How Frank Lloyd Wright designed a distraction-free home office

By Anne Quito
Design and architecture reporter
Buffalo, New York • October 24, 2020

How would America’s greatest architect design a home office? Could Frank Lloyd Wright, who had visionary solutions for contemporary living—from sustainable design, air conditioning, even open-plan offices—have an answer to the search for ideal Covid-era remote working configurations?

A clue lies in the meticulously-restored Martin House in Buffalo, New York. Commissioned by workaholic businessman Darwin Martin in 1902, Wright considered it among his greatest achievements, on par with Falling Water in Philadelphia and the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Scholars consider cite the Martin House as a prime example of Wright’s prairie house style—a building characterized by broad, flat structures, and a free-flowing interior layout.

Wright designed over 500 homes over the span of 70 years, but the jewel of Buffalo’s Parkside neighborhood is one of the few with a dedicated work space. The Martin House’s 12 ft by 15 ft bursar’s office, as it was called, was designed to accommodate the owner’s compulsive work habits.
As corporate secretary of the Larkin Soap Company, Martin was in charge of the bookkeeping of the thriving business. He worked 14- to 16 hour shifts, six days a week, and was known to carry lunch and an evening meal with him. “Martin began at the Larkin company at age 14 and worked so hard he was discovered asleep on the accounts books one morning having been there all night. I’d say, yes, he was a workaholic,” says historian Jack Quinan a leading scholar on Wright and curator emeritus of the Martin House Restoration Corporation.
Mary Roberts, Martin House’s executive director describes how the one-line entries in Martin's diary revealed his stress. “Too busy to think; Busy all the time; Not a minute to despair; My blood is all out of order’.”

Apart from his all-consuming job at Larkin, Martin had investments in Toronto, Buffalo, and the western US, which meant more administrative paperwork. The custom-designed bursar’s office was a space where Martin could focus and to attend to those matters at home without distraction.

Wright introduced several solutions: First, he created a dedicated and discreet entrance to Martin’s man cave, concealing the door behind a low brick wall from the outside and behind a small door from the living room.

This was an upgrade from the layout of most home offices during this time. As Elizabeth Patton explains in her book, Easy Living: The Rise of the Home Office, the “chamber,” as they were then referred to, was typically located close to the main door so the man of the house can receive business associates without disturbing the rest of the home.

Wright’s signature art glass windows were smaller and positioned above the 4.5 ft bookshelves so Martin won’t be distracted by street traffic when he was seated. (He was 5 ft 6). He also included a stained glass skylight to infuse some light in the room.
The bursar’s office had thick walls, and cocooned Martin from the din of horse-and-buggy and car traffic on his street. Wright built Martin a three-sided desk, akin to an open cubicle. His chair faced away from the door, which was, as Roberts describes it, “like putting him in the zone.”

The Martin House home office mirrored details in Wright’s design of the Larkin Company Administration Building—a major commission for the 35-year old architect. He installed built-in drawers for a type of client filing system Martin invented. Inspired by the Dewey indexing system in the Buffalo Public Library, Martin pioneered a widely-copied system using index cards in lieu of big heavy ledgers.

“It changed the way businesses in American kept records,” says Roberts. “People say that he [Martin] was the Bill Gates of his time, in the sense that he figured out a new way to store information for businesses.”

“The Larkin Company’s most valuable asset was neither soap nor other merchandise manufactured and sold, but its inventory of names and addresses annotated with indications of trustworthiness —what we would today its customer database,” wrote Columbia University’s Zeynep Çelik Alexander in a 2018 article published in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*. “Martin’s groundbreaking invention, then, had nothing to do with innovations in manufacturing or sales but rather with the seemingly humdrum matter of bookkeeping.”

**Architecture as portraiture**

How might Wright deal with today’s home office woes, such as the need to be on constant Zoom meetings, interruptions from social media and domestic chores, and the spaghetti tangle of cables?
“Wright was working in a very different era, of course, with technologies that amounted to a telephone, a mechanical typewriter, some bookshelves, and file cabinets,” Quinan tells Quartz. “I can’t begin to say how Wright would deal with today’s complex home office requirements other than to fall back on his consistently organic approach to such things.”

Organic, as Wright used it, can be roughly boiled down to “form and function are one,” a notion that design solutions should grapple with specific needs. In the book, *Architecture as Portraiture*, Quinan elaborates on how Wright believed in designing homes as mirrors of its owners, akin to the work of portrait painters like John Singer Sargent.

Quinan explains that though Wright had a reputation for always getting his way, he was first thinking of the client’s needs: “For Kenneth Laurent, who was stricken with paralysis that made him wheelchair-bound, Wright design a house of one floor with a master bedroom with twin beds placed end-to-end along one wall. [There was a] writing desk across the room with a cantilevered writing surface that allowed Mr. Laurent to fit comfortably at work in his wheelchair.”

Wright’s attentiveness to the client’s physical and psychological state is crucial to designing their home offices. Before committing to new furniture or extensive renovations, start by observing “the patterns and rhythms” of your work life and go from there.