

Dismembering Frank Lloyd Wright

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Source: *Design Quarterly*, No. 155 (Spring, 1992), pp. 2-5

Published by: [Walker Art Center](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4091268>

Accessed: 23-12-2015 02:20 UTC

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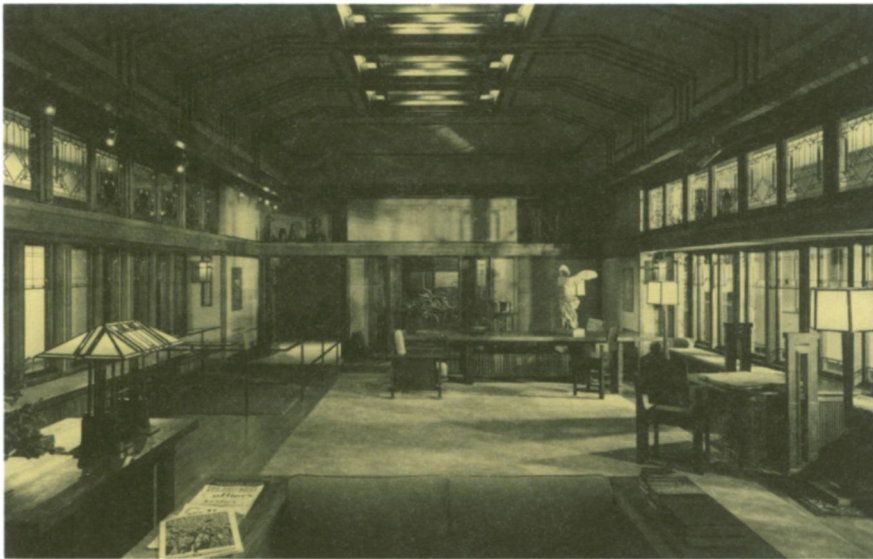
by Donald Hoffmann



Architecture seems the most substantial of the arts but proves one of the least enduring. A good poem or pot stands a better chance of survival. Thus the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, which began in the mind, can be expected to end there: not by being understood, but because so few of his buildings will be able to testify accurately to his imagination. Among the many fruits of that imagination, of course, were the phantom buildings never constructed at all. Wright left a wealth of projects, great and small, and more than sufficient to fill a large picture book, which indeed proposes they be built even now, thirty-three years after his death.¹ Then there were buildings not constructed to plan, left unfinished, poorly built, or built with errors and evident difficulties. Those problems were variously blamed, by the different parties, on contractors, unions, a lack of supervision, the absence of detail in the working drawings, or Wright's annoying habit of using what he called a unit-system rather than simply providing exact numerical dimensions. The late George Nakashima said that after visiting the Hanna "Honeycomb House" of 1935–37 in Palo Alto, he was so dismayed by the discrepancy between Wright's idea and its shoddy structural realization that he gave up architecture for woodworking. Wright himself, in recalling another of his California essays, the Barnsdall "Hollyhock House" of 1917–21 in Los Angeles, confessed his envy for the composer, whose music could be brought to life so beautifully by great orchestras.² Still other of his buildings were not well-conceived. Could any imagination — least of all one that was operative during more than seventy years — sustain itself at a peak of performance?

But the forces most insidiously ruinous to Wright's architecture are a misguided museum world and its twin sister, the errant art market, both of which encourage the dismemberment of his buildings, physically and intellectually, into mere fragments. Wright-at-auction remains one of

Frank Lloyd Wright, table lamp, Robie house, Chicago, circa 1910, bronze base, leaded glass shade, 23 1/4 x 31 3/8 x 18 1/2 in., private collection

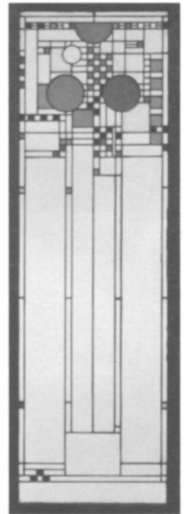
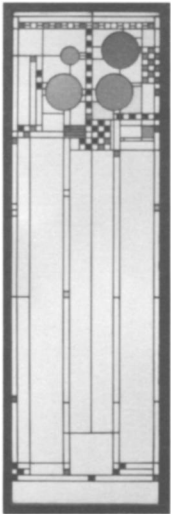


the shameful legacies of the Reagan years, a continuing and tawdry parade of leaded-glass windows and doors, tables and chairs, table lamps and wall fixtures, even a wooden gutter cover, all presented as antiques of extreme money-value. Other architects, it is true, had been collecting souvenirs of Wright's imagination for many years, but usually in a modest way, for their own instruction and joy. In the summer of 1966, an architect attending a professional meeting in Natural Bridge, Virginia, heard about a Wright-designed lamp in a cluttered antique shop nearby. On the way home, he stopped at the shop and bought the lamp for \$150. This was the double-pedestal lamp originally stationed on the library table of the Robie house of 1908–10 in Chicago. In June 1988, the lamp sold at auction at Christie's in New York City for \$704,000. The art market had wrought a paradox worthy of Oscar Wilde: the sum of the parts, if they could be advertised as Wright's, was much greater than the whole.

The story of another double-pedestal lamp bears further witness to this appalling state of affairs. Originally, that lamp belonged to the Lawrence house of 1902–04 in Springfield, Illinois, which the state bought almost complete for \$1 million in 1981 and unhappily renamed the Dana-Thomas house. Governor James Thompson, acting on behalf of a foundation that was formed to retrieve missing details to make the house look more inhabited, in 1988 negotiated direct purchase of the Lawrence lamp at a sum equal to whatever the Robie lamp would fetch at auction. There went another \$704,000. At an earlier auction, in December 1987, the governor had spent \$330,000, also raised from private or corporate contributors, to be able to return to the house a music cabinet, a smaller lamp, and three original drawings. In short, more had to be spent for those six items than the state had spent for the entire building, in which survived some 450 art-glass windows, doors, interior panels, and light fixtures, as well as about 100 pieces of furniture.

Frank Lloyd Wright, living room from Francis W. Little house, Wayzata, Minnesota, 1912–14, 13 ft. 8 in. x 46 ft. x 28 ft., collection The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, purchase, bequest of Emily Crane Chadbourne, 1972, installation through the generosity of Saul P. Steinberg and Reliance Group Holdings, Inc.

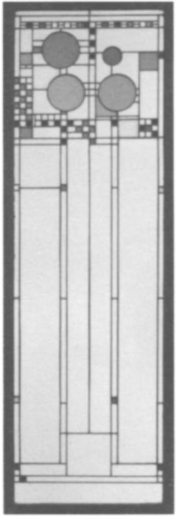
Goethe, in 1812, contemplated once more the front of Strasbourg Cathedral, and wrote that he could see “each and every ornament appropriate to the part it decorates, subordinate to it and as if growing out of it.”³ Wright aspired to the same high order of organic integrity as did the Gothic masters. He recognized what should be obvious: that if architecture is the art of building, or *Baukunst*, then its products should be works of art, entities with an integrity rarely encountered in the other realms of life. Architecture, however, can be distinguished from the other arts because it is essentially environmental, specific to a place and meant to stay put. In a Wright building, the details are conceived as minor parts or dependencies of the fabric itself; they also become its ornamental flowering, or full development as abstract pattern. Their character is thoroughly architectonic and usually expressive of basic motifs in the plan or elevations. Thus the leaded-glass shade of the Robie house lamp is a child of the great cantilevered roof. This means the idea of collecting Wright’s architecture in stray fragments represents nothing so much as a contradiction in terms, a violation of the whole spirit of his art, or its spirit as a whole.



Bits and pieces of his architecture are being scattered like the bones of a saint. Exhibited in museums or private collections as if precious treasures of the so-called decorative arts, these pathetic fragments ought to be seen instead as evidences of greed, ostentation, and the most shallow of relationships to art. Art museums often preserve the object by killing its spirit, a Pyrrhic victory at best. When any work is made to serve a specific need, Ananda Coomaraswamy warned many years ago, “it can only be effective in the environment for which it was designed, that is to say in some such vital context as a man’s house in which he lives . . . and not in any place the primary function of which is to contain all sorts of art.”⁴ Any spectator of the truth — to borrow Aristotle’s ringing phrase — would choose to see a living whole, intact, and not mere fragments in, say, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which has played such a contemptible role in debasing Wright into “collectibles.” In 1967, the year after the Robie house lamp was sold in rural Virginia for \$150, the three central windows from the Coonley playhouse of 1912 in Riverside, Illinois — a small building that still survives — entered the Metropolitan Museum as its first slice of Wrightiana. The intention, ironically, was to commemorate the centennial of Wright’s birth (by then confirmed as having occurred two years earlier than the architect pretended). Still more strange, the late Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., the Wright scholar who was instrumental in getting the windows into the museum, may well have sensed something dubious about it all. Some years later, when the Wright collection at the Metropolitan had grown much larger, Kaufmann wrote what amounted to an apology for the museum’s presentation, but at the same time quoted some contrary and trenchant words of Wright’s, from 1918:

. . . academic centers have never been the life of art in any individual, city, or nation. Original impulses live outside, hostile to established orders. Institutions are in their very nature hostile to these impulses . . . An art institute should be no editor of genius in the spirit of connoisseur or collector. It should be an opportunity, a staff in the hand, a cloak for genius in the bitter wind . . .⁵

Wright-at-auction remains one of the shameful legacies of the Reagan years



Put more simply, Wright exhibited his work in museums to proclaim his cause and advance his career. His somewhat cynical use of museums as convenient instruments of publicity and prestige was nothing, of course, compared to the present-day symbiosis between museums and the art market. Consider the year 1982. It saw the first auction of Wright artifacts at Christie's in New York City; the Metropolitan Museum opened a temporary exhibition of its Wright artifacts, accompanied by the *Bulletin* in which the director, Philippe de Montebello, boasted that "Our holdings now constitute what is perhaps the finest Wright collection in any museum." Moreover, the Metropolitan reconstructed in its new American Wing a living room transported from the Little house of 1912–14 in Wayzata, Minnesota, a lakeside retreat that had been deconstructed in 1972 to make way for a new residence. The museum's presentation of Wright's architecture in the form of a twentieth-century period room persists as an even more egregious violation of his art, an ostensibly faithful simulation from which in truth every trace of a living architecture has been drained.

Wright was a man of curious failings, but he built for a noble way of life, and the splendor of his architecture depends in large degree on the vigor with which it defies any compromise or dilution, just as the level of his imagination had much to do with his heroic discipline in attending to every detail. Nietzsche wrote that whatever in the past "was able to expand the concept 'man' and make it more beautiful must exist everlastingly."⁶ Much of what Wright accomplished meets that standard, but it will survive in ways other than material. In 1987 his Larkin Building in Buffalo — built from 1903 to 1906 and demolished in 1950 — reappeared to the imagination in a study by Jack Quinan, a scholar never privileged to have seen his subject.⁷ In some measure, this paradox — Quinan's Task, or the study of something that isn't there — will face everyone who tries to understand the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright.

1. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, *Frank Lloyd Wright: Treasures of Taliesin* (Fresno, Calif., 1985).
2. George Nakashima in a conversation of May 30, 1981, at New Hope, Pa., and Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (New York, 1943), p. 225.
3. *Goethe on Art*, trans. J. Gage (Berkeley, Calif., 1980), p. 116.
4. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Why Exhibit Works of Art?* (London, 1943), p. 93.
5. Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. "Frank Lloyd Wright's Architecture Exhibited," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (Fall 1982), p. 5.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, England, 1983), p. 68.
7. Jack Quinan, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Building* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987).

Frank Lloyd Wright, window triptych from Avery Coonley playhouse, Riverside, Illinois, 1912, zinc comes, transparent and translucent glass, pine frame, each 86 1/4 x 28 x 2 in., collection The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, purchase and gift of Edward C. Moore, Jr. and the Edgar J. Kaufmann Charitable Foundation, 1967