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If Frank Lloyd Wright Built Your Dorm Room ...

By Chris Sherman - 9/1/2009

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Architectural legends walked the earth at Lakeland's Florida Southern College again, and this time they reached down to the shore of Lake Hollingsworth.

The genius and ghost of Frank Lloyd Wright, who designed 12 of the buildings here, is always on campus, and last week he was joined by living legend Robert A.M. Stern, who is reinvigorating Wright's legacy and adding to it.

The occasion was Stern's latest addition, Nicholas Hall, the second of two new dormitories that echo Wright's distinctive style in their colors and broad overhanging eaves. They also extend the diagonals of Wright's campus plan from the 1930s.

One enters the dorms just below the top of bluff of the main campus while the four stories of rooms carry one down to the lake level. The top floor is set off by a wide band of forest green clapboard while most of the walls are buff cream with all window cases and details in Wright's signature red.

Nicholas Hall at Florida Southern College
[Photo: Lakeland Ledger]

At the unveiling, Stern noted that Wright declared himself the world's greatest architect, adding "we lesser mortals need to soldier on with what talents and tools are available to us. And so I hope that I have done right by Mr. Wright." It's all part of a [Campaign By College President Anne B. Kerr](#) to preserve Wright's legacy.

Stern's own style has been called modern traditionalist -- known for preserving old principles of various periods and making them work in contemporary settings. He is the dean of architecture at Yale but has considerable work in Florida, including the master plan for Celebration.

Joining him at the event was another architectural giant, Gene Leedy of Winter Haven. He was a leading member of the Sarasota School of Modernists at work in the 1950s when Wright was still alive and presiding over his final work at Florida Southern. Leedy remembered Wright at a similar event 50 years ago, walking in cane and broad hat under the controversial walkways critics called too low: "He raised his cane and tapped the roof and said 'This is exactly the right height.'"

Stern's design did not try to replicate Wright but to recapture his ideas and extend the paths set by the college walkways. "We really tried to imagine what he would do and to bring the diagonal down to water and open up the campus," he said.

While the original Wright buildings are built of custom cast block that have an organic feel, the new dorm's long bold lakeside windows and triangular staircase echo other features on campus. The stair case railing evokes Wright's Tree of Life pattern. The dorms' sharp lines make them more contemporary and post-modern, while the cladding and colors reflect the traditional pre-war houses around the lake.

The dorms, built through grants from the Carol Jenkins Barnett and Barney Barnett charities and Publix Super Market Charities, have one feature that students will notice immediately: the clever wooden furniture. Each of 120 students in the dorm has a bed that sits more than three feet off the floor with space underneath for a rolling chest of drawers and room for small refrigerators, footlockers and other paraphernalia. The chair at each desk is modified version of a rocker.