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Source: *AA Files*, No. 21 (Spring 1991), pp. 40-48

Published by: Architectural Association School of Architecture

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29543729>

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FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT & THE GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

David Watkin

The Guggenheim Museum encapsulates Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural thinking, which was always dominated by four themes: the cantilever, the central void, the interpenetration of forms, and the spiral. The long and passionate battle that Wright fought over a period of seventeen years to get the Museum built is a clear indication that he saw it as one of the supremely important monuments of his career. During this slow process he wrote innumerable letters¹ and made 740 separate drawings. However, although the Guggenheim Museum is one of the best documented and most famous of Wright's buildings, there has been no definitive monograph on it.²

In 1927 the 66-year-old multimillionaire Solomon Guggenheim, a leading member of the copper-mining family, met the young German artist Hilla Rebay (her real name was Baroness Hildegard Rebay von Ehrenwiesen). Guggenheim's wife, Irene, a Rothschild, had bought some paintings from Rebay, who was having her first New York show. In the following year Rebay painted a portrait of Solomon Guggenheim which, despite her avant-garde sympathies, was thoroughly representational. Until this time Guggenheim had been buying Old Masters and Barbizon School. Rebay saw in him a rich opportunity for promoting what she called 'Non-Objective', i.e. abstract, art. She thus introduced Guggenheim to her lover, the abstract artist Rudolf Bauer, from whom he bought two paintings for \$10,000 each; about twenty times more than Bauer had been paid for anything before! During the next ten years Guggenheim bought some two hundred paintings from Bauer, and even allowed the artist to keep them in his own possession. In Berlin Bauer set up a private museum, *Das Geistreich*, in which to exhibit them.

A group of Rebay's artist friends were proposing to create an artists' colony near Paris, with a museum designed by Le Corbusier. This was related to his World Museum, or Mundaneum, at Geneva, of 1929 (Fig. 1), in which the whole history of mankind would be unfolded to the observer.³ Like Wright's Sugar Loaf mountain project (Fig. 2), of which more later, this also contained a spiral wrapped around hemispherical planetariums — a spiral within a square, with galleries connected by movable walls, omitting the traditional grand entrance and grand staircase. In his proposed Museum of Contemporary Art in Paris in 1931, Le Corbusier adopted a horizontal but still rectangular spiral for a gallery so as to enable it to grow, like a shell, as the collection grew.

Rebay continued to ponder an ideal museum, a temple or dome dedicated to non-objective art. This spiritual, even religious

character was stressed by the fact that, as the German word for cathedral is *Dom*, she may, when she wrote the word dome in English, have had the resonances of a cathedral at the back of her mind. In the late 1930s Rebay discussed her ideal museum building with artists and architects such as Le Corbusier, Kandinsky, Gropius, Breuer and the Viennese-born architect Frederick Kiesler, who had designed a windowless museum fourteen storeys high. Kiesler's visionary and organic architecture was based on endless forms such as eggs or animal shells (Fig. 3). Rebay's project for a museum in New York had support from Nelson Rockefeller, who wanted to build a museum of non-objective art at the Rockefeller Center.

In the meantime Bauer was imprisoned under the Nazis. He was rescued by Guggenheim, who brought him to New York, where, amazingly, he set him up with a legal contract providing him with a home, a car and a trust fund, in exchange for his entire artistic output. In fact, Bauer refused to paint another picture.

By 1939 Guggenheim's collection already included about seven hundred paintings, obviously more than could be displayed in a private house, still less in his suite in the Plaza Hotel. About half were abstract, including one hundred by Kandinsky, one of Rebay's favourite artists. Together with others by Klee, Chagall, Moholy-Nagy, Gleizes, Mondrian and Delaunay, they were exhibited in a temporary gallery under the auspices of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. This opened in June 1939, with Hilla Rebay as Director. In the meantime Bauer had become mentally unstable and, in order to get the post of director for himself, spread the rumour that Hilla Rebay was a Nazi.

By 1943 the need for a permanent new home for the collection was apparent. Rebay sought what she described as a 'temple of spirit' that was 'organic, refined' and 'sensitive to space'. She approached Moholy-Nagy to recommend an architect; he drew up a list which included himself, Le Corbusier, Gropius, Neutra, Breuer, Aalto and Lescaze. In the middle of the war, this was not a very realistic list, and one may wonder why Rebay had not hit on the ultimate organic architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. The reason is that she had not realized that he was still alive; he was, after all, 76. Having found out that he was alive, she read his books and responded sympathetically to their windy rhetoric, though she did not bother to look at his buildings. She thus sent a letter to him at Taliesin in June 1943, seeking designs for a museum to house the collection. She wrote, 'I do not think these paintings are easel

paintings. They are order creating order and are sensitive (and corrective even) to space. As you feel the ground, the sky and the “in-between” you will perhaps feel them too; and find the way. I need a fighter, a lover of space, an originator, a tester and a wise man. . . . I want a temple of spirit, a monument!’⁴ At last Wright had met his match in the creation of vainglorious rhetoric, and, interestingly, he assumed that the author of this verbiage must be a man. Wright replied to this invitation by inviting the author to come to Taliesin, bringing his wife.

Despite the double misunderstanding, that he was dead and that she was a man, they got on well. Within a few weeks Rebay was persuading Wright to go to her doctor for regular blood-letting sessions in which great black leeches were applied to his neck. She also persuaded him to have all his teeth removed in the hope of purifying his blood. Olgivanna, Wright’s wife, followed suit, but when it was suggested, in January 1944, that their 13-year-old daughter, Iovanna, should undergo the same process, Olgivanna said to her husband, ‘Frank, this [museum] is a building for which you, for which we, have quite literally given our blood’, but ‘Hilla is not going to get her [Iovanna’s] teeth as well’.⁵

In June 1943 Wright signed a contract to design a museum for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation which would cost no more than \$750,000. Guggenheim urged Wright to design the museum first, and then to fit it onto a site when they had one. Wright explained that this was not how great architecture was produced. However, he did begin designing a low-spreading horizontal museum that had something in common with his Johnson Wax building. When it became clear that land values in Manhattan would prevent a low-spreading building, Wright conceived on 30 December 1943 the idea of a vertical museum. He labelled his drawing of this spiralling design ‘Ziggurat’ (p. 40 and Fig. 4), writing in a letter to Rebay in January 1944 that ‘We can use it either top side down or down side top.’⁶ Because of existing building technology,

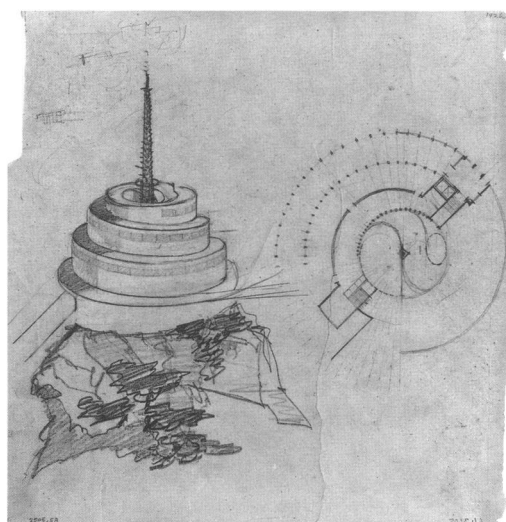
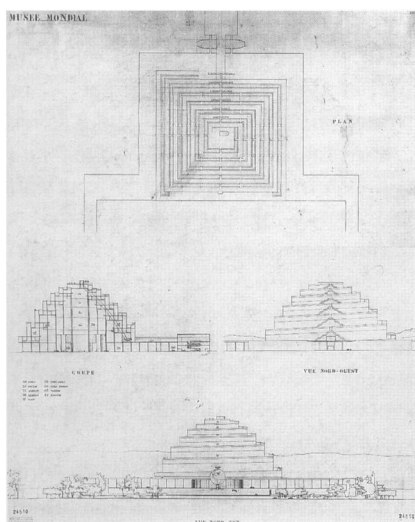
ancient ziggurats had necessarily diminished in size as they rose, but with reinforced concrete and steel one could have an upside-down ziggurat, which is what was built. Because it grew larger as it rose, Wright called it an ‘optimistic ziggurat’.

Rebay responded instinctively to Wright’s proposal because she found it akin to the symbolism which governed the spiritual world of the Non-Objective art championed by her allies. They belonged to a sort of secret society which had links with theosophy and other Eastern cults and rejected representational art as unacceptably materialistic. In the catalogue of an exhibition held in Philadelphia of the Guggenheim collection she wrote, ‘Non-objectivity is the religion of the future. Non-objective paintings are prophets of spiritual life’.

Wright in turn described his ideal museum in a letter to Rebay in January 1944 as

one extended expansive well proportioned floor space from bottom to top — a wheel chair going around and up and down, *throughout*. . . . The atmosphere of the whole should be luminous from bright to dark — anywhere desired: a great calm and breadth pervading the whole place . . . Much crystal — much greenery about. No distracting detail anywhere. In short, a creation which does not yet exist.⁷

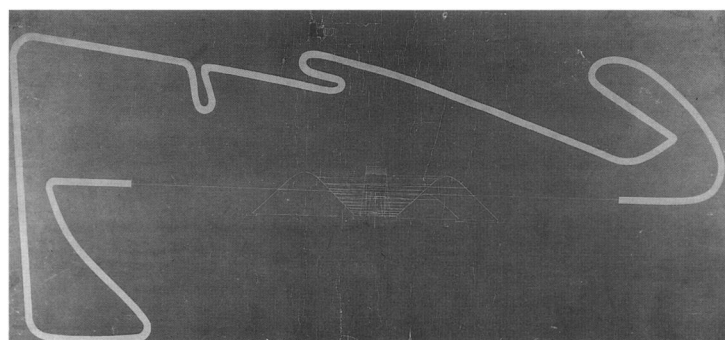
He presented four different schemes to Guggenheim, of which only one featured static floor divisions, the other three incorporating the idea of the helical ramp. All of these early projects included a prominent flat or apartment for the director, an indication of Rebay’s influence, at this stage, over both client and architect. The site for the museum was also selected in the first half of 1944. Among those considered was one on the campus of Columbia University, but in his dislike of the city Wright tried to persuade Guggenheim to buy an eighty-acre park in Riverdale, north of Manhattan, overlooking the Hudson river. In March 1944 part of the present site, on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 89th Street, was purchased



1. Project for Musée Mondial, Geneva, 1929, by Le Corbusier.

2. Project for Gordon Strong Automobile Objective and Planetarium, Sugar Loaf Mountain, Maryland, 1925, by Frank Lloyd Wright.

3. Project for Place de la Concorde, Paris, 1925, by Frederick J. Kiesler. Print mounted to board. 92.1 × 194.3 cm.



and Wright began to prepare the working drawings at Taliesin.

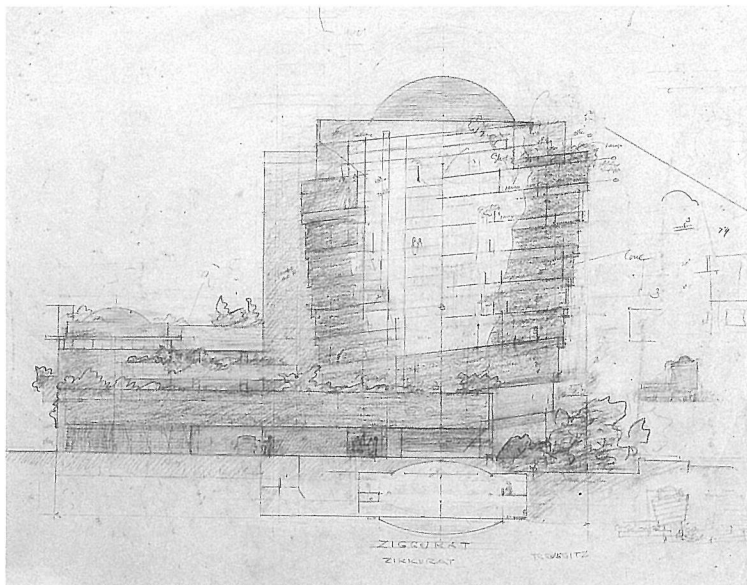
Not much was built during the war and by 1946 the rise in building costs meant that the original estimate of \$750,000, made three years before, had almost doubled. A model of the museum was exhibited in 1946 (Fig. 5) and, in view of the prominent and prestigious location near the Metropolitan Museum, it caused some controversy. A further section of the site was then acquired. Early in 1949 Wright raised the estimated cost to \$2,500,000. Rebay said this was out of the question because Guggenheim, by then aged nearly ninety, had named two million dollars in his will. In late 1949, within a few weeks of making this decision, he died. His will did not specify the architect, the design or the time of construction. He was succeeded as a decision-maker by a group of trustees, on both sides of the Atlantic, who were not all persuaded of the worth of the collection or the design, and would anyway have preferred a more conventional and cheaper building. Wright, of course, claimed to be privy to the dead man's wishes, and used his usual poetic eloquence, or lies, to persuade the trustees to choose his design (Fig. 6).

There was still a long delay before construction could begin, in 1956, though in 1950 the last privately owned block between 88th and 89th street became available and was acquired on Wright's insistence. However, long debates with the New York Building Department had begun. In 1952 Harry Guggenheim, the president of the trustees, obtained the resignation on health grounds of Hilla Rebay, who had become increasingly unbalanced. She was replaced by James Johnson Sweeney, who reorganized the then existing temporary museum along the blankly austere lines which have been the curse of all modern museums till recently; draperies were removed, the walls were whitewashed, gold frames were removed, indeed the paintings were hung frameless. Even the name was changed, from the Museum of Non-Objective Art to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

As a base from which to supervise the complicated project of building the new Guggenheim Museum, at a time when he had over a hundred other clients, Wright opened a New York office in 1954 in a luxuriously remodelled suite in the Hotel Plaza, apparently at Harry Guggenheim's expense. He decorated it in Montenegrin luxury, with chandeliers, plum-red velvet curtains, woodwork painted a matching plum red, thick fitted carpets in peach, wall panels of rice paper flecked with gold leaf, and black lacquer furniture. In view of Wright's often stated dislike of cities, his devotion to this opulent apartment, and to the luxurious life that went with it, is a striking paradox. Perhaps we might see his decision to live in New York City as a measure of his devotion to the Guggenheim Museum, his only major building in this city.⁸

In 1954 Wright began referring to the Guggenheim building as the 'Archeseum', rather than 'Museum'. He had taken this word from a book on Egypt in which Rameses' tomb-temple was referred to as a Rameseum. By calling it an Archeseum he implied that it would be a temple-tomb dedicated to architecture. Indeed, in the sequence of drawings in which the design of the museum evolved there is one which shows a bulge in the horizontal connecting-band at the second level, which is labelled as housing the 'architectural archives'. This can only have been intended for the drawings and documents relating to the design of the building. Thus it would become an autonomous work of art, carrying its own history within it. Its true function would not be to house a few abstract canvases, but to be a manifesto of organic architecture which could be studied *in situ* by architects and historians as a key to Wright's genius. The name Archeseum was not officially rejected by the Trustees till June 1956.

When it was found that the working drawings contravened thirty-two building regulations, Wright wrote to the Court of Appeal on 14 February 1953, arguing that 'Freshness of being must evaporate under compelled repetition.'⁹ It also became clear that the tenders



4. Guggenheim Museum: Concept section and elevation, 1944. Pencil, sepia ink and blue ink accents for dome. Tracing paper mounted to board. 50.8×76.2 cm.



5. Frank Lloyd Wright, Hilla Rebay and Solomon R. Guggenheim viewing the model, 1946.

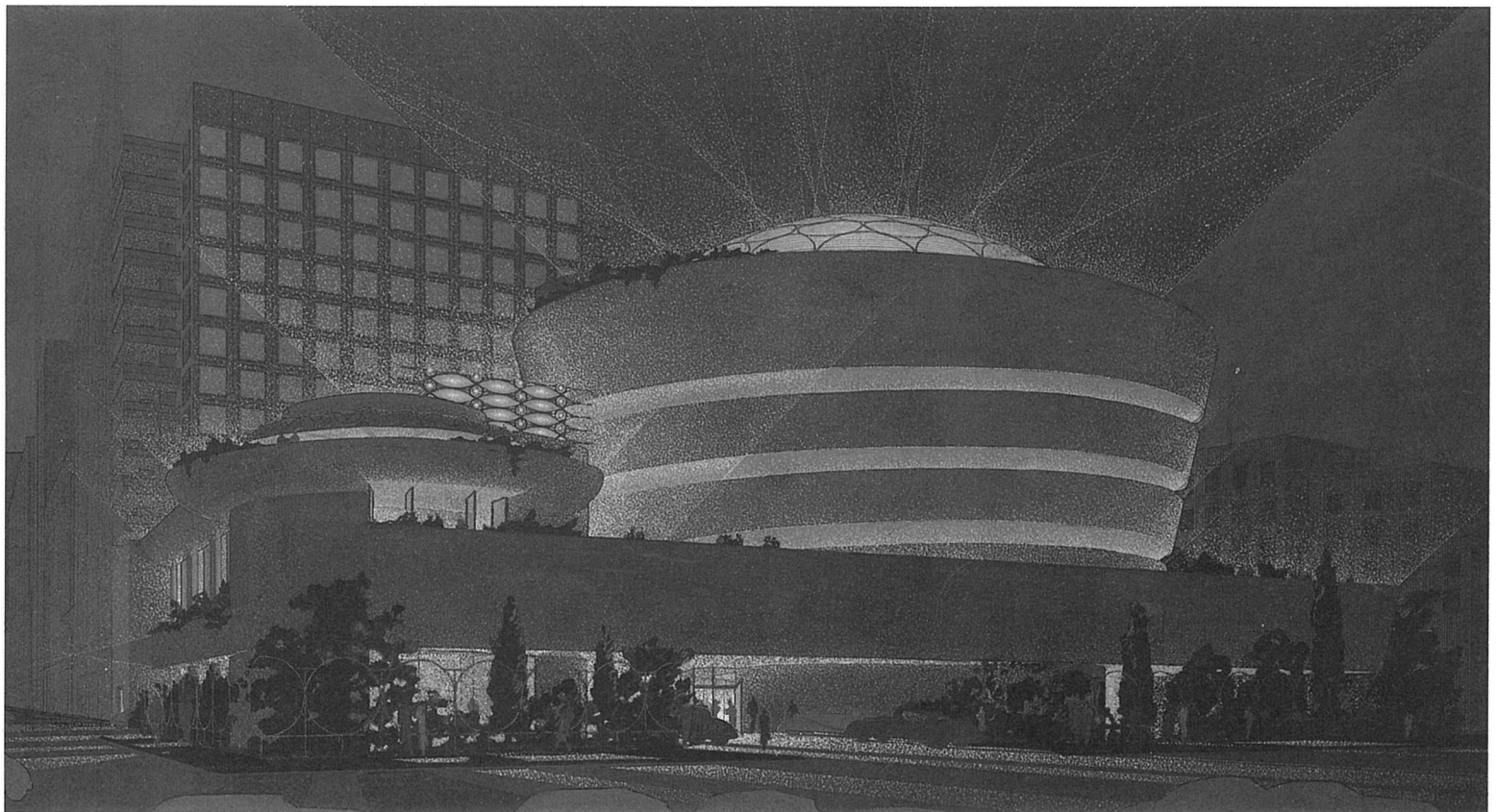
from builders were going to exceed the budget. These and other financial pressures meant that the building as executed was much less ambitious and luxurious than Wright had originally intended. One might recall in this context that Solomon Guggenheim's way of life had itself been luxurious and refined to a degree. At his dinner parties there was a liveried servant behind every other chair. At the beginning of his designs for the Guggenheim Museum Wright had pressed for a costly monument composed of polished marble, glass and steel. He had always loved colour and gilding, and originally wanted the marble exterior to be largely red (see p. 40). In a letter to Rebay in February 1944 he wrote that '*Red is the color of Creation*', and '*A building is a terrestrial circumstance wherein Reality not only insists upon the perfect form for the purpose but also a harmony with Earth*'.¹⁰ But owing to economic pressure the marble-aggregate finish of the exterior was replaced with painted concrete; the inner parapet of the ramp could not be cast in concrete continuous with the main structure but had to be tacked on afterwards; and the intricate dome of coffered glass tubing was replaced by a more conventional glazed lantern. Thus, though the idea of the original design may have survived, it was gravely compromised in construction and materials.

Once this unusual pile began to rise in 1956 amid the adjacent conventional New York blocks in upper Fifth Avenue, a storm of opposition broke out. Its exterior, which gets wider as it gets taller, certainly contradicts all traditional notions of form and of safe structure, while its curious method of displaying pictures on sloping ramps with outward-leaning walls led twenty-one artists to publish an open letter in 1957, in which they condemned its 'callous disregard for the fundamental rectilinear frame of reference necessary for the adequate visual contemplation of works of art'. Wright attacked them for their 'callous disregard of nature', complaining that they knew 'too little of the nature of the mother art: Architecture'¹¹ to be able to criticize his work. Wright also had to

face opposition from the chillingly conventional director, James Johnson Sweeney, who, even in 1958, during construction, remained opposed to Wright's outward-sloping walls, lighting arrangements and interior colours.

The curious method of exhibiting paintings on a slope, and lit from behind and above so that they appear almost as dark spots, provoked controversy from the start. It was not really approved of by Hilla Rebay, or by her successor as director, Sweeney, both of whom would have preferred a more traditional method. It is sometimes forgotten by those who praise Wright's hanging arrangement that he by no means admired the paintings the museum was designed to house, and thus wanted them to be hung in as temporary a fashion as possible, with sliding screens and movable walls (Fig. 7), hoping that in due course they could be replaced by more sensible art.¹² Rebay, by contrast, thought the collection, which she had largely built up, was perfect and complete and that the pictures should be hung in this 'temple' permanently — 'built into the walls', in her words. Suspicious of Wright's intentions, she wrote perceptively to him: 'While I have no doubt that your building will be a great monument to yourself, I cannot envisage how much (or how little) it will for the paintings.'¹³

As I mentioned at the outset, the Guggenheim Museum draws on four of Wright's principal obsessions: the cantilever, the central void, the interpenetration of forms, and the spiral. I will briefly relate the history of these themes in Wright's work. His use of the cantilever began in his early suburban Chicago houses, ludicrously called the Prairie Houses, where the roof was cantilevered out from the central hearth block. He could thus dispense with conventional room divisions, since the interior walls served no structural function. The climax of this tradition in domestic architecture is Fallingwater of 1936 for Edgar J. Kaufmann, which seems to grow organically out its setting.



6. Presentation drawing: Night rendering, c.1950.

In the Guggenheim the ramp is one continuous cantilever, given rigidity by being folded in one plane to form the outer wall, and curved in another around the central axis (Fig. 8). The wide loops of the ramp are slung out from the service tower and are supported by the tensile strength of steel reinforcing rods woven into the concrete fabric. The structural web of twelve narrow piers running upwards to form the dome were added late in the design process, to reassure the New York Building Department. These and the consequent obstruction of the continuous band of natural light violate Wright's original conception of a continuous cantilever which would hover in mid-air without visible vertical support.

The second theme, the glazed light well or central void, had become a feature in Chicago offices when Wright received his training.¹⁴ With the development of electric lighting in the 1890s, the light well became obsolete in office interiors. None the less, Wright used a light well for aesthetic effect in his Larkin Company office building of 1904, as well as in the Unity Temple of 1906. His Johnson Wax administration building of 1936 was a huge hollow box with light flooding in above the soaring mushroom columns, though the celebrated roof of pyrex tubing failed and had to be replaced by a conventional skylit roof. Wright believed that 'the interior space itself is the reality of the building' — a somewhat limiting doctrine which, despite his disapproval of the Modern Movement, he held in common with it.

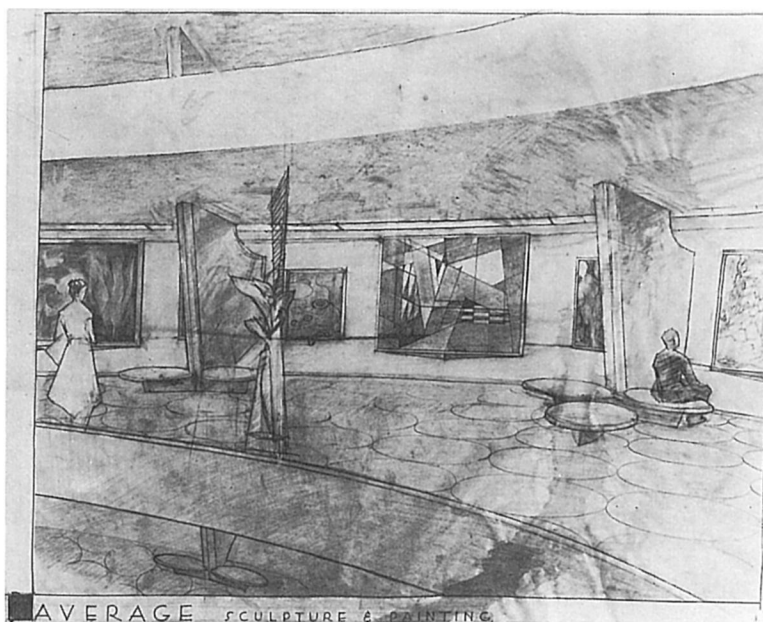
Looking inwards rather than outwards, the architect of the Guggenheim Museum raises himself to the role of Cosmocrator creating his own universe. Hadrian's Pantheon had achieved a similar effect, but its sacred role justified the abrupt shift between the graceless exterior and the poetic, other-worldly interior. However, since the modern world offers to art the veneration formerly accorded to God, the numinous character of the interior of the Guggenheim is perhaps understandable. There are, indeed, certain links between it and the Pantheon. In the centralized interior

of the Pantheon the sky is replaced by a man-made celestial vault which oppresses all who enter beneath its ponderous form. Even the light of the sun is submitted to imperial control and restricted to the central oculus: a vast staring eye that transfixes the intruder. The justice of this comparison is underlined by Wright himself who, on his return from Rome in 1956, referred to the Guggenheim as 'my Pantheon'. Schinkel had earlier described the pantheon at the heart of his Altes Museum as 'the sanctuary wherein the most precious is stored'. Another parallel to the Guggenheim is the grand entry to the Vatican Museum in Rome, designed in 1932 by Giuseppe Momo for Pope Pius XI. Here, two spiral ramps for ascent and descent lead up to a lantern which is close in form to that of the Guggenheim.

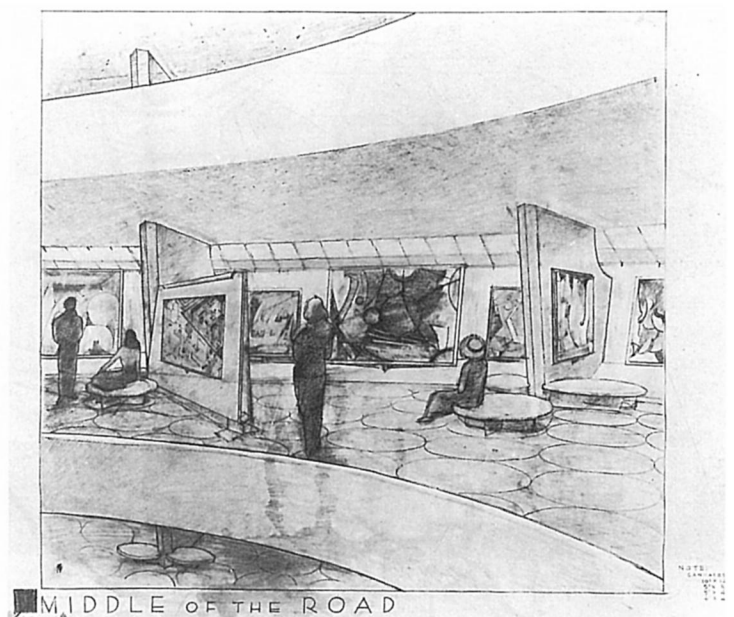
Wright's building, though ostensibly designed for human use, is a hostile interior in which we feel subordinate to the ability of the architect to create a new, self-sufficient world. Into this world the human being ventures at his own risk. The sloping surface of the ramp threatens us with the danger of a fall, while its low parapet provides inadequate protection, and our sense of unease is further heightened by the rake of the exterior wall.

The third theme concerns the interpenetration of geometrical solids, which some, including Wright, have traced back to his childhood experience with Froebel blocks. This appears at the Guggenheim in the relation of the horizontal range which connects the squat cylinder of the administration wing with the museum itself.

Finally, the spiral. It first appeared in Wright's work in 1924. A Chicago business man called Gordon Strong wanted to develop Sugarloaf Mountain, Maryland, as a tourist attraction.¹⁵ He asked Wright to design an 'automobile objective'. Wright proposed wrapping the mountain with two spiral ramps, one within the other, to enable cars to drive to the top (Fig. 2). Inside was to be a planetarium. This desecration with motor traffic of a perfectly good mountain seems the antithesis of organic architecture. Wright



7. Interior perspectives, 1958.



continued his interest in spiral architecture in the form of two designs for huge buildings in Pittsburgh of the late 1940s: a civic centre and a public garage, both commissioned by Edgar J. Kaufmann of Falling Water. A ramped spiral was built in the V. C. Morris gift shop of 1948 in San Francisco, and in a house for Wright's son David in Phoenix, Arizona, of 1950, though in these two buildings it serves just as a means of access, independent of the main structure.

Wright was certainly aware of the great helical buildings which were among the seven wonders of the world: the Lighthouse of Pharos and the Tower of Babel. He knew also the spiralling sacred towers of pre-Columbian architecture in Central America. A night-time view of the Guggenheim made in c.1950 demonstrates its likeness to a lighthouse, with strange rays of light flooding from its dome; here it seems a beacon of culture, guiding people to a haven on Fifth Avenue (Fig. 6). A night-time photograph of the actual building, though dramatic, lacks these rays.

Its role as a new Tower of Babel may be more relevant, for the tower was seen as a monument to the vanity of mankind, in particular to the decadence of Babylon, the city of Queen Semiramis. We might recall that when Gordon Strong saw Wright's design for the Sugarloaf project he wrote,

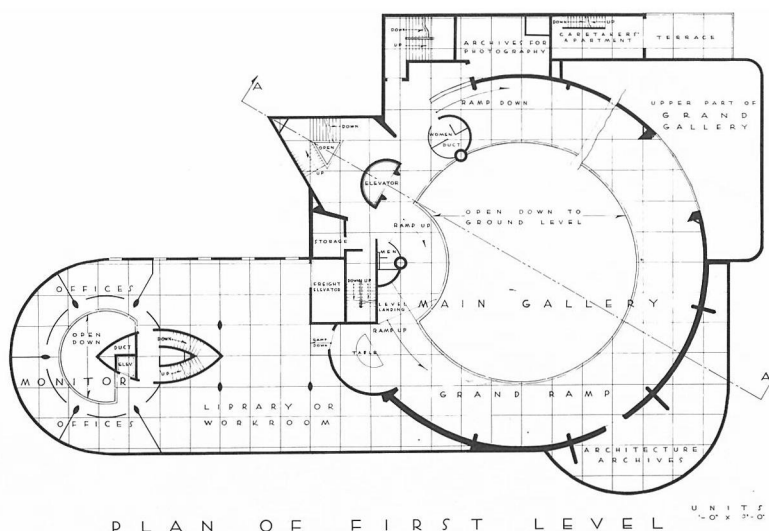
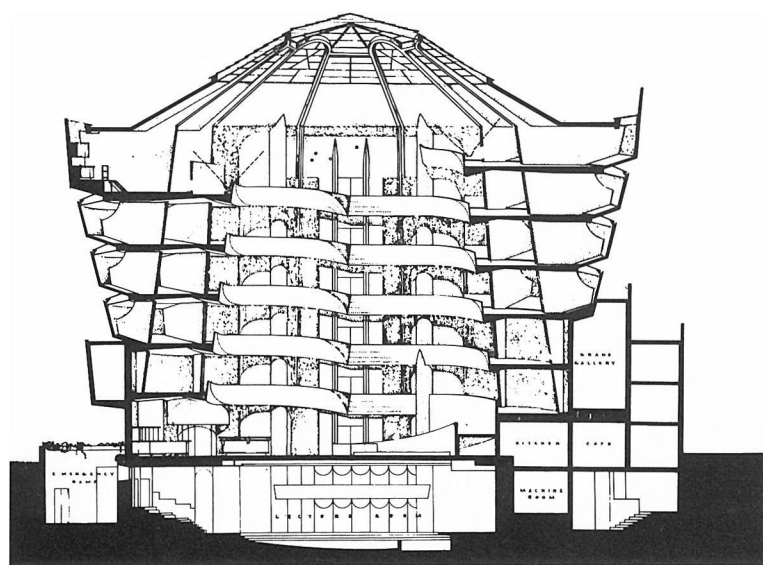
Perhaps the particular view which I have of the tower of Babel may not be in your collection. You will note in the foreground a gentleman who, according to the Bible, has lost his voice in endeavouring to explain that the structure under way possessed one thing anyhow — organic integrity. But the more he repeated the phrase, the less his hearers understood him. Finally, their understanding became so mixed that they did not understand each other. Which was the end of the first attempt at an externally ramped mobile observatory.¹⁶

Much of Wright's rhetoric about organic architecture rested on his hatred of cities, especially those on a grid plan like New York. He believed that the modern city centre had no future except as a

museum of a lost way of life. New York was to him the most wicked of cities, a view of city life which went back to the moralizing Welsh Unitarianism of his childhood, with preachers condemning the corruption of Sodom and Gomorrah, Babylon and Corinth. Perhaps Wright thus planned the Guggenheim to be a tower of Babel appropriate to the decadence of New York as the new Babylon.

We understand the spiral as something which is essentially kinetic because we associate it with movement, from water draining down a plughole to the awesome or destructive grandeur of a whirlwind. Our solar system was formed from an encircling dust cloud and is itself situated on the outer reaches of an even vaster spiral, the Milky Way. We read that God answered Job 'out of a whirlwind', and many theories of matter have been based on the vortex.¹⁷ In 1953, Watson and Crick discovered the structure of DNA, the double helix, and in a presentation drawing Wright made of the Guggenheim in 1958 (Fig. 8) he gave a misleading impression of its construction and appearance in order to suggest that it consists of two equal curves, whereas in fact the interior is a single circle interrupted by a bump for the service spine where it hits the ramp at the heart of the building. The drawing suggests that the interlocking forms of the circle and the bump are of equal significance and size — and form, in fact a double helix. Thus Wright predicts, in a building, the structure of life itself. There seems to be no other obvious purpose for the drawing, since the design had been accepted and construction begun.

If the Guggenheim has a kitsch, space-age quality, like many of his later designs, it was indeed constructed to survive all man-made disasters. In 1945 Wright explained its construction to newspaper reporters in the following memorable words: 'the ramp which is coiled in the shape of a true logarithmic spiral, is one continuous piece from top to bottom. When the first atom bomb lands on New York it will not be destroyed. It may be blown a few miles up into the air but when it comes down it will bounce.'¹⁸



8. Section (as built) through main gallery and dome, and plan of first level, 1958.

So how, in fact, has the building survived? If you like painted concrete you will like the exteriors: they are neither better nor worse than any such surfaces are, provided, as at the Guggenheim, they are regularly painted (Fig. 9). As I pointed out earlier, this lifeless cream-coloured finish is not what Wright intended. The building was to have had a polished marble-chip surface creating a shell-like purity. Internally, the major structural fault seems to be the substantial cracks which have opened up in the remarkable floor of terrazzo which is inset with circles ringed by brass borders. The controversy over the suitability of the building as a setting for the display of pictures will, of course, continue as long as it exists, but it is only fair to say that, of the smaller New York museums, it must be far and away the most popular with the public. The building itself is, of course, the most important work of art in the collection.

Changes that have been made since Wright's time include the whitewashing of the interiors and the introduction of neon strip-lighting. In addition, short iron bars have been attached to the walls so that the paintings do not lean out at an angle with the walls but can be supported in a vertical position. Another great change is one of growth. Museums almost inevitably grow — though some of the most attractive are those which do not, such as the Frick Collection, a little south down Fifth Avenue, or Sir John Soane's Museum and the Wallace Collection, both in London. Unfortunately, the Guggenheim's exhibition space expanded in the 1960s with the creation of the banal Justin K. Thannhauser Wing in the link-building connecting the museum proper with the smaller circular building which contains offices. In 1968 William Wesley Peters of Taliesin Associates, who had succeeded to Wright's practice, built a four-storey annexe on a deep, narrow strip at the north corner of the site, to contain conservation and storage facilities. This was on the site of a much larger building for the same purpose, for which Wright himself had made proposals in 1947 (Fig. 6). In fact, Peters made

his foundations sufficiently strong to carry a ten-storey building.

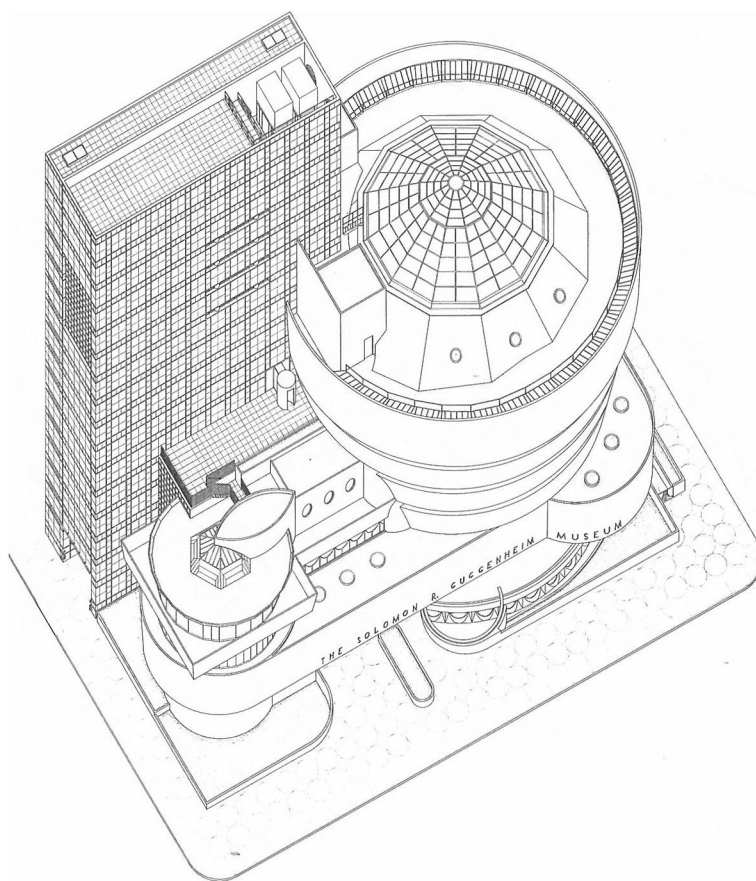
Nothing major happened for another eighteen years, until in 1986 the museum authorities shocked New York by commissioning an immense addition from Charles Gwathmey and Robert Siegel Associates. They proposed an eleven-storey tower, the upper part clad in shiny, blue-green tiles and projecting dramatically in a huge cantilever. It was indeed a 'monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved friend', and a petition condemning it with over 3,500 signatures was published in the *New York Paper* and an open letter sent to the City Planning Commission. The signatories claimed that the Guggenheim was threatened by an alteration which would 'destroy the integrity of a unique architectural icon'. It was also felt that the addition was far too monumental for its humble function of housing administration, conservation, and storage; nor did such accommodation require magnificent views across Central Park. One might have thought an obvious solution was simply to build the Wright plan for this site — though the proposed erection of works by dead architects, notably Mies van der Rohe, has run into trouble recently in London.

One problem raised by alterations and additions to the Guggenheim Museum was that it was not protected as a historic monument. It was too young to be considered for landmark status in New York and it was located, furthermore, in a pocket strangely outside historic district boundaries, on the Upper East Side. None the less, in response to widespread criticism the scheme was rejected by New York City's Board of Standards and Appeals. Gwathmey and Siegel went back to the drawing board and in February 1987 presented a far more modest and acceptable proposal (Fig. 10). The projecting cantilevered upper parts had been entirely trimmed away, reducing the depth from fifty to thirty-five feet, the height was lowered from eleven to ten storeys, and the shiny coloured tiles were replaced by a subdued limestone cladding forming a grid pattern of eight-foot squares. This modified



9. Exterior view.

10. Axonometric of Guggenheim Museum showing extension by Gwathmey Siegel & Associates.



scheme resulted in a twenty per cent loss of space, so that the new building contains only office space and galleries, with archives, conservation and storage housed elsewhere. The gain is that all the non-public functions now take place in this building, so that the whole of Wright's spaces in both the large and the small rotunda are now free.

One is tempted to wonder, however, whether it would not be even more exciting to remove all the additions made since Wright's death and to restore it as an unsullied abstract monument, one of the wonders of the twentieth century, perhaps just containing the work of Hilla Rebay and Rudolf Bauer. Certainly, the museum's statistics show that far more postcards are sold of the building itself than ever have been of the paintings displayed inside it. Perhaps it would be better with no paintings at all: a memorial to Wright. In a moving late photograph of him, he is seen gazing as though into his own mausoleum (Fig. 11). So in one sense it stands as a monument, a leaning tower like that of Pisa, with the excitement of dynamic descent in architecture as its principal justification. As Wright's most recent and best biographer, Brendan Gill, has written, architecture is not 'based on anything as rational as the need for shelter . . . on the contrary, the art of architecture imposes, not without great hardship, a literary or aesthetic ideal that is often laughably inappropriate to its setting'.¹⁹ Wright could not understand this because he had no sense of irony, and therefore no self-knowledge, but doubtless in the end that scarcely matters.

I am greatly indebted to Mr Richard John of the Warburg Institute for help in the preparation of this paper.

Notes

1. *F. L. Wright: The Guggenheim Correspondence*, selected and with commentary by Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (Carbondale, Illinois, 1986).
2. The best account is W. H. Jordy, *American Buildings and their Architects: The*

Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century (New York, 1972), pp. 279–360.

3. On the Mundaneum, see F. H. Taylor, *Babel's Tower: The Dilemma of the Modern Museum* (New York, 1945).
4. Pfeiffer, op. cit. p. 4. Letter, HR to FLW, 1/6/43.
5. Ibid. p. 30.
6. Ibid. p. 42. Letter, FLW to HR, 26/1/44.
7. Ibid. p. 40. Letter, FLW to HR, 20/1/44.
8. See H. Muschamp, *Man About Town: Frank Lloyd Wright in New York City* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1983).
9. Pfeiffer, op. cit. p. 184. FLW, 14/2/53.
10. Ibid. p. 43. Letter, FLW to HR, 6/2/44.
11. Ibid. p. 243.
12. Wright himself collected, and dealt in, Japanese prints.
13. J. Lukach, *Hilla Rebay and the Spirit in Art* (New York, 1983), p. 195. Letter, HR to FLW, 13/1/45.
14. See M. Clausen, 'Frank Lloyd Wright, Vertical Space, and the Chicago School's Quest for Light', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, XLIV, 1985, pp. 66–74.
15. See M. Reinberger, 'The Sugarloaf Mountain Project and Frank Lloyd Wright's Vision of a New World', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* XLIII, 1984, pp. 38–52.
16. Ibid. p. 46. Letter, Strong to FLW, 14/10/25.
17. See C. F. Culmsee, 'Wright and his Helix', *Shapes for the Deep Unrest: Three Essays* (Logan, Utah, 1970), pp. 8–22.
18. *Architectural Forum*, January 1946, p. 85.
19. B. Gill, *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright* (London, 1988), p. 504.

Fig. 1: © Fondation Le Corbusier. Figs. 2, 4, 5, 7, 8: courtesy of Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. Fig. 3: Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the architect. Fig. 6: photograph by David Heald, courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Fig. 9: photograph by Robert E. Mates, courtesy of Guggenheim Museum; Fig. 10: courtesy of Gwathmey Siegel & Associates. Fig. 11: photograph by William H. Short, courtesy of Short and Ford and Partners.



11. Frank Lloyd Wright on the museum's top ramp during construction.