

BUILDING COMMUNITY WITH USONIAN HOMES

GRADE: 6-12

TIME: Two 50-minute sessions

What does good design look like on a modest scale? Recognizing the financial restraints that the Great Depression created for American families, Frank Lloyd Wright explored this question as he designed affordable homes for the masses. Called Usonian homes, these middle-class house designs featured hallmarks of Wright's architectural style—organic materials, natural colors, and built-in furniture—yet were simple and affordable. In this lesson, participants will explore the distinct characteristics of Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian homes as well as the Usonian Automatics, homes built with modular concrete blocks. Participants will then work in groups to design and construct a Usonian-inspired home or building using modular blocks, such as Legos.

INTEGRATED SUBJECTS: Visual Arts, Social Studies, Social-Emotional Learning

OBJECTIVES

MATERIALS | RESOURCES

Images of Usonian Homes

Legos or other manipulative blocks

Sketchbooks and/or graph paper

Pencils

Cameras (optional)

1. Research and examine the era of the Great Depression in the United States.
2. View and discuss Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Homes.
3. Design and construct a home or building that incorporates Usonian ideas.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. How are nature and the environment vital to the Usonian idea?
2. What factors caused Frank Lloyd Wright to simplify his home designs?
3. How can good design be more accessible?

LESSON PROCEDURE

EXPLORE

Session One

- **Introduce Frank Lloyd Wright and the era of the Great Depression.** The following link may be a helpful resource: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/dustbowl-great-depression/> **Ask students:** How do you think the Great Depression changed the way that American families lived? How do you think the Great Depression influenced house designs?
- **Introduce students to Frank Lloyd Wright’s Usonian house designs: middle-class, modest homes that embody Wright’s organic design principles and invoke American ideals of democracy and freedom. Despite their simplicity, Usonian homes strive to create a sense of openness and freedom. Show examples of Usonian homes and the Usonian Automatics.** (Tip: Helpful resources include <https://franklloydwright.org/frank-lloyd-wright-designed-sonian-automatic-house-on-the-market-for-the-first-time/> and <https://franklloydwright.org/style/sonian/page/2/>) **Ask students:** What features do you notice? Are they good designs? If so, how?
- **Discuss characteristics of Wright’s Usonian homes with students:**
 - ◇ one story, horizontal orientation
 - ◇ generally small, around 1,500 square feet
 - ◇ no attic; no basement
 - ◇ low, simple roof
 - ◇ radiant heating in concrete slab floor
 - ◇ natural ornamentation
 - ◇ efficient use of space
 - ◇ blueprinted using a simple grid pattern
 - ◇ open floor plan with few interior walls
 - ◇ organic, using local materials of wood, stone, and glass
 - ◇ carport
 - ◇ built-in furnishings
 - ◇ skylights and clerestory windows
 - ◇ often in rural, wooded settings
 - ◇ Usonian Automatics experimented with concrete and patterned concrete block
- **Optional Extension:** compare and contrast Usonian home designs with some of Wright’s designs for wealthy clients, such as the Frederick C. Robie House or the Darwin D. Martin House.
- **Divide participants into small groups and distribute building blocks or identical manipulatives, such as Legos.**
- **Challenge each group to design a home, building or structure that embodies Usonian qualities.**

LESSON PROCEDURE

ENGAGE

Session Two

- Review Frank Lloyd Wright and his development of Usonian homes. Challenge students to identify characteristics of Usonian homes.
- Have groups assign a design role (Idea Development, Planning, Building, Deconstruction, Photographer/Notetaker) to each member of the group and brainstorm design ideas. Encourage participants to experiment with building materials. Offer the option for group members to alternate roles.

DESIGN

- Encourage groups to sketch ideas for a Usonian-inspired design, taking note of any Usonian characteristics. Challenge students to draft several ideas. Ask groups to select one design for further revision.
- Have groups finalize their design and then use blocks to construct the design.

CRITIQUE & INTERPRET

- Ask each group to present their design and show any photographs of their experiments. Challenge students to explain how the design was inspired by Wright's Usonian homes. Encourage participants to note how the design allows for optimal space and freedom of the individual.
- Have students identify similarities and differences in each design.
- **Optional Extension:** Have participants collaborate with other groups to unite designs in a planned community. **Have students consider:** How should the homes be arranged in a neighborhood plan? What is the ideal natural setting for each home and why?