

# Louis Henri Sullivan and His National Architecture

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**Abstract:** As an important pioneer in the implementation and promotion of American organic functionalism in the field of architecture, Louis Sullivan's slogan "Form Follows Function" and his "organic functionalism" are often misunderstood intentionally or unintentionally, resulting in his organic architecture being divided into the opposite camp of modern functionalism and Art Nouveau. To some extent, this makes people ignore the credit of his architectural ideas for giving high-rise commercial buildings the American national spirit at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Through an analysis of the background of Sullivan's architectural thought and the causes of misunderstanding, this paper reveals the free, democratic and innovative American spirit conveyed by Sullivan's organic architecture, and explores how his practices contribute to the development of a positive architectural culture that shapes national self-confidence and identity. This discussion is particularly instructive given that architecture is becoming template-based processes in the modern world.

**Keywords:** Louis H. Sullivan; national architecture; Form Follows Function

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## 1. Introduction

Louis Henri Sullivan (1856-1924), whose motto "Form Follows Function" has been repeatedly highlighted, has cemented his place among contemporary functionalists. Under this trend, Sullivan's enthusiasm for decoration and the cloaks that are generously exposed on the facade of the building and show organic vitality, are obviously unacceptable. Modernists, on the one hand, attribute Sullivan's breakthrough structural treatment of high-rise buildings to functionalism; on the other hand, Sullivan's architectural decoration endowed with spiritual and cultural connotations was rejected as useless. Sullivan's internal spirit conveyed by architecture is difficult to fully comprehend because of the fragmented way they treat his organic constructions. As a result, Sullivan's influence on the shaping and promotion of the American national spirit was underestimated.

Sullivan's unique solution for tall buildings in the late 19th century was undoubtedly a major guide and encouragement at a time when the United States was suffering from cultural inferiority and desperately seeking a sense of national identity. While other American architects were still copying and imposing the heavy, hypocritical makeup of "European culture" on this fledgling country, Sullivan courageously created a new style of architecture that fit the local environment—a new form that was full of freedom, democracy, and innovation. A century later, under the tide of globalization and the fusion of various styles, forms, and characteristics, it is even more necessary for architects to learn how to strengthen people's national confidence and identity by shaping an architectural culture with a unique national character.

## 2. The establishment of national architecture

Born in Boston in 1856, Sullivan studied architecture at MIT and Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. At school, Sullivan was not interested in the classical columns taught by his teachers; and in his hometown, the architecture of the city mostly frustrated him [1]. Given that writings about Sullivan mostly focus on his educational experiences, it is easy to ignore that Sullivan's rebellion against the traditional academic school appeared before he became a real architect. The architecture critic Wichit Charenbhak keenly noticed that in the early days when young Sullivan was still receiving education at MIT, the innovator had no intention of obeying or even contradicting the teaching system of Beaux Arts classicism, because these were "boring, empty and repetitive" courses for him [2]. In a word, his study in this school ended quite briefly. In 1875, Sullivan began to work with William Le Baron Jenney, the "father of skyscrapers," and then formally started his architectural career in Chicago.

The devastating fire of 1871 in Chicago caused great damage to the city, but it also allowed American architects to rethink the architectural style of this land. Unlike other architects who were still reveling in the European Classical Revival style, Sullivan resisted using it mechanically and instead wanted to develop an American style. In the past, although people had worked hard to escape European colonization and build a great nation, they inevitably built their new homes in the same patterns as the prior proprietors. Fire-ravaged Chicago was the ideal place to create a new aesthetic, but architects had not yet decided on a design. An enormous amount of interest was generated by the White City of 1893 Chicago Exposition since most of the old guard only wanted to continue adopting European architectural models. They intend to shape the "majestic" perception of American culture by reconstructing the historically magnificent buildings. This self-deceiving pseudohistorical reproduction was strongly denounced by Sullivan. The attempt today to imitate "the bygone forms of building, is a procedure unworthy of a free people," as well as "a suggestion humiliating to, every active brain" [3]. Sullivan quickly began to fight against conservative classicism. At the exhibition, Sullivan and his collaborator Dankmar Adler designed and built the Transportation Building (1893) using a novel approach. The originality of this building won them high praise from the French Alliance and European partners, represented by André Bouilhet. Although Sullivan and his allies provided an original and self-designed architectural reference style at that time, this innovative experiment was not valued by the local people but was annihilated in the classical wave. Disappointed with the locals' taste, Sullivan persisted in opposing classicism, seeing the architectural innovation as "a test of American culture" [4].

Apart from the Reconstruction Project and the international exhibition, which made Sullivan realize how urgently fresh design forms and architectural systems needed to be established to create a regional architectural style, the Gilded Age's challenge to the construction industry also served as a catalyst for Sullivan's exploration into the evolution of national architecture. In the second half of the 19th century, the United States ushered in the Gilded Age, characterized by rapid industrialization, urbanization, and modernization, with the end of the Civil War and the reconstruction of the South. With the outbreak of the Industrial Revolution, the influx of people into cities, the more crowded urban space, and expensive land prices made it more sensible for buildings to move upward into the sky. In the process of upward expansion of architectural space, the bourgeoisie also continued to seize wealth, and brutally exploit and oppress workers. Against this background, although Jenney designed the world's first high-rise building—The Home Insurance Building, which revolutionized the use of steel frames as the support for the entire building, he did not bring in a systematic standard of high-rise construction, and his high concern for the functionality of the building made the facade of the building appear rational and cold. Sullivan supported Jenney's innovative approach to structuring, which he continued in the Wainwright Building, and on this basis developed a structural

treatment system for high-rise buildings. For Sullivan, however, the grim looking of commercial buildings would remind people of their former landlords and alienate the people of this land. In Sullivan's mind, "For architecture is, through and through, a social art, and all its interesting and valid answers must be couched in response to the demands of society" [5]. Sullivan wanted to develop a new style of architecture that would express the ideals of the American public's desire for a democratic, free society and a good community. The opportunity of Chicago's urban renewal, the stylistic challenge of the international exhibition, and the social problems exacerbated by the Gilded Age undoubtedly pushed Sullivan to find a way for architecture to speak for the land and the people it serves.

Sullivan emphasized the social functionality of architecture, believing that a nation's spirituality could be expressed through its buildings. In October 1885, at the second annual meeting of the Western Society of Architects, Sullivan made his first speech on the development of an organic national style. He said, architectural practice, up to that point, had revealed "a lack of insight equally strange and deplorable," and their designers had blindly continued thinking in terms of the emotional enlightenment from "the matured beauty of Old World art," ignoring the fundamental principles of stylistic creativity [6]. In his architectural theory, "a building which is truly a work of art (and I consider none other) is in its nature, essence and physical being an emotional expression [7]. Sullivan believed that American architects' behavior of copying European classical architectural models and applying them directly to their own country represented a kind of naivety and hypocrisy in their thinking. At the same time, the architectural criticism was also as self-deceiving as the chaotic architectural imitation, trying to fabricate an image of the young nation as a master of art with a profound cultural heritage. This is completely divorced from reality and exposes a false democratic ideology in American society that is rooted in individual thought and education systems. As Sullivan observed, "We are at that dramatic moment in our national life wherein we tremble evenly between decay and evolution, and our architecture, with strange fidelity, reflects this equipoise" [8]. At that time, under the shadow of feudal capital in the United States, Sullivan's strong cry for democracy, freedom, and the spirit of innovation undoubtedly strengthened his identity as a socialist.

### **3. National architecture based on organic functionalism**

Sullivan is eager to rescue America from the low tide of art. He advocates practicing the emotional expression of architecture by observing reality and developing an innovative style in the organic form of nature. In 1885, in his first professional paper *Characteristics and tendencies of an American architecture today*, Sullivan discussed in detail about "the formative beginnings of this national style" [9]. Many attempts in the past actually pointed to "a grafting and transplanting process," he continued, which has not changed the current status of American architecture because they were not committed to fostering an emotion associated with environmental quality, which is precisely the driving force for the development of unique forms and structures [9]. According to Sullivan, to achieve this artistic expression, architects need to observe people and their surroundings and be attentive to reactions to everyday life, which will help them to be inspired by subtle emotions. By utilizing the organic forms of nature, it is possible to connect the observed shapes to their innermost nature and to the way they are adapted to their environment, so that their function can be truly demonstrated in architecture. As Sullivan demonstrated in the design of the Wainwright Building, by organically processing natural plants with local cultural symbolism into decorative patterns, architectural forms are endowed with the connotation of spiritual culture. Sullivan's consideration of the humanities and environment around buildings can be seen not only in the Wainwright Building, but also later in the Guaranty Building, the Carson Pirie Scott store, the Farmers and Merchants Union Bank and other buildings.

On the one hand, Sullivan's organic functionalism is reflected in the interior of the building, which responds to the current urban environment through the structural treatment of high-rise buildings. In his article entitled the tall office building artistically considered published in 1896, he clearly showed us how to express the spirit of high-rise office buildings based on their characteristics:

Beginning with the first story, we give this a main entrance that attracts the eye to its location, and the remainder of the story we treat in a more or less liberal, expansive, sumptuous way, a way based exactly on the practical necessities, but expressed with a sentiment of largeness and freedom. The second story [10] ...

The vertical line of the wall rises to the cornice, making the overall shape of the building look more towering and magnificent. Although these vertical lines may seem functionally insignificant in terms of structure, in Sullivan's theory, they are also the composition of high-rise office buildings, and together with the method of treating different floors separately, forming the fixed structure rules of tall buildings. In Kindergarten Chats, Sullivan regarded that the vertical piers and lintel were "two chemical elements unite," and pointed out that they had the original meaning of "the two great rhythms of growth and decay, or of life and death" [11]. He showed us how to establish a link between mechanical technology and artistic emotional experience, and in this regard, Sullivan obviously handled it better than his former colleague Jenny. What he did for American architecture was exactly what Albert concluded, "He was the first prophet to build for the American condition" [12].

On the other hand, Sullivan developed an organic decoration system to achieve the goal of penetrating the spiritual material into the design. In the discussion on architectural decoration, Sullivan put forward that "the ornament should appear, not as something receiving the spirit of the structure, but as a thing expressing that spirit by virtue of differential growth" [13]. Unlike the later extreme functionalists who believed that architecture could "grow" its appropriate form, Sullivan emphasized the importance of decoration to the spirit of architecture. In his architectural practice, Sullivan provided an imaginative form of exterior decoration developed from natural plants. With vortex-like tendrils, sinuous leaves, and creeping branches, Sullivan arranged these patterns rhythmically in reliefs or murals, giving the building vibrant energy and free spirit. Through the organic expression of personality, Sullivan made decoration no longer an unnecessary attachment to the surface of architecture, but a resonance with the structure, achieving a true spiritual and emotional expression. This is what the architect said "the preparatory basis of what may be called an organic system of ornamentation" [13]. For Sullivan, the law of nature is the essence of the development of architecture, and it was from it that he found the approach to modern high-rise buildings in the United States: using organic structural and decorative expression to suggest a new approach to architectural rhythm. This moved away from the three-stage composition of traditional building facades, and instead developed a unique American architectural style. Even if he relentlessly criticized the inconsistency between words and deeds in Sullivan's architectural thought and practice, Lewis Mumford had to admit that, "Sullivan's was perhaps the first mind in American architecture that had come to know itself with any fulness in relation to its soil, its period, its civilization, and had been able to absorb fully all the many lessons of the century" [14].

In the second half of the 19th century, under the specific background that American society and the people were longing for an original architectural style to demonstrate the country's political stance and social ideology of democracy, independence, and freedom, the wave of innovation caused by Sullivan played an undeniable role in shaping and consolidating the American national culture and spirit. Through organic experiments, he found a scene-appropriate expression for both structure and decoration, as well as a medium for people to convey their emotions. This set Sullivan apart from his contemporaries and made him the founder of modern American architecture and the

voice of architectural innovation. This exploration of utilizing new technologies, materials, and forms to improve society and create a better living environment and social atmosphere for the people is essentially an organic evolution of the United States in the historical context. Unfortunately, over half a century, Sullivan's organic functionalism was often misinterpreted, intentionally or unintentionally, and developed into what Sullivan has always fought against—the law of soullessness.

#### 4. Misunderstanding of Sullivan

Sullivan's understanding of the relationship between “Form” and “Function” was later condensed into his slogan “Form Follows Function,” which was often used out of context to deny any decorative form in the period when functionalism was popular. According to the understanding of modernists, “Form” is the expression of architecture, that is, decoration. Following the teachings of their “modernist pioneer,” “ornament is mentally a luxury, not a necessary” [15]. Therefore, they directly forgave this unnecessary luxury, as they saw in Sullivan's article, that even a building without decoration may “convey a noble and dignified sentiment by virtue of mass and proportion” [15]. John Wellborn Root, a member of the Chicago School, also did not approve of the exquisite details of Sullivan's architecture. In Root's opinion, this peer's excessive attention to architectural details made him neglect to think about “the larger questions of mass, of light and shade, of sky-blotch” [16]. Later, some people, such as Hugh Morrison, Sigfried Giedion and Philip Cortelyou Johnson, though they regard Sullivan as a prophet, may also be based on their belief in the modernist part of his performance. More ruthless denigration of Sullivan's organic decoration can be clearly seen in the articles of Mumford and Bush-Brown. Under this trend, Sullivan's architectural concept was arbitrarily summarized as “functionalism”. The elaborate ornaments he devoted to were defined as “useless forms” and were rejected. “Form Follows Function” became the most powerful weapon of modernists to attack all of Sullivan's behaviors that do not conform to “pioneer” status.

The misreading of Sullivan's organic functionalism and the promotion of the architect to the status of “the pioneer of modernism” may be the adherence to international style at that time, or the hypocrisy and cultural inferiority that the American people have not yet overcome. As one of the founders of the Chicago School, Sullivan has long shown a keen sense of constructing modern architecture. However, neither Sullivan nor the Chicago School, for their groundbreaking work in modern American architecture, were appreciated by their compatriots until they were rediscovered by Europeans in the early 20th century. This “official” approach to new construction began to be embraced by locals, leading them to interpret all of Sullivan's architectural behavior in a conventional way. Walker Warehouse, Meyer Building, Dexter Building, and Selz, Schwab & Co. Factory, which were hardly decorated, were particularly noted for being more in line with functionalists' emphasis on “modernity.” In order to highlight the functional simplicity of Sullivan's skyscraper, historians even used unclear black and white photos to automatically filter his decoration [17]. If in the United States, the support for Sullivan was a conformist behavior of Americans trying to free themselves from eclecticism and make the country in accordance with the industrialized temperament of the new era in the West. Then, after the “functionalism” characteristic of the International Style was established, the search for an international reputation for Sullivan's high-rise buildings cannot exclude a kind of vanity or the quest for national pride. Associate Professor Wang Zheng of Southeast University analyzed American organic functionalism from the perspective of transcendentalism, and pointed out that Sullivan's innovative approach to skyscrapers was revered as a pioneering practice of modernism after the 1930s because of the “roots-seeking” activities in the United States [18]. It is self-evident that Sullivan's organic functionalism and his slogan have been deliberately misinterpreted, either by the

fawning of modernism and later internationalism, or by the “root-seeking” motive to proclaim Sullivan as the “father of modernism.”

It must be recognized that Sullivan himself should be, to some extent, responsible for the result that his organic architecture used to be viewed in isolation. The lack of ornamentation in his early works and his disorienting poetic writing can easily lead the uninitiated to misunderstand this architect's stance at the intersection of old and new styles. Buildings such as the Walker Warehouse and the Dexter Building, favored by modernists, were so bare that they made people seriously wonder about Sullivan's attitude toward ornamentation. Sullivan's sometimes “take-it-or-leave-it attitude toward ornament” created the impression that ornament was unimportant in architecture and automatically diverted the viewer's attention to the structure and quality of his buildings [19]. In addition to the lack of ornamentation in some of Sullivan's buildings, which could easily be used by functionalists to question his concept of organic form, Sullivan's beautiful but ambiguous writings also laid the foundation for misinterpretation by others. When asked by his students to discuss “ornament” and “proportion,” Sullivan was lost in his own thoughts: “All is function, all is form, but the fragrance of them is rhythm, the language of them is rhythm” [20]. While the Wainwright Building, the Guarantee Building, the Auditorium Building, and other magnificent architecture display vivid decorations, Sullivan writes, “If we have then become well grounded in pure and simple forms we will reverse them; we will refrain instinctively from vandalism; we will be loath to do aught that may make these forms less pure, less noble” [21]. For Sullivan, writing is an important expression of his architectural ideas. However, the romantic ambiguity of his statements and his often contradictory behavior undoubtedly made his organic structure and decoration increasingly separated.

No matter the deliberate or unintentional misreading of Sullivan's slogan and his architectural thought, Sullivan's architecture based on organic form was separated from the two conflicting camps of the modernism movement and Art Nouveau movement for more than half a century. As part of organic architecture, both structure and decoration contained the spirit and emotion he wanted to convey. Therefore, his slogan “Form Follows Function” obviously cannot be recognized as modernists believe, that “form” (decoration) should serve practical “function.” In fact, Sullivan's meaning of “function” is different in different contexts, and he seldom compares this word with the “practical needs” of architecture. From his theoretical source, it can be seen that Sullivan's organic form refers to “function,” that is, the “representation” of internal will and motive force [22]. In order to achieve this emotional expression, all parts of the building need to serve this purpose. Before Henry R. Hope boldly argued for Sullivan's abandoned decoration in 1947, most articles discussed and studied Sullivan's modern architecture with great enthusiasm, although Sullivan's organic decoration had shown similar characteristics to European Art Nouveau. Or, like Morrison's attitude towards Sullivan's organic decoration, even though the former has realized that Sullivan's functional architecture was intended to express the “intellectual and emotional and spiritual realities” [23]. Morrison did not treat his predecessor's decoration fairly, let alone explore its emotional connotation. The combination of internal structure and external form constitutes architecture, and their variations develop into different styles and characteristics. Only when Sullivan's vertical steel-framed high-rise buildings are paired with his organic decoration, can they truly represent national architecture imbued with American emotion and spirit. A modern structure without organic decoration would not seem misplaced if constructed in any corner of the industrialized world. Likewise, the organic decoration separated from Sullivan's high-rise structure can be arbitrarily affixed to any building of European Art Nouveau. Because when they leave the soil where they grow and no longer “spring from the same source of feeling” [24], they lose the American soul.

## 5. Conclusion

As the process of global social integration advances, the world's architecture shows a trend of integration and development. How architecture in each country innovates and develops is a matter of concern. Although Sullivan's organic functionalism had a short and partial influence in the United States at that time, the uniqueness and foresight of his architectural thought have shown a value that cannot be ignored in the history of modern architecture, and still have an important role in the field of contemporary architecture. Sullivan's revolution in American architectural form during the wave of historicism in the late 19th century is an intriguing example for today's designers who blindly followed trends and constructed cookie-cutter buildings in cities. His relentless pursuit of innovation and development of architectural forms, his emphasis on the cultural connotation and spiritual value of architecture, as well as his recognition of the close ties between architecture, the environment, and the nation, all serve as reminders for us to re-examine contemporary architecture and rethink the role of architecture in shaping the image of a nation. For contemporary architects, his theory is a call for self-identity recognition, and also a criticism of conformism and formalism. His theory functions as both a summons for modern architects to recognize their unique identities and a rebuke against clinging to outdated traditions and formalism. Today's buildings, whether rural or urban, private or public, still lack soul and emotion. With the rapid development of modernization, the building has become a cold structure, lacking vitality and personality. Amidst this trend, designers need to continuously ponder and experiment on how to create buildings that are rich in vivid colors and emotional elements, while also embodying a sense of contemporary relevance.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Sullivan provided us with a reference through his organic form of architecture on how to construct architectural culture and build modern buildings that embody the harmonious unity of national spirit, culture, and the times. By analyzing the historical background of Sullivan's national architecture and the reasons why his slogan and architectural theories are often misinterpreted, it is helpful to grasp the emotional instructions conveyed by Sullivan's architecture based on a correct understanding of his architectural ideas. The labels attached to Sullivan in the United States deviate from and are even contradictory to his own architectural philosophy. In fact, it is this retrospective examination of his work that has led to transcendentalist scrutiny following the shakiness of the International Style, ultimately reinstating the legitimacy of his Organic Functionalism. Compared to his American colleagues, Sullivan's work made him appear more like a social reformer. Although the design explorations of Sullivan and his functionalist followers were collectively criticized as idealistic, elitist, and utopian ideological practices after the 1960s, their approaches nonetheless reflected the authentic spirit of the times. The spiritual sentiments of democracy, freedom, and innovation that Sullivan sought to convey through architecture epitomized the American personality, including his sometimes contradictory social ideas. Architecture, as a social art, is a reflection of social thinking and should be a true reflection of it, no matter good or bad. Contemporary designers should not be overly fascinated with foreign trends or blindly follow the crowd, applying all forms of "beauty" to local architecture. In the context of globalization, designers should learn to respect and protect the national culture, explore design methods that meet the needs of users based on the characteristics of the local environment and culture, and promote the vigorous development of national architecture.

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