

“Out of the Ground, Into the Light...A Child of the Sun”

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Bronze Statue of Frank Lloyd Wright

In 1938, Florida Southern College, located in Lakeland, Florida (a little known Central Florida treasure), was a handful of elegant brick buildings perched on a hillside overlooking Lake Hollingsworth. But according to our local tour guide, amidst the orange groves and magnolia trees, college president Dr. Ludd Spivey envisioned something far grander. He saw the setting for the first truly “American” college, a campus that did not mimic the ivy-laden halls of European colleges, but rather embraced and celebrated the budding, uniquely American aesthetic. It was a dream that only the greatest architect of the time, Frank Lloyd Wright, could accomplish. After meeting President Dr. Ludd Spivey, Wright (70 years old at the time), accepted the challenge to build a modern American campus. After touring the site, Wright remarked that he envisioned buildings rising “out of the ground and into the light, a child of the sun.” Over the next twenty years, Wright completed his master plan for the “Child of the Sun” campus, encompassing a total of 18 structures.

From the projects’ start in 1938 through 1958, twelve of those structures were built under Wright’s guidance, making “Child of the Sun” the largest and most fully articulated collection of Wright’s work in the world. According to our tour guide, Wright felt most college campuses were architectural failures and wanted the opportunity to design an entire campus from scratch. Wright believed his concept of Organic Architecture would unite the individual structures with their environment and as a group, enable them to work together to create a whole better than the sum of its parts.

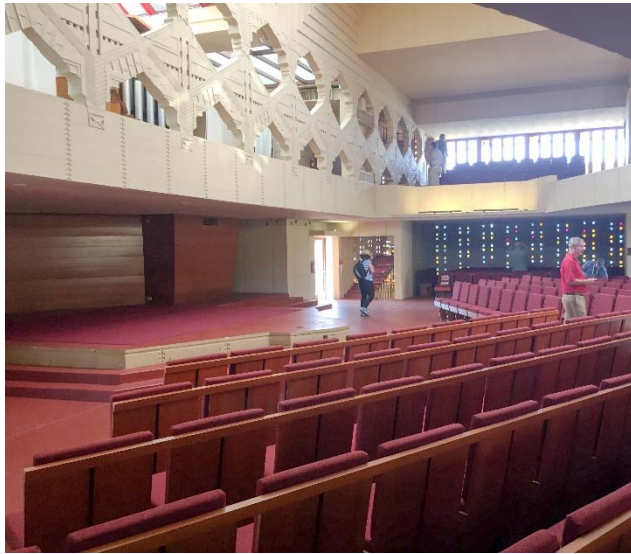


Water Dome, A Central Point in Wright’s Concept of the Campus Symbolizing the Fountain of Knowledge



Exterior of Annie Pfeiffer Chapel

The first Wright building to be constructed was the Annie Pfeiffer Chapel, considered by many to be a true paradigm of Wright’s work in that it exhibits all his trademark architectural elements. Completed in 1941, it commands center stage on campus reflecting the college’s religious affiliation (Methodist). Differing from the traditional church, there are no windows in the chapel aside from those at the entry doors and in the French doors that open to the north and south balconies. In the interior of the chapel, we were able to see thousands of glass pieces set into the customized concrete blocks making up the chapel walls. These



Interior of Chapel - Choir Screen and Theater Type Chairs

cypress and still contains the original pews and cushions designed by Wright.

Construction of one of the most dominant elements of Wright's plans are covered walkways or esplanades. These covered walkways, over a mile in total length, connect in a geometric pattern to the Wright buildings of the west campus. According to our local tour guide the supports suggest the orange trees that were numerous on campus. The esplanades are trimmed in copper along the edges to add its natural green patina to the appearance. Wright's west campus still remains today a significant and formidable masterpiece of design. The campus is a product in both overall planning and execution of the architect's organic concepts of human proportions, the special breakthrough of non-orthogonal angles,

perforated blocks are filled with translucent glass inserts in various colors – red, blue, green, white, yellow and gold – giving our group the sense of a “pointillists canvas” of varicolored dots. In a likely homage to stained glass windows, the chapel walls generate a kaleidoscope of hues frozen in time.

On the mezzanine level, above the chancel area, Wright created an unusual choir space by partially shielding the choir from the congregation with a screen of decorative concrete blocks.

The William H. Danforth Chapel is adjacent to the large Annie Pfeiffer Chapel and in many ways, it's every bit as intriguing. This small chapel is Wright's only work in leaded art glass. It is framed in native Florida tidewater, red-



Partial View of Esplanades (Covered Walkway)



Interior View of the Circular William M. Hollis Room in the Thad Buckner Building (Originally the Library)

stylistic unification and symbolic presentation, in an attempt to identify with the natural surroundings and a refutation of conventional non-indigenous collegiate styles.

At the end of our tour, our group concluded that perhaps Frank Lloyd Wright sought to capture not just a physical edifice but an idealized one. It was a creation recognizing that the primal trait of human civilization – the urge to learn – merged with another primal trait – the joining with the natural environment – in a more holistic sense of place. The campus attracts thousands of visitors annually. The Southern College was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975.