

May 9, 2010---

RACINE, Wis.---Now, this is a living, breathing wax museum.

In early 2010, Fortaleza Hall opened on the sparkling campus of the SC Johnson company, the international headquarters of Johnson Wax.

The hall is the first major new construction on the site since [Frank Lloyd Wright](#) designed and developed the Administration Building and Great Workroom, which opened in 1939, and the Research Tower, which opened in 1950.

Fortaleza Hall is named for the Brazilian city that company president Herbert F. "Hib" Johnson Jr. visited in 1935 in search of the carnauba palm and the rich, waxy substance it provided for Johnson wax. The building also commemorates the spirit of Sam Johnson, fourth-generation family leader of the 124-year-old company. He died on May 22, 2004.

Over the years while thrifting in [Racine](#) or heading for a hand-pressed burger at Kewpee's, downtown at 520 [Wisconsin](#) Ave., I've driven by the linear, sleek SC Johnson headquarters, where some 1,300 people work, and wondered what was going on in there.

Now, I know.

This place is a must-see on any weekend excursion, especially [Wright](#)'s Great Workroom. There's organic-shaped columns, glass tubing and custom furniture right out of the 1940s and '50s. [Wright](#) designed the workroom for company secretaries with administrators toiling in a mezzanine.

The building attracts more than 4,500 [Wright](#) enthusiasts annually.

In 1976, the U.S. Department of the Interior named the workroom and Research Tower as National Historic Places.

Reflecting [Wright](#)'s naturalist style, the open workroom has a forest-like ambiance defined by 32 cream-colored columns, which are 19 feet at the top and 9 inches at the base. [Wright](#) called his base the "lily pad." Original desks were made of American walnut and maple but were replaced by Formica due to wear and tear over the years. Executive offices retain some wooden desks.

Hard-core [Wright](#) fans know of the three-legged chair he designed for the workroom. With three legs, [Wright](#) believed the sitter had to keep both feet on the ground, ensuring better posture. But the chairs were unstable and tipped over easily. [Wright](#) did not take this sitting down.

"Mr. Johnson did not want his employees falling out of chairs," explained tour guide Pat Isaacson, who has lived in [Racine](#) all her life. "So, Mr. [Wright](#) had a meeting with Mr. Johnson in his office. They knew he was coming, so they waxed the floors in Mr. Johnson's office. Of course, we have the wax. Maybe buffed them a bit.

"When Mr. [Wright](#) came for his meeting, he fell off his own three-legged chair." [Wright](#) changed his mind.

Today, the SC Johnson finance and law department works in the space. The mid-20th century feel of the room would make for a great movie set. SC Johnson has had requests from Hollywood but they have been denied because it is still a functioning work center. The offices of the beloved Daily Planet in the film "Superman Returns" do look an awful lot like the Great Workroom.

In keeping with the linear [Wright](#) stuff, the new Fortaleza Hall has one of America's four Vertical Gardens.

Time magazine named the Vertical Garden one of "The 50 Best Inventions of 2009." The soil-

free garden is 18 feet high by 49 feet long and features nearly 2,500 plants (79 species) largely native to Central and South America. Plants such as the "Fluffy Ruffle" (*Nephrolepis exaltata*) and the Begonia (Cleopatra version) were harvested at Milaeger's Landscape in [Racine](#).

Earlier this year SC Johnson also installed three 14-foot-tall wind turbines to assess renewable energy on its campus. The year-long pilot program will determine if the company wants to install more turbines at its other buildings. (SC Johnson operations are based in more than 70 countries.)

A [Frank Lloyd Wright](#) Library and Reading Room in Fortaleza Hall has more than 350 books, blueprints and 140 personal letters from the architect. The material mostly deals with his [Wisconsin](#) projects.

Check out the video kiosk of a 1950 Johnson Wax Polish television commercial that features [Wright](#)'s work at SC Johnson in [Racine](#). The library is open to the public by appointment.

Fortaleza Hall serves as the visitors' center for the new tours.

The hall was designed by London-based Foster + Partners, which tried to make it a contemporary partner to [Wright](#)'s work, notably in the use of horizontal lineage. The hall features the Golden Rondelle theater, built in 1964-65 at the SC Johnson Wax Pavilion at the New York World's Fair. After the fair closed, the steel framework was dismantled, shipped back to [Racine](#) and redesigned in 1967 by Taliesin architects in Spring Green, Wis. The 292-seat theater is used for corporate and community meetings.

The theater's Cherokee red brick walls and use of horizontal glass tubes are in concert with the other [Wright](#)-designed SC Johnson facilities. [Wright](#) believed in local sustainability. The red brick came from Streator Brick Company in Streator, Ill.

A functional S-38 "Spirit of Carnuaba" amphibious plane hanging from the ceiling defines the hall. This is similar to the plane Herbert Johnson used to comb the jungles of Brazil. (The original plane is at the bottom of Manokwari Bay in New Guinea. It was sold to Shell Oil Company to look for oil reserves and went down in a storm. No one was killed; the pilot swam to shore.)

"Sam wanted to reconnect with his father's Herb's legacy," Isaacson explained. "Sam had another plane built in Minnesota. It was completed for the 1998 trip that Sam and his two sons took to recreate the flight that HF Johnson took in 1935." The plane was disassembled and then reassembled as Fortaleza Hall was built around the installation.

Circular stairs around the new hall feature Sam Johnson quotes such as "*May your every day be the first day of summer and the beginning of a great adventure*" and, my favorite:

*"If you're not willing to be wrong or to make a mistake, then you can't lead."*

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