects and the refuge, a subject; some thinking or action related to the inside of the object. Wright's Monism is formed through the emphasis of experiences in uniting the subject and the object.

He emphasized the inner unification of nature and the occupant through the empirical experience of being close to nature even inside a building. By eliminating the vertical corner frame in the corner window, the inside of a building generated dynamic mobility by being released from stability. With the element of frameless corner window, he enabled to experience the prospective unification of subject and object in both visual and spatial energetic terms.

![Fig. 1. Freeman House: corner window – from ‘Understanding Frank Lloyd Wright's Architecture’, p.41](image)

2.2 The basic form of Prospective space through the destruction of box.

Bruno Zevi, in his thesis “The Syntax of four dimensional decomposition”, explained the concept of space in De Stijl, while mentioning the process of dividing cubes into planes. According to him, once the cubic is broken up into several planes, each pieces; six planes (roof, floor, and four walls) form a mobile continuum.

As the space created by the six decomposed planes is expands from the closed and limited Renaissance Euclid space, a mobile freedom is generated in the space.

![Fig. 2. 4-dimensional syntax of decomposition - from ‘The modern language of architecture’, p.32](image)

Wright's ‘Destruction of the Box’ theory deeply affected to the ‘De Stijl’ which emphasized spatial mobility. ‘Destruction of the Box’ can be explained by the developed diagrams.

1) A box is generated, 2) It undergoes the process of forming voids in the wall. 3) The four corners support each four places to each direction in some distances. 4) By indenting four corner pillars, beams of pivot become cantilevers. The remaining ones are successive beams with short spans. 5) The walls act as screens detached from the corner pillars and here, the corner window is inserted. 6) The screen walls generated through the above process take on the role of opening the inside to the outside and vice versa. Thus nature, humans and buildings can be horizontally liberated. 7) The spatial continuity can extend horizontally and vertically to the ceiling of the building. 8) With the above concept, the inside and outside mutually interact to generate the flexible organic concept.

![Fig. 3 Destruction of the Box – from ‘The Modern Language of Architecture’, p.38](image)

While the De Stijl concept of box breaking was accepted in formal or aesthetic terms, Wright’s concept of the prospect closely related to the refuge was derived from the organic thinking which focuses on the experience of humans and nature being united. This shows that the prospect is inevitably related to the refuge.
As a result of the destruction of the Box, the characteristics of Monism of the prospect in Wright’s work can be classified into four different architectural techniques.

First, as the box is broken from the center of the cruciform toward all directions, the space can obtain centrifugal force and contain dynamic power uniting the topography of land and ecological environment.

Second, the concept of unifying the environment and humans appears in the architectural materials. That is, Wright used unfinished stone, wood, and glass etc., most of which are similar to the natural environment. He especially regarded glass as a natural material ‘a kind of crystal made of compressed air’.

Third, the process of breaking the box into a wide and low roof characterizes major elements of Wright’s unique architectural style. This roof plane is like ‘a shelter such as the big wide open wings of a mother bird protecting little birds’. While the interior of a building protected by a widespread roof plane, it also has a prospect of challenging image toward the outside.

Fourth, as mentioned earlier, the occupant experiences a unity with nature through the corner window.

2.3 Exterior Prospect and Refuge

The concept of exterior prospect in Wright’s buildings can be translated into a relationship based on the monism generated between nature and occupant. Exterior prospect – view from the inside to the outside - is intended by the architect to allow the object; nature and the subject; resident experienced as one identity.

Wright’s building has general interior characteristics as follows; the entrance, corridor or other private spaces usually have a low ceiling, narrow width and less light that results from the forming of the refuge, which is compressed like a cave. The exterior prospect, however, is maximized with the introduction of bright light and unlimited spatial scale.

The sequence of the occupant’s view from the compression and tension inside to the expanded and relaxed space has dynamic mobility which promotes the experience of being united with nature. The inside and outside of a building are co-related by the glass that he regarded as a condensed crystal of air in between. Therefore the compressed interior space and expanded outside space can be mutually inserted without obstacles, of which the extended prospect is doubled by the corner windows.

The prospect in Wright’s works especially offers psychological relief since it is designed so that occupants can experience the interior; where we feel intimacy or of being protected. In the organic sense, the exterior prospect of his buildings accepted the land and natural ecology itself as a dynamic visual and spatial mobility formed based on the prospect-refuge concept. It also embraces the changing evolutionary prospect, including the growth of nature according to the change of season.

Based on the concept of box breaking and the exterior prospect, Wright's architecture acquires the essence of organic architecture with a vigorous vitality of change and growth. Bruno Zevi referred to him as the ‘only one architect who accorded with Einstein's concept of time-space in that Wright pursued the ultimate freedom of time and form without any fixed thinking’ in his book “A Critique of Modern Architecture”iv.

2.4 Interior Prospect and the Concept of Refuge

In Wright's buildings, public spaces such as a living room or a big hall, are expanded to the maximum to produce dramatic interior prospect with the private spaces compressed and saved to the utmost. This is the effective alternative in the case that the interior prospect is impossible and improves the sense of community among the occupants to increase the level of relative public space.

2.5 Case Studies

(1) The Schwartz House, 1939

The prospect presented in Wright’s building is seen not only in the macroscopic aspect in terms of the total concept between the external and internal space, but also the microscopic aspect by means of the detailed internal space. It is summarized as follows:

![Fig. 4. The Schwartz House – from ‘The Wright Space’, p.122](image)

First, the clerestory; a continuous horizontal belt that introduces the changing directions of light according to the changing position of the sun makes it possible to experience natural vitality even inside a house by embracing the entire day. Second, the lower ceiling height above the sofa of a living room provides refuge and a compressed sense of intimate scale which in turn produces a feeling of liberation and releases in the living room with a high ceiling height.

(2) The Palmer House, 1950

This building displays an impressive external prospect by using unique triangle modules, a major feature of his later houses. The scale of private spaces such as bedrooms, bathrooms, and corridors is
compressed and dark, while public spaces such as a dining room or a living room is expanded to the maximum and is full of bright light. This contrast is seen even in the exterior prospect through the shape of the roof. Since spatial energy streaming continues from compression to expansion, the direction of sequence moves actively from private space to public space. As a result occupants feel released from the compressed and intimate private space which allows them to share the experience of being united.

Fig. 5. Plan of the Palmer House  — from ‘The Wright Space’, p.143

(3) The Edgar Kaufmann House, 1936

This exterior view of the Kaufmann House – the so called ‘Falling Water’ - shows Wright’s box-breaking skill. Duplication of horizontal mass that is floating and vertical mass that is heavily anchored makes various exterior prospects possible, uniting experience with the land and express the concept of organic architectural freedom and growth.

Fig. 6. Edgar Kaufmann House

The interior space of this house is compressed as low as the ceiling heights, while the outside expands as a space of light and unlimited extended scale. Therefore, as a refuge space, whether private or public, the whole inside contrasts with the changing exterior prospect. Hence, in this house, there is little dynamic visual sequence while the interior prospect is formed by controlling the relative scale of the interior space.

(4) The Johnson Wax Administration Building, 1936

This building in which the interior prospect is predominant is designed to alternate with the inadequate exterior prospect as the surrounding land is located in an urban factory area. The forms, which are analogous to mushrooms are used as columns and connected by a slab while natural light penetrates mystically among these organic structures. This interior prospect creates an image like that in the middle of a forest thereby successfully introducing an experience of ecological and natural space. The entrance of this building has an abnormally low ceiling height and is compressed as a space for refuge, while the office hall creates a dramatic interior prospect with the organic form of pillars, overhead lighting and huge space, which produce the ultimate prospective sequence. Through this interior prospect, each of the occupants or workers have a sense of being united with natural elements introduced in the building which substitute for outdoor elements.

(5) The Meeting House of the Unitarian Church, 1947

As in the case of the Johnson’s Wax Building, the interior prospect dominates the interior of the Unitarian Church. All entrances and rooms of the building are lowered and compressed in scale as spaces for refuge, while the meeting hall is relatively expanded with bright lights and a high ceiling.

The meeting hall is opened out by means of a horizontal louver behind the platform, producing a mysterious atmosphere by the silhouette from the penetrating light, resulting in a dynamic interior prospect in terms of the elevated form of roof-ceiling plane.

Fig. 7. Johnson Wax Administration Building

Fig. 8. Meeting House of the Unitarian Church

In the architecture of Wright, the dynamic experience of sequence is compressed in private spaces, corridors, and entrances, to produce a climax in public spaces and thereby released, which means that identity of self-existence is expanded to form sympathy with the sense of refuge among occupants.
3. Conclusion

Table 1. Prospect-Refuge concept in five case studies

| classification | Prospect | Refuge | Sequence between Prospect-Refuge |
|----------------|----------|--------|----------------------------------|
| Schwartz house| Interior (living room) | Living room (sofa space), Bedroom | Simultaneous |
| Palmer house   | Interior (living room) | Entrance, Corridor, Bedroom | Successive |
| Kaufmann house | Exterior | Whole interior | Simultaneous |
| Johnson Wax Administration | Interior (hall) | Entrance, Each room | Successive |
| Unitarian Church | Interior (hall) | Entrance | Successive |

Table 2. Summary of Wright’s prospect concept

| Philosophy | Monism (unification of object and subject) |
|------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Basic form | Unification of land and building           |
| Exterior prospect | Experience of unifying nature and inhabitants through corner window |
| Interior prospect (direction of sequence) | Private space (compressed) → Public space (expanded) ⇒ creating sense of community unification |

So far I have analyzed the characteristics of prospect in terms of the relation between the object and subject, land and building, nature and self or occupants.

We can conclude as follows:

First, in constructing the basic form of space for the prospect, Wright used the ‘destruction of box’ based on the organic idea of monism to unify land and architecture.

Second, the exterior prospect in the philosophy of monism creates an ideal refuge experiencing closer scenery in relation to the prospect and refuge.

Third, the visual sequence of the interior prospect climaxes in a public space with a sense of unity.

Today interpretation of the relationship between subject and object is becoming more and more complex and various regarding the paradigm of multiple-ideologies. Thorough analysis concerning Wright’s concept of prospect based on monism is one of the prerequisites for the clarification of what we are pursuing in terms of today’s architecture.

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Endnote

i Thayer. Jr, Robert L. Gray World Green Heart, John Wiley & Sons. Inc, 1994

ii Zevi, Bruno. The Modern Language of Architecture, University of Washington Press, 1978 p.31~38

iii Wright, F.L. An American Architecture, Horizon Press, NewYork.1955

iv Einstein’s theory has relativity changing each moment when on the contrary, we move in Newton’s space of absolute coordinates. As Wright’s architecture includes the growing structure of organic materials and landscape architecture where all space and volume exist as movement itself, his architectural theory accords with Einstein’s relativity theory. According to this theory, the observer can experience relatively and the continuously changing prospect in his architecture.