Prospect-refuge patterns in Frank Lloyd Wright’s Prairie houses: Using isovist fields to examine the evidence

Michael J. Ostwald, Michael Dawes
University of Newcastle, Australia

Abstract

It has been argued that the domestic works of Frank Lloyd Wright possess an innate phenomenological appeal that is a direct result of a particular spatial and visual pattern in Wright’s architecture. This argument, which is central to several architectural variants of prospect-refuge theory, suggests that a distinct spatio-visual system exists which directly shapes the way people move through and experience Wright’s architecture. This paper uses a computational technique, isovist field analysis, to search for prospect-refuge related spatio-visual patterns in paths through five of Frank Lloyd Wright’s canonical Prairie houses. The paper concludes that there is no clear evidence in these particular cases of the suggested pattern.

Keywords

isovist analysis, visibility graph analysis, spatial perception, prospect-refuge theory, Frank Lloyd Wright

In An Autobiography Wright even tells of two houses that “were bought back again by the same people who had built them and sold them, because they said they could not feel at home in any other.” Given the source, one might approach the comment with caution, yet Robert Twombly, a careful and balanced biographer of Wright, notes that “as questionnaires and interviews establish again and again, his clients love their homes, indeed, are more than ordinarily enthusiastic, and leave, if they have to, with considerable reluctance.” Yet few houses of equal fame have embodied more conspicuous faults. Many of Wright’s plans defy reasonable furniture arrangements, many frustrate even the storage of reasonable and treasured possessions.