

# FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT STYLE ON THE SAND

WRIGHT TRANSFORMED ARIZONA BY CREATING BUILDINGS THAT STOOD IN HARMONY WITH THEIR ENVIRONMENTS. HIS LEGACY LIVES ON THERE TODAY, BOTH IN WORKS THAT HE DESIGNED AND OTHERS THAT HIS PHILOSOPHY INSPIRED.

BY MARK A. THOMPSON

ARRIVING IN THE SONORAN DESERT IN 1928, WISCONSIN-BORN ARCHITECT FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT contended that there was “nothing more inspiring to an architect ... than pure Arizona desert.” In those years, the territory — which had recently become the last of the contiguous United States — was primarily noteworthy as a refuge for those suffering from lung ailments. However, Wright was immediately smitten by the region’s natural beauty and its compatibility with his principles of organic architecture.

“Early on, Wright recognized that Arizona lacked an architecture that was suitable to its climate and geology,” says John Rattenbury (who was Wright’s protégé and worked with him on more than 60 projects, including the Guggenheim Museum). Wright would go on to remedy this by creating significant architectural landmarks in the area of Phoenix — setting a new standard for contemporary desert style and anticipating the advent of green architectural practices. Among them are his masterpiece Taliesin West; the Grady Gammage Memorial Auditorium at Arizona State University; the locally beloved Scottsdale spire, and the iconic Arizona Biltmore resort.

These pieces remain as remarkably insightful about the intersection of architecture and desert life as they were when they appeared on Wright’s drafting board decades ago, when they stood in stark contrast to trends of the day. “In the 1930s, people built the same kind of buildings everywhere,” Rattenbury offers. “They didn’t recognize that buildings should learn from the environment.”

Wright was a believer in the famous axiom of modernist architect Louis Sullivan: *Form follows function*. However, Wright tweaked it to: *Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union*. Throughout his 22 years designing projects in the Southwest, Wright sought to create a more perfect union — between buildings and landscape, form and function — by utilizing natural light, local materials, and thoughtfully blended space to create truly sustainable architecture. Wright recognized, Rattenberry recalls, that “nature is the great teacher.”



The main lodge at The Boulders, part of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Arizonan architectural legacy.

## JEWEL OF THE DESERT

Located in the heart of the Camelback Corridor, the Arizona Biltmore has reigned as Phoenix’s premier desert sanctuary for more than 85 years, thanks in great part to its renowned architecture and legendary history as an oasis for the illustrious and the elite. Clark Gable was married there. Marilyn Monroe claimed the hotel’s Catalina Pool (pictured, next page) as her personal favorite, and Irving Berlin penned the holiday classic “White Christmas” seated alongside it. The lobby piano has been played by stars such as Elton John, Billy Joel and Bono, and hotel guests have also witnessed impromptu late-night concerts from the likes of Frank Sinatra, Liza Minnelli and Sammy Davis, Jr.

Opened in February 1929, the Arizona Biltmore still bears the imprint of Wright, who officially served as “consulting architect” for

his student, Albert Chase McArthur, in crafting this “Jewel of the Desert.” The exterior employs Wright’s signature “textile block” technique whereby concrete was poured into wooden molds to create uniquely patterned building blocks. More than 250,000 “Biltmore blocks” were created in 34 different patterns, with design inspirations varying from the trunks of palm trees to a mathematical equation for the refraction of light.

Wright’s enduring critical regard has helped make his touch at the Biltmore more evident now than ever. The 39-acre property is home to six replicas of Wright’s “Garden Sprites,” sculptures



The famous pool at the Arizona Biltmore.

which were first displayed in 1915 at Chicago's Midway Gardens. A stained-glass window titled "Saguaro Forms and Cactus Flowers" is based on a Wright design commissioned by *Liberty* magazine in 1926. You'll find both room interiors and public spaces at the Biltmore furnished with Wright-inspired designs in both Prairie School and art deco styles.

The relaxed atmosphere throughout the Biltmore and its expansive grounds is partially attributable to the effortless flow from interior to exterior spaces, one of the highlights of Wright's principles of organic architecture. "'Organic' means living, growing, evolving," says Rattenbury. "Wright chose the word carefully; he wanted an architecture that would continue to evolve with the environment." For example, throughout many of his Southwestern projects, Wright incorporated overhangs for shade during the sun-drenched days and hearths for warmth during cool desert nights. Rooms decorated in the desert's natural tones flow into outdoor spaces as naturally as the *arroyo* (dry riverbeds) that wind through the desert. Handcrafted furniture reflects Wright's belief in the harmony between nature and construction materials. Rattenbury recalls one of Wright's guiding principles: *Nature will teach us how to design.*

#### A COMPANION TO THE HORIZON

Opened in 1937, Taliesin West continued the evolution of the

Southwestern architectural style inaugurated by buildings such as the Biltmore. Wright's purchase of 800 acres at the foothills of the McDowell Mountains was motivated by his desire to merge architecture with the environment. Wright believed that a properly designed home should serve as "a companion to the horizon."

"Wright's god was nature," says Rattenbury. "He learned from looking out the window. Nature was his inspiration. He took the same respect that the Native Americans had for the environment and hoped to impart that respect through his organic architecture." Built from the stone and sand of the Sonoran Desert and complemented by pools that reflect the sun and sky, Taliesin West achieves a near-perfect balance between land and inhabitant.

Initially, Wright may have even gone a bit overboard in his attempt to keep his creation one with nature. "The original buildings had canvas flaps because glass was not a part of the desert," says Rattenbury. "But very quickly he realized that Taliesin West was to be [practical], as well as an architectural practice."



Arizona Biltmore

## A SOJOURN IN THE SONORAN

*If you're heading to Arizona in search of the legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright, here's an agenda of where to stay, dine and visit that incorporates both the memorable architecture discussed in this article — and more local favorites.*

#### WHERE TO STAY

Only the **ARIZONA BILTMORE** ([arizonabiltmore.com](http://arizonabiltmore.com)) has Marilyn Monroe's favorite pool and has hosted every U.S. president since Hoover, but **THE BOULDERS** ([theboulders.com](http://theboulders.com)) is a desert retreat with natural splendor that was millions of year in the making.

#### WHERE TO EAT

Opened in 2014 and already voted Phoenix's "Greatest Neighborhood Restaurant," **THE HENRY** ([foxrc.com/restaurants/the-henry](http://foxrc.com/restaurants/the-henry)) serves homestyle comfort classics from breakfast through dinner. Meanwhile, **PALO VERDE** ([theboulders.com/restaurants-and-dining/palo-verde.html](http://theboulders.com/restaurants-and-dining/palo-verde.html)) offers contemporary Southwestern cuisine with a soaring ceiling that mirrors the desert sky and a view that overlooks the picturesque duck pond at The Boulders. Ever-ebullient tea sommelier Jeffrey Hattrick ensures that taking afternoon tea at **THE RITZ-CARLTON, PHOENIX** ([ritzcarlton.com/phoenix](http://ritzcarlton.com/phoenix)) is as much fun as it is delicious; live musical entertainment accompanies the traditional English afternoon repast. Last but not least, **FRANK & ALBERT'S** was named for the architects of the Arizona Biltmore (Frank Lloyd Wright and Albert Chase McArthur), and offers traditional American cuisine that complements the hotel's fabled history.

#### WHAT TO SEE

Don't miss an opportunity to tour Frank Lloyd Wright's masterpiece **TALIESIN WEST** ([franklloydwright.org/taliesinwest](http://franklloydwright.org/taliesinwest)), which is also the home of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation and the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture. Then get a taste of alternative Phoenix at **UNION AT BILTMORE FASHION PARK**, a collection of 18 independent boutiques and eateries that uniquely blends art galleries, wood-fired pizzas, cold-pressed juices, a natural beauty bar, a micro-haberdashery, an olive boutique, a cake shop, and other distinctive concept stores.

#### MILLIONS OF YEARS IN THE MAKING

Even to the casual observer, Wright's architectural legacy is echoed throughout the Southwest — in the use of outdoor roofed spaces like pergolas and loggias; in construction that embraces indigenous materials and desert tones; and, above all, in an evident respect for nature.

This respect is reflected in the design of The Boulders (pictured, opening spread), a 1,300-acre desert resort just north of Scottsdale, that was built in 1985. The project is appropriately named for the 12-million-year-old stones that rise from the desert floor around it in gargantuan piles. Notable for its sustainable landscaping and untouched indigenous flora, The Boulders resort has received various environmental awards and accolades for its adherence to the tenets of Wright's organic architecture. Its eco-friendly design includes locally sourced material like hand-hewn wood-beam ceilings and Mexican tiling, but Wright's legacy is most obviously echoed in the way the resort seems nestled among the stones as though Mother Nature herself had placed it there.

Guests may not be consciously aware of it as they enjoy the spa or the golf course. But, perhaps, as they head out to climb among the (actual) boulders, return from riding horseback, or spot it from a hot air balloon, they'll take a moment to smile at how nearly indistinguishable the resort is from its surroundings — just as Wright would have wanted.

#### THE WORST THING THAT CAN HAPPEN

During his career as the most prolific architect in 20th-century America, Wright completed nearly 500 buildings. But more important than any single one of these structures is how he changed the way people thought about the intersection between man-made structures and nature — as he did here in Arizona. Seated on the desert floor, gazing upward, it's not hard to imagine Wright's beneficent gaze still lingering across the Sonoran Desert. Not that Wright was ever one to rest on what he had already accomplished. "You know what Wright said whenever someone asked him which one of his buildings was his favorite?" Rattenbury asks, with a smile. "Wright always responded, 'My next one.'" And although there will be no more buildings by Frank Lloyd Wright, when it comes to buildings shaped by his teachings, there will always be a next one. ■

PHOTOS: OPENING SPREAD AND ABOVE COURTESY THE BOULDERS; POOL BY ANDREW PELAGE.