

# Form, Function, and What Follows: Louis Sullivan's Emotional Design



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By Lindsey Vehlewald

Everyone has heard of Frank Lloyd Wright. Possibly the most famous American architect, there are LEGO versions of his works available in miniature for the armchair architect. I'm willing to bet that many people can name at least one famous building he's responsible for designing – Falling Water, the Guggenheim, the Imperial Hotel, Taliesin. All breathtakingly beautiful, innovative, and cultivated to exist in harmony with their environment and the people inhabiting them.





*Louis Henry Sullivan, looking dashing in 1895*

But while I appreciate Frank Lloyd Wright, and I love the Prairie School and the Arts and Crafts Movement, my favorite architect is actually Wright's teacher. His contributions to St. Louis history anchor my hometown's architectural heritage. They are, for me, two of the most emotionally evocative landmarks in the United States.

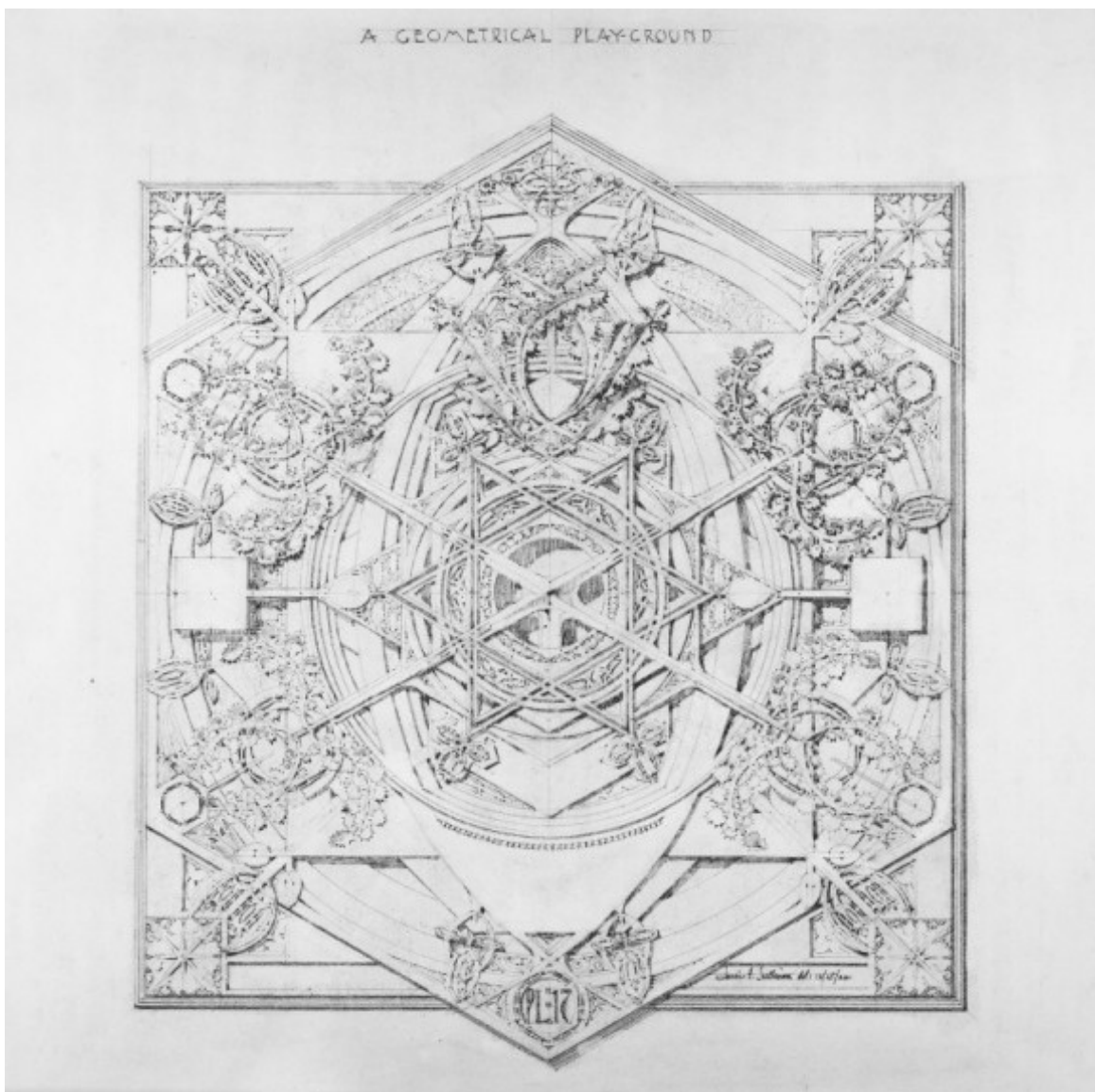
Few people know the name of Wright's mentor, Louis Sullivan. Though he was the father of modernism in architecture and a man who has done more to touch the daily architectural life of Americans, his name is less well-known than that of his protegee. However, most people will recognize his principle statement and architectural guiding star, "Form follows function".

## **Function**

Louis Sullivan is known as the father of skyscrapers, teasing architectural design toward fantastical heights. Sullivan made his mark in architecture during a sea change in design, technology, and economic growth. Faced with rapid urbanization, buildings needed to make more room with a smaller footprint – they needed to move upward rather than outward. Previous buildings had been limited by the load-bearing masonry of the ground floors but the technology introduced by the steel beam offered versatility, economy, and strength.

Much of the aesthetic of load-bearing masonry consisted of elements to disguise and work within the constraints of the structure itself. Without the need for the base, shaft, and cornice, architecture utilizing steel beams faced a stylistic identity crisis. It was a blank page.

Undaunted, Sullivan deftly ushered in the era of the modern skyscraper with an artist's eye for precedent and a visionary's embrace of the technological possibilities. Traditional architectural elements were toyed with, architecture was given grammar, and a new style of urban development and the era of steel-frame high rises began.



*Sullivan's sketch from System of Architectural Ornament: Plate 17, titled "A Geometrical Play-Ground" (c. 1922).  
Courtesy Art Institute Chicago Archives*

Sullivan's designs were honest and playful. He wanted pedestrians to crane their necks and marvel at buildings that towered above the city skyline. But he also wanted people to really examine them and look harder. We were all Jack, looking up at a steel and brick beanstalk growing out of the ground to tickle the clouds with its concrete leaves. We were left wondering how high up it (and we) could go. Sullivan's architecture, while born of modern technology, was emotionally resonant and human.

the flow of life, how absorbing the mystery! Unceasingly the essence of things is taking shape in the matter of things, and this unspeakable process we call birth and growth. Awhile the spirit and the matter fade away together, and it is this that we call decadence, death. These two happenings seem joined and interdependent, blended into one like a bubble and its iridescence, and they seem borne along upon a slowly moving air. This air is wonderful past all understanding.

Yet to the steadfast eye of one standing upon the shore of things, looking chiefly and most lovingly upon that side on which the sun shines and that we feel joyously to be life, the heart is ever gladdened by the beauty, the exquisite spontaneity, with which life seeks and takes on its forms in an accord perfectly responsive to its needs. It seems ever as though the life and the form were absolutely one and inseparable, so adequate is the sense of fulfillment.

Whether it be the sweeping eagle in his flight, or the open apple-blossom, the talling work-horse, the blithe swan, the branching oak, the winding stream at its base, the drifting clouds, over all the coursing sun, *form ever follows function*, and this is the law. Where function does not change, form does not change. The granite rocks, the ever-brooding hills, remain for ages; the lightning lives, comes into shape, and dies, in a twinkling.

It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things superhuman, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that *form ever follows function*. This is the law.

Shall we, then, daily violate this law in our art? Are we, so decadent, so insubstantial, so utterly weak of eyesight, that we cannot perceive this truism—simple, so very simple?—Is it indeed a truth so transparent that we see through it but do not see it? Is it really, then, a very marvellous thing, or is it rather so commonplace, so everyday, so near a thing to us, that we cannot perceive that the shape, form, outward expression, design, or whatever we may choose, of the tall office building should in the very nature of things follow the functions of the building, and that where the function does not change, the form is not to change?

Does not this readily, clearly, and conclusively show that the lower one or two stories will take on a special character suited to the special needs, that the tiers of typical offices, having the same unchanging function, shall continue in the same unchanging form, and that as to the attic, specific and conclusive as it is in its very nature, its function shall equally be so in form, in significance, in continuity, in conclusiveness of outward expression? From this results, naturally, spontaneously, unwittingly, a three-part division,—not from any theory, symbol, or fanciful logic.

And thus the design of the tall office building takes its place with all other architectural types made when architecture, as has happened once in many years, was a living art. Witness the Greek temple, the Gothic cathedral, the medieval fortress.

And thus, when native instinct and sensibility shall govern the

exercise of our beloved art; when the known law, the respected law, shall be that form ever follows function; when our architects shall cease strutting and prancing handcuffed and vainglorious in the asylum of a foreign school; when it is truly felt, cheerfully accepted, that this law opens up the airy sunshine of green fields, and gives to us a freedom that the very beauty and sumptuousness of the outworking of the law itself as exhibited in nature will deter any sane, any sensitive man from changing into license; when it becomes evident that we are merely speaking a foreign language with a noticeable American accent, whereas each and every architect in the land might, under the benign influence of this law, express in the simplest, most modest, most natural way that which it is in him to say; that he might really and would surely develop his own characteristic individuality, and that the architectural art with him would certainly become a living form of speech, a natural form of statement, giving sentence to him and adding treasures small and great to the growing art of his land; when we know and feel that Nature is our friend, not our implacable enemy,—that an afternoon in the country, an hour by the sea, a full open view of one single day, through dawn, high noon, and twilight, will suggest to us so much that is rhythmical, deep, and eternal in the vast art of architecture, something so deep, so true, that all the narrow formalities, hard-and-fast rules, and strangling bonds of the schools cannot stifle it in us,—then it may be proclaimed that we are on the high-road to a natural and satisfying art, an architecture that will soon become a fine art in the true, the best sense of the word, an art that will live because it will be of the people, for the people, and by the people.

Louis H. Sullivan.

#### THE EVOLUTION OF THE WEDDING-CAKE.

WHEN in ancient and imperial Rome a maiden was wedded according to custom, she always carried three ears of wheat in her hand, while over her head was broken a simple cake of *far* and *mol* eaten as a pledge of plenty and an ample abundance of the good things of life.

In this primitive custom we see the germ from which grew the elaborate plum leaves and daintily beribboned boxes of luscious richness that form so conspicuous a feature of our marriage feasts to-day.

The bridal wreath of an Early English bride was likewise fashioned of bearded (and sometimes gilded) wheaten spikes, while, on her return from church, corn and other cereals were showered upon her and then carefully gathered up and consumed by the wedding guests. In this, also, we recognize a rude ancestor of a modern fashion, that of sending a newly married pair off in a small blizzard of hard, snowy rice.

In the course of time, however, the golden grain was ground and

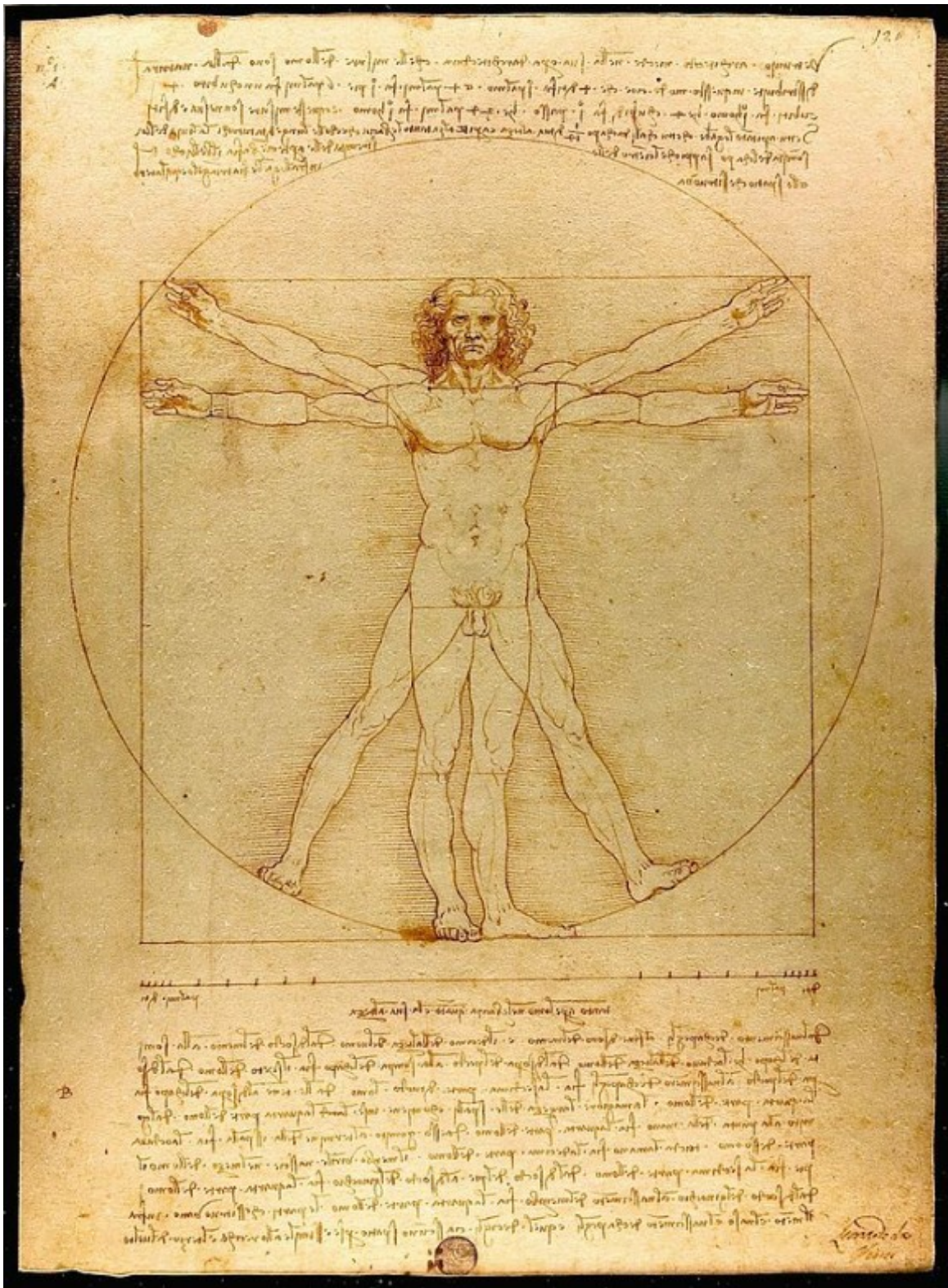
Published in Lippincott's monthly magazine in 1896, Sullivan's essay contains the first appearance of his truism "Form follows function" (highlighted). Image courtesy Open Library.

Louis Sullivan wrote in "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered":

It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things superhuman, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that *form ever follows function*. This is the law.

Sullivan credited his observation to his study of the Roman architect, Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, who wrote *De architectura*. Vitruvius wrote about the ethos of architecture, declaring that the quality of a building was built on the social relevance more than the materials or end result. He wrote, "[t]he ideal building has three elements; it is sturdy, useful, and beautiful." His concepts of proportion and emotional relevance influenced both art and architecture. Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man" is a direct reflection of the three elements as applied to human anatomy.





Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man" utilized the same principles of proportion.

## Form

### THE WAINWRIGHT BUILDING

St. Louis is home to two of Sullivan's masterpieces: The Wainwright Building and the Wainwright Tomb.



*The view of the Wainwright Building from the sidewalk. Image credit 10 Buildings That Changed America*

Found downtown at 709 Chestnut, the Wainwright Building is a 10-story brick office building that exemplifies Sullivan's skyscraper ethos. Originally completed in 1891 to house the St. Louis Brewers Association, it was named for Ellis Wainwright, a local brewer and financier. Named a National Historic Landmark in 1968, it is currently home to Missouri state offices.

Sullivan wrote of his architectural vision, citing the Wainwright Building as illustration:

[The skyscraper] must be tall, every inch of it tall. The force and power of altitude must be in it the glory and pride of exaltation must be in it. It must be every inch a proud and soaring thing, rising in sheer exultation that from bottom to top it is a unit without a single dissenting line.

An art history or architecture student can appreciate the tripartite composition that lightly suggests Classical forms but never devolves into the foamy neoclassicism that Sullivan found contemptible. Dressing the steel beams in brick and terra cotta, Sullivan added warmth and organic textures. Distinctly modern, the Wainwright Building was, to Sullivan, "a proud and soaring thing" that relied on its vertical aesthetic.

In the Wainwright Building, Sullivan also established his symbolic architectural poetry, marrying geometric structural forms with organic detail and ornament. This "objective-tectonic" and "subjective-organic" juxtaposition came to fruition in the Wainwright Building. His signature elements amplified height through designs that led the eye up, up, up to the very top of the building in even, vertical lines. Once there, the natural forms of florals and leafy botanicals folded around honeycomb windows in intricate, intimate geometry, teasing the viewer on the street with patterns too detailed to be understood from the sidewalk.





*Image credit 10 Buildings That Changed America*

Heralded now as one of the ten buildings that changed America, it was the first skyscraper that looked the part. Frank Lloyd Wright declared it was “the very first human expression of a tall steel office-building as Architecture.” Sullivan was able to take something impersonal and utilitarian, and elevate it into art.





*Image credit 10 Buildings That Changed America*

Dwarfed now by taller skyscrapers downtown, the Wainwright Building stands out among its impersonal glass and metal neighbors because of its warmth and organic feel.

## THE WAINWRIGHT TOMB

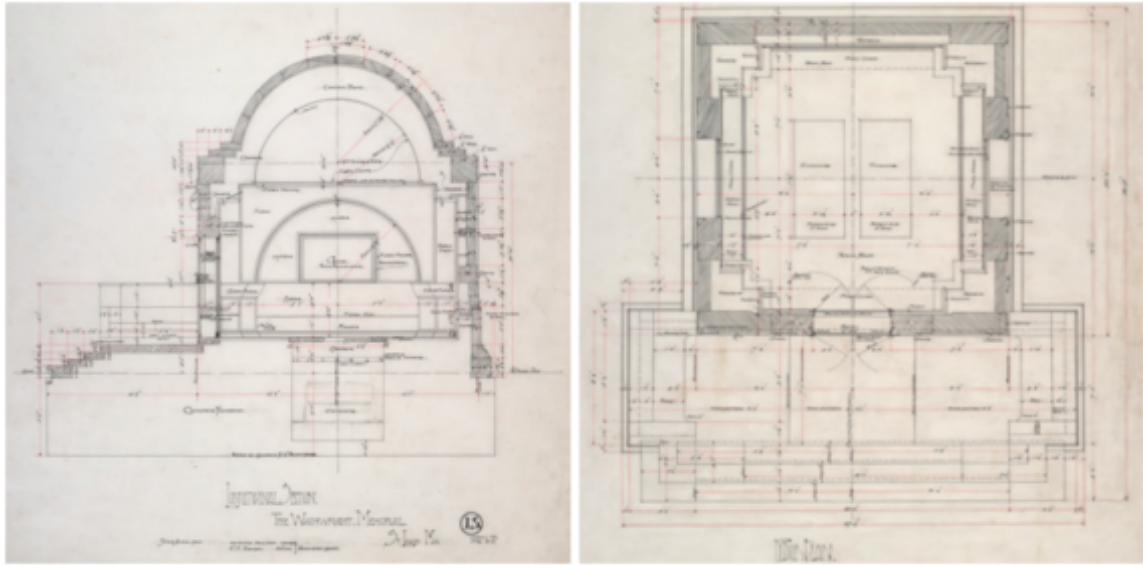


*From the TOKY Archives*

Placed regally under tall maple and sweet gum trees that feel as old as the city itself, the Wainwright Tomb perches on a sunny hill in North St. Louis City's Bellefontaine Cemetery. This is my favorite place within the 314 acres of the park.

Tragedy visited the Wainwright family during completion of the downtown skyscraper. Charlotte Dickson Wainwright, the young, vibrant wife of Ellis Wainwright and lauded by local press as “the most beautiful woman in St. Louis”, died of an acute infection in 1890.

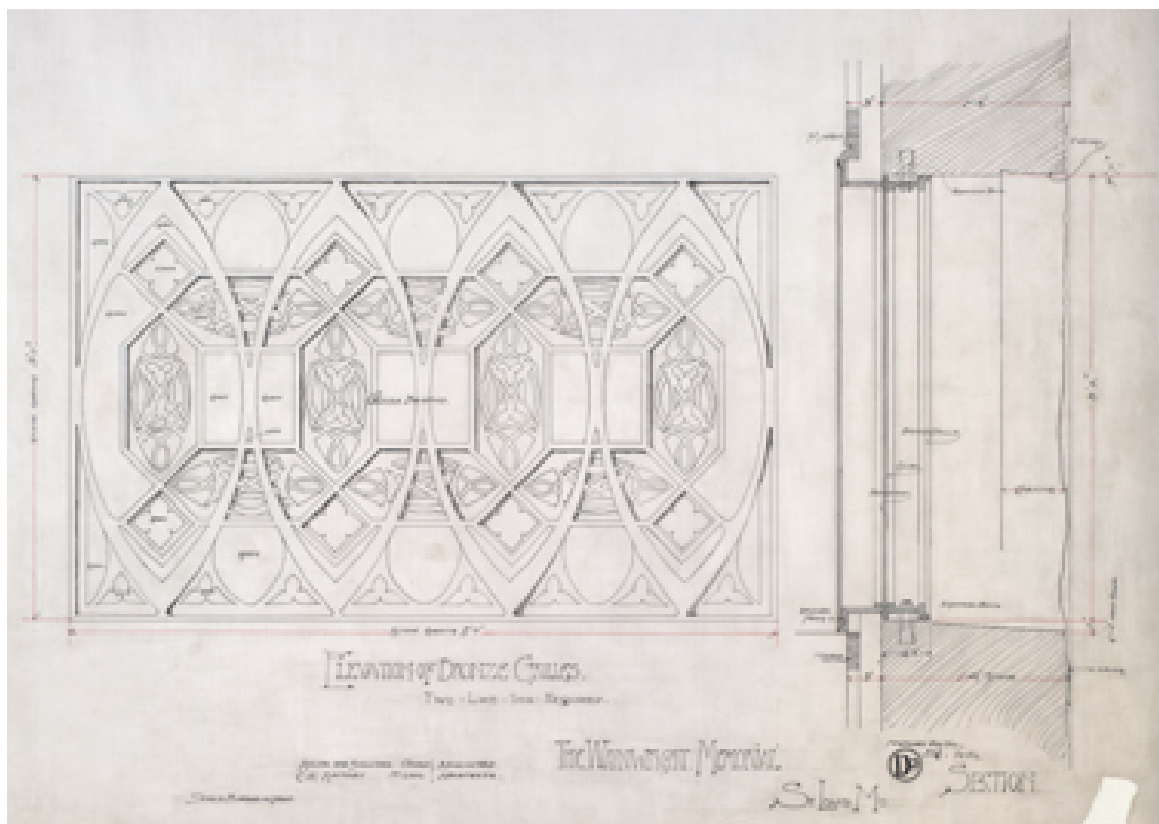
Devastated, Ellis commissioned Sullivan to design a monument to his wife where they could rest together forever when it was his time to join her. The mausoleum that resulted has become known as the Taj Mahal of St. Louis, both for Ellis’ grief and Sullivan’s graceful sensitivity of design.



*Sullivan's original designs for the Wainwright Tomb. Images from the St. Louis Public Library*

From the outside, the Wainwright Tomb is severe in its simplicity: two classical geometric forms, a dome resting on top of a perfect cube. Devoid of the ornate iconography that ran rampant in late Victorian cemeteries, the Wainwright Tomb is quiet and stoic by comparison. It doesn't even feature the family name.





Sullivan's sketches for the smallest details were intricate, even the window grills received delicate planning sketches. Photo from the St. Louis Public Library



The bronze window grills have turned green with age. Photo courtesy St. Louis Patina



A closer look at the external detailing begins to give Sullivan's signature subjective-organic poetry a voice. Outlined in the limestone facade is a neat row of Sullivan's botanical designs that never repeat exactly. The botanicals resemble stylized Parrot Tulips with ruffled petals and deep cups. Victorians held floriography in very high esteem – one could have an entire conversation in a bouquet of flowers and their meanings. The inclusion of tulips here, no matter how stylized, has to be read as intentional.



*Photo courtesy St. Louis Patina*

In the language of flowers, tulips were among the highest praise for the intended. Introduced from Persia with a stunningly tragic mythology, they represent the truest, passionate love. Unlike a rose, the classic symbol of love and passion, the tulip is without thorns and presents itself to the viewer in total vulnerability. And unlike nearly every other flower, tulips continue to grow after being cut. In cemetery engravings, flowers with bowed heads represented an untimely passing while still in the “bloom” of youth.

Added together, the infinite strip of inverted tulips around the Wainwright Tomb can be read as Ellis at his most vulnerable: his deepest grief at the death of his beloved wife and the confession that his love will continue to grow for her, even at their parting.

For the reserved Gilded Age, that was a gutpunch of a confession.



*The original key to the mausoleum continues the thematic detailwork. Photo from Distilled History*

If you're fortunate enough to know someone with the (equally ornate) key, stepping over the threshold of the mausoleum is like watching the passing of the design baton from Sullivan to Wright. Sullivan brought in his student to assist with the interior design so he could focus on the impending competition of the Wainwright building downtown.

Here, again, Sullivan's observation of "form follows function" holds true. If the outside of the Wainwright Tomb spoke of grief, the interior speaks with the hope and joy of an eternal, loving union.





*The view stepping inside the Wainwright Tomb. Image via Arch Daily. This photo is part of a monograph series titled "American City: St. Louis Architecture"*

At the heart of the small structure are two burial slabs for Ellis and Charlotte, side by side, in literal conversation with each other. Lines from poets Tennyson and Barbauld are engraved in echoing sentiment for husband and wife, respectively. Charlotte's reads "Say not good night. /



*But in some brighter clime / bid me good morning".* Inscribed on Ellis' slab on his death is 1924, "O, for the touch of a vanished hand and the sound of a voice that is still".

In this soft, personal space, it's easy to picture the couple lying side by side looking up at the sky together and whispering affections. That intimacy is evident in each detail of the interior. The floor and ceiling of space are covered with tiny mosaic tiles that twist in colorful vines around the space. Far from being somber, the color palette is almost joyful – bright reds and greens curling around bright white and yellow. Everything leads the eye upward, toward the bowl of the dome directly above Mr. and Mrs. Wainwright. From their resting place, they would have the perfect view of a twinkling heaven, tiled with gold mosaics and pastel cherubim that smile kindly back. This isn't a mournful space, it is hopeful.



*Mosaic detail, image from Landmarks Association of St. Louis*

But all of this comfort and love is only viewed with the door of the mausoleum open, letting natural light in along with the external grief. It is a beautiful tribute to a young, beloved wife. More than any marble or limestone memorial in Bellefontaine, the Wainwright Tomb stands as an evocative meditation on the grieving process itself.

## What Follows

Sullivan's designs are, at their core, emotional, honest, and very human. For a world sitting at the brink of massive technological and industrial overdrive, Sullivan's design let the human element straddle the divide between past and future.

Sullivan believed that architecture must flow naturally within its physical environment, but also within the human environment. His designs draw the eye up, literally and metaphorically, demonstrating that we are more than our facades. In the Wainwright Building, we're compelled

to look up and consider the heights of man's technological accomplishment. But in the Wainwright Tomb, we're prompted to look heavenward and contemplate man's emotional journey. In form and function, both views lead upward toward hope.

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To see TOKY's work for our friends at Bellefontaine, including video, branding, and outdoor marketing, be sure to flip through TOKY's archives on Bellefontaine Cemetery here. Or, visit the park for yourself. Bellefontaine offers historical tours many days of the week and most weekends. For any history, architecture, or art and literature buff, there is a wealth of beauty to be appreciated.

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