

Organic Étude

By Aris Georges

Most efforts to define the term *organic architecture* leave more clues about the way architects tend to argue rather than to elucidate the nature of the term. When the majority of arguments are limited to conveying one's own view, it is difficult to elaborate the insights Frank Lloyd Wright left us.

It is convenient to argue that Wright never defined *organic*—at least satisfactorily—or that he couldn't. It is rather intriguing to argue that he defined it by demonstrating it in his architecture; questioning the necessity for a scholastic (linguistic) definition (*just look at the thing—it is there*).

In two extraordinary instances of advanced theoretical scholarship in architecture, insightful aspects of the term *organic* were offered. Considering them could help elevate casual arguments to a serious discourse.

The first implicates the notion of (organic) form. In a meticulous work on the evolution of designs Philip Steadman records the biological analogy in architecture and applied arts. Steadman posits that the aim of an 'organic wholeness' of the work is traced back to a continuum from the ancient Greeks (Plato and Aristotle), to the German romantics (Goethe, Schlegel, Schelling).¹ The inference is that form is integral or 'innate' to the work, rather than being preconceived and 'impressed' on to it. Wright expressed this concept as 'from within, outwards.'

The second pins the origin of the term *organic architecture* to a few years before Wright was born and suggests how it may have passed onto Wright by his *Lieber Meister* Louis Sullivan. In the classic study *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture* Peter Collins, in the context of the biological analogy, discusses its connection to the mid-nineteenth century advent of the science of Biology. Collins also states that Louis Sullivan's enthusiastic interest in Herbert Spencer's work, where *form* is firstly associated with *function*, flows to Wright.² To Sullivan's *form follows function* Wright responded with *form and function are one*. Collins also reveals that the term *organic architecture* first appeared as a slogan in the French publication *Revue Générale de l'Architecture* in 1863, a somewhat premature call for the world of art and design to veer from the classic sources and respond to questions raised by biology about living organization and existence.

Frank Lloyd Wright's most notable opening on *organic* points to the two sources he directly experienced that he claims shaped his design sensibility: the pedagogy and gifts of *Froebel* and the insights he drew from the Japanese woodblock art of the *Ukiyo-e*. The former taught Wright the power of geometry as a language of expressing what he saw as structure and articulation in the natural world. The latter stimulated his interest for the landscape (conveyed by the sheer flatness of the image) as an integral part of the architectural object to be conceived in it. Wright intuited 'the whole is to the part, what the part is to the whole.'

In this context, Wright repeatedly urged us to 'go to those sources' and craft our own organic response, rather than preoccupy ourselves with evolving his work. In other words, Wright's *organic* implies a genuinely critical response to our experience.

However, etymologically the term *organic* is the adjective of the Greek noun *organon* (*instrument*). Aristotle used the term under which he compiled his work on logic and reasoning. Add to this that geometry in Ancient Greece was the fundamental visualization of reasoning and intuition. If the contest to define the term *organic* is primarily a sport where individual expression opposes analysis and insight, then I find myself intuitively in the lane Wright travelled: *Organic* is *instrumental* and essentially *geometric*. It is the toolset with which our conscious mind spans across chaos to connect to the natural so we can immerse in it to design and build harmonic beauty.

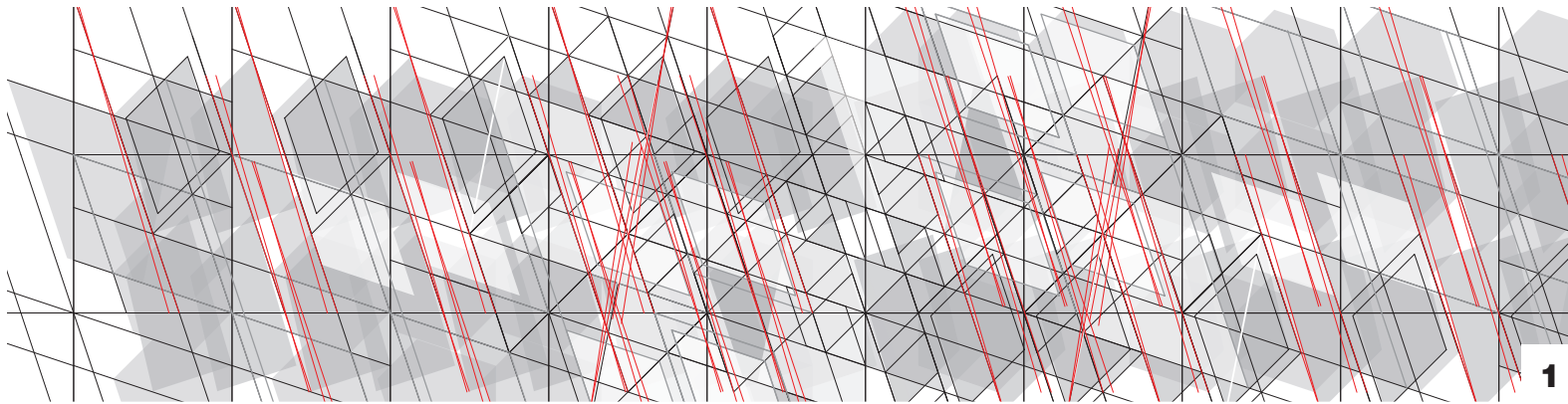
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Images courtesy Aris Georges: *Five études on organic compositional principles*

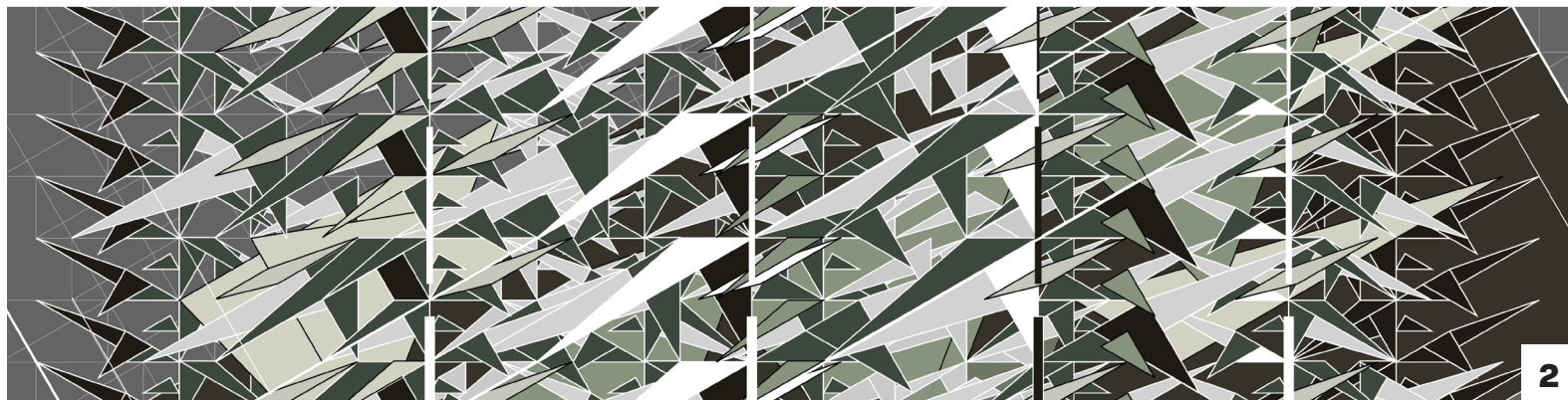
1) Root-two rectangle grid diagonal extrapolations. 2) Root-four rectangle grid mapping the foliage of midsummer cornfield. 3) Dynamic symmetry grid mapping the peeling bark of the birch tree. 4) Extrapolation of the rule of ramification (branching) in the spirit of John Ruskin. 5) Three-dimensional cardboard study of the foliage of the sumac plant.

¹ Philip Steadman, *The Evolution of Designs* p.9 (Cambridge 1979 / Routledge revised edition 2008)

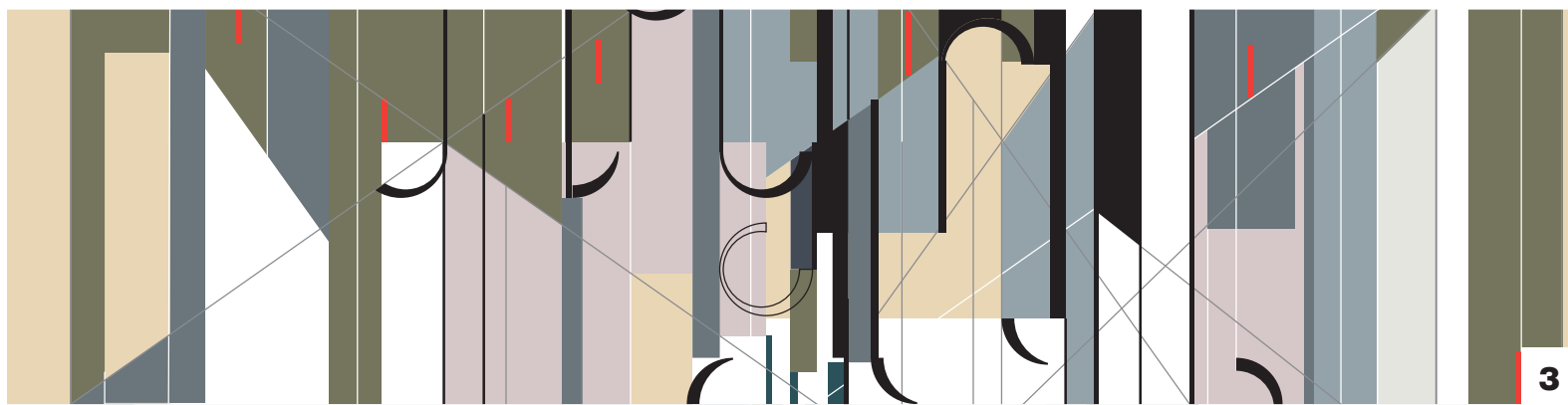
² Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals of Modern Architecture, 1750-1950* p.156 (Montreal, McGill 2nd edition 1998)



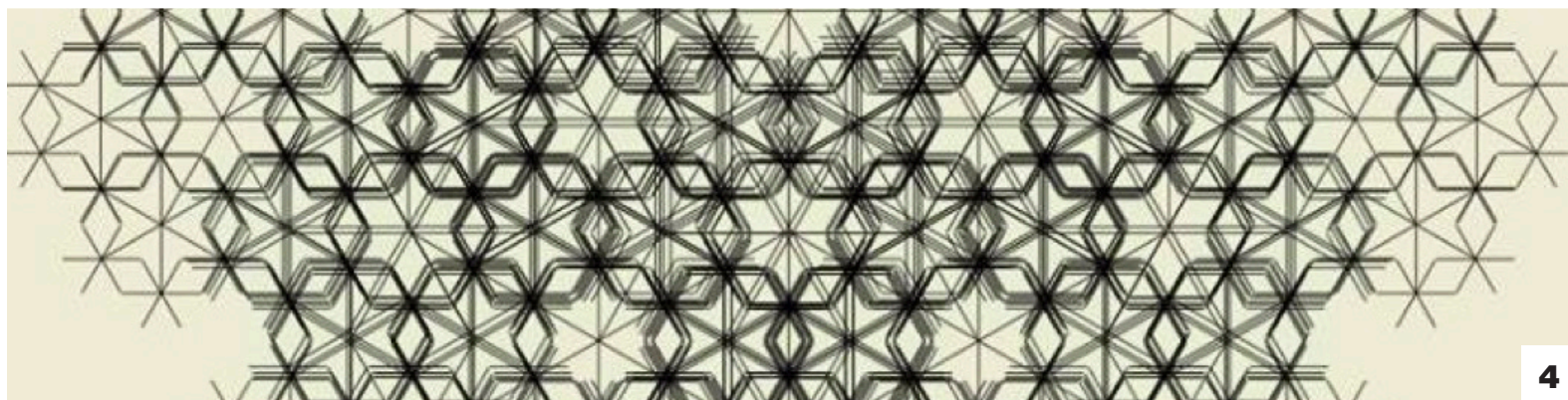
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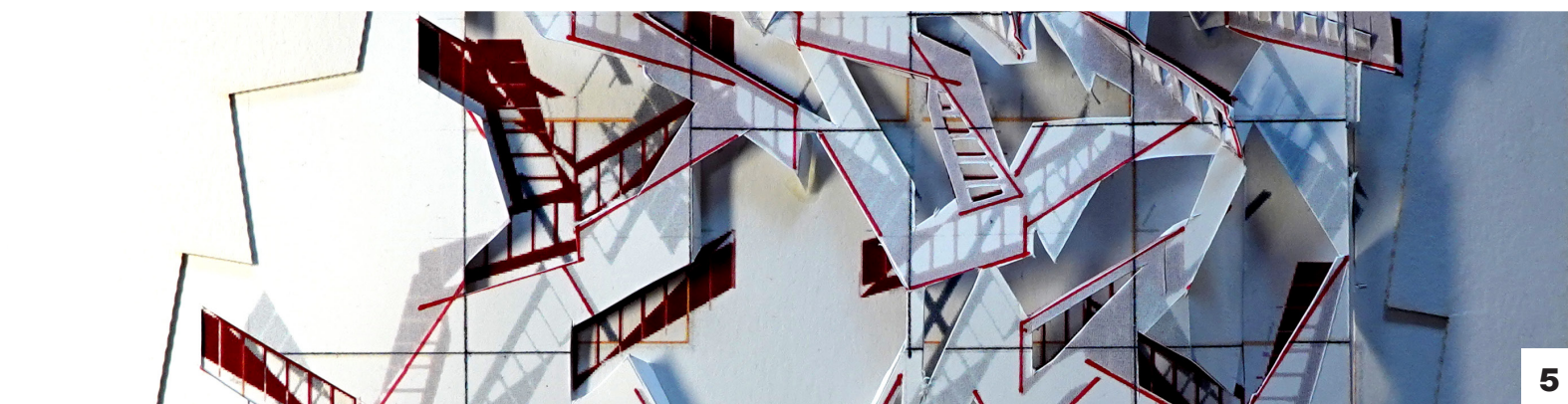
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