

Curtis Besinger, Working with Mr. Wright: What It Was Like (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, Stg45.00 cloth, Stg15.95 paper). Pp.313. ISBN 0 521 48122 8, 0 521 58714 X.

This journal-like account of the life of an apprentice in the Taliesin Fellowship in Wisconsin and Arizona between 1939 and 1955 is an indiscriminate mixture of trivial and striking details, punctuated by short and seemingly neutral accounts of wonderful incidents:

Mies spoke no English. ... Conversation was limited; tea was brief. Mr Wright, who liked to hold forth on his favorite subject, architecture, seemed thwarted by speaking through an intermediary and by Mies's one- or two-word responses. Mies: "Ja." Translator: "He says "yes."" (p. 23)

Less is more?

Curtis Besinger seems to have been a model apprentice (unlike the person who did not like the built-in furnishings, threw them out of the window, and four hours after arriving was back on the train to Chicago) and wrote his account in reaction to Robert Twombly's more critical (and second-hand) version of Taliesin. But there is an angle to the book because Besinger tells us that by the end of his long stay he had become unhappy with the changes in the Fellowship's purposes as an Emersonian/Jeffersonian influence gave way to Georgi Gurdjieff-type theatrical self-explorations. The photograph of the 1955 summer party on a Venetian Renaissance theme, with 'glamorous and exotic maidens' 'dispensing treasures' (p. 289) and Frank Lloyd Wright in the middle of it, is enough to make one sympathetic to the affront to Besinger's midwestern, Southern Baptist outlook. A week later he left Taliesin.

There are many passing insights into Wright's projects and Besinger relates his particular interest in the Usonian houses and how they differed from Wright's earlier, individualistic Prairie-style houses. One of the themes of Wright's work, dating back to 1901 and 'The Art and Craft of the Machine', emerges in Besinger's discussion of the Usonian concept, with its combination of craft and mass-production. There is also some informative attributing of various

Usonian houses since Wright exercised only general control at times. And, of course, there is plenty of significant detail - amidst all of the day-to-day routine - of Taliesin in Wisconsin and in Arizona. The construction of Taliesin West or Taliesin in the Desert, for instance, is described as part of the annual migration to Arizona by Wright's apprentices and the camping and very basic toilet and shower facilities which they apparently cheerfully endured while building the Wrights' quarters. As Besinger notes, one had to live and work on the site to appreciate the 'way in which all paths of movement within the camp seemed to be consciously directed toward, to focus upon, and to reach out and "pull into the camp," major features of the much larger landscape' (p. 47). Then there would be the 'spontaneous' picnics at Taliesin in Wisconsin or treats, such as the overnight camping trip from Taliesin West to Los Angeles in 1940. Wright joined the group in Los Angeles, having been driven there in his Lincoln Continental convertible, and took Besinger and the other apprentices on a tour of the houses he had built in the city, expressing considerable irritation when he discovered that the furnishings put into the Ennis house by the Ennises were not the ones he wanted. Probably the most telling detail surfaces in Besinger's account of Wright's movie shows. Along with cleaning and other tasks, operating the antiquated movie projectors fell to apprentices such as Besinger and he tells of his experiences when the film broke or became jammed. Among the films Wright particularly liked were Eisenstein's; two Westerns - *Stagecoach* and *Destry Rides Again* - which were screened at least once a year; and *The Czar Wants to Sleep*, a Russian satire. According to Besinger, Wright 'always left the theater after seeing this film with his eyes brimming with tears from laughter, and saying to himself the last line of the film, "It is difficult to be a czar."' (p. 87)