

POLYTECHNIC OF TORINO
FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE
Degree in Architecture
Honors theses

The Architecture of Louis Sullivan. Residential Designs 1883-1912

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Sullivan's residential architecture, even if it consists in fifty designs, is a part of his production nearly ignored among numerous studies about his architecture.

First goal of this dissertation is the presentation of these works as a whole through the compiling of a complete list of residences designed by S. and the reconstruction of their iconography (only nine of these buildings are today still existing)

The perspective of the analysis is the reintegration of these works inside the most popular production of this architect through the consideration of the reasons why architectural historians ignored residential architecture even if it's known since the monograph published by H. Morrison in 1935 (*Louis Sullivan- Prophet of Modern Architecture*)

The first part of the dissertation is a reflection about different themes that are useful to understand residences. One is the urban history of Chicago, a city that, at the end of XIX Century, lives two events that have many influences on his architecture: the great conflagration in 1871 and World's Fair in 1893.

Relations between S. and his clients are very important to outline a story of the firm and his interests in different architectural fields, but also to visualize links between the status of clients and the style and ornamentation of their residences.

Other themes, strictly connected with architecture and presented like an introduction to the analysis of his works, are Sullivan's education and cultural references, his theories about architecture and finally the artistic personality of his young but soon afterwards popular draftsmen like F.L.Wright and G. Elmslie.

Analysis of designs uses a subdivision in two periods (1883-1886, 1888-1893) that is chronological but also expressive of changes inside themes presented.

Since 1883 until 1886, the most part of residences (twenty-eight of thirty four) have been built for an homogeneous group of clients that belongs to German Jewish Community of Chicago and that is linked with the firm through D. Adler, son of the rabbi of KAM Congregation.

The architecture of this period, featured by an eclecticism that mostly consists in Sullivan's reinterpretation and "contamination" of styles, have been read through the relations between S. and his clients.

Within apparent absolute variety of outlines, the social conditions of clients, an upper middle class where there are strong ethnic and religious belongings, seem to give a useful key to the interpretation of stylistic choices.



D. Adler, A. Kohn and E.B. Felsenthal Residences, Chicago 1886

Very different are the circumstances of the production in the second period, a period that is much longer and various in client's composition, but characterized by a lower number of commissions.

The story of the firm is a key to analyse differences, for example between designs until 1893 and after 1898. Years between 1893 and 1898 are years of crisis that lead, among other consequences, the displacement of the basin of clients outside Chicago (1893 is the end of cooperation between S. and Wright, who was with the firm since 1888 and 1895 is the end of the partnership with Adler).

The system of architectural influences changes together with the status of clients, now most of all rich Protestants bound to S. by friendship, and with the new connections between S. and Prairie School's circles .



J. Charnley Residence, Chicago 1892



H. Babson Residence, Riverside 1909

The presence of Wright in the firm is an hint in the interpretation of Sullivan's residential architecture and his critic bad luck.

Wright ascribes to himself in his Autobiography all the residences designed while he was working for the firm. This is one of the circumstance that lead critics to consider scarcerly interesting the early works, modern, but seldom attributable to Sullivan, the residences designed during the collaboration of Wright, and merely imitative of Prairie School's manner the late works.

This dissertation tries to read complexity and ambiguities of these works like a potential enrichment of the interpretation of Sullivan's architecture.

Links between Sullivan's residential production and delicate themes in history of contemporary architecture like Art Nouveau and Eclecticism are explored and put in comparison with Sullivan's canonical role as "Prophet of Modern Architecture".

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