

Frank Lloyd Wright, Preservation, and the Question of Authenticity

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This commentary on authenticity in historic preservation was inspired by events surrounding the restoration of Frank Lloyd Wright's Darwin D. Martin House, a six-building Prairie-house complex designed and built between 1903 and 1907 in Buffalo, New York. Though much celebrated in histories of architecture, the Martin House has had a long and troubled history. Following the loss of the family's fortune in the Great Depression and the death of Darwin Martin in 1935, Isabelle Martin was forced to abandon her home in 1937, after which it endured years of alternative uses, deterioration, and vandalism culminating in the demolition of three of the six structures—the pergola, conservatory, and garage-stable—in 1960. Two of the remaining structures, the Barton House and the gardener's cottage, were sold to new owners in the 1930s, and the principal Martin residence was acquired by the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1967.

Neglect continued, however, until 1992 when a public-private partnership was formed to restore the state-owned principal Martin residence. In 1993, a scholars' conference was held to determine a date of significance to which the building would be restored.¹ The year of completion, 1907, was chosen because the majority of the participants felt that it best represented Wright's intentions for the Martins; a minority objected that eighty-five years of the building's history would be wiped away in the process. Thus, two kinds of authenticity seemed to be under consideration: one representing the architect's original vision, the other representing the building as it stood.

Subsequent to the scholars' conference, a combination of strong community support and fortuitous circumstances enabled the university to acquire the rest of the original site, including the George Barton House and the Martin gardener's cottage, and in 2006 to complete the reconstruction of the three missing buildings.

The activities surrounding the restoration of the Martin complex have precipitated the construction of three additional "Wright" structures in Buffalo: a boathouse designed for Madison, Wisconsin, in 1905 but never real-

ized; a gas station for a Buffalo oil company for which Wright made several preliminary sketches in 1927 and 1928; and a mausoleum for the Martin family that was initiated in 1928 but never realized. Indeed, the version of the Martin "Blue Sky" mausoleum that has recently been constructed in Buffalo's Forest Lawn Cemetery was rejected by the Martins, who favored a second version; the "new" mausoleum was not built on the Martin family plot, and its materials, inscriptions, and proportions have been altered from Wright's original drawings to conform to contemporary cemetery codes and other exigencies. The prevailing sentiment in Buffalo seems to be the more the merrier, hopeful that the additional buildings will enhance Buffalo as a destination for Wright tourism.

According to criteria that characterize an authentic Frank Lloyd Wright building as one that was designed by the architect and built either under his supervision or that of one of his apprentices during Wright's lifetime, these new projects in Buffalo have no claim to authenticity.² Yet, in order to restore the Darwin Martin complex to its original form, the pergola, conservatory, and garage-stable had to be entirely reconstructed in new materials from extant drawings, photographs, and archaeological evidence. The Martin House restoration would appear, then, to have a considerably stronger claim to authenticity than the other three new buildings, but all of the Buffalo projects—and other similar projects nationwide—seem to have various (if somewhat tenuous) claims to authenticity. What, then, does "authentic" mean in historic preservation, and what bearing does Frank Lloyd Wright's work have on that question?

Dictionary definitions of authenticity draw a hard and fast line between the real and the false. Such a distinction may be vital in a court of law, but in the practice of historic preservation, the quest for authenticity is elusive, highly subjective, and ultimately impossible to achieve in an absolute sense. Indeed, it appears that authenticity in historic preservation is a relative condition, something toward which preservationists strive against a rising tide of current building codes, obsolete materials and technologies, high

labor costs, changing building contexts and uses, additions, demolitions, differing intentions, and time itself.

Within this exacting realm of activity, the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright poses a particularly rigorous challenge. Questions of Wright's much-bruited "greatness" or "genius" aside, he brought an unprecedented force to bear on the business of architecture through the aggregated sum of his organic system, his exhaustive pursuit of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, his numerous innovations with structure, lighting, materials, and the extraordinary longevity of his practice, during which he produced nearly 500 buildings at many levels and varieties of type, style, quality, and degrees of personal supervision.

Moreover, the preservation of Wright buildings is further compounded by a host of variables that include the considerable differences between the work of the younger Wright of the Prairie period and that of the later, post-1937, Usonian-period Wright; the commissions that received Wright's personal supervision versus those that he did not personally supervise;³ those that resulted from a close personal relationship with a client (such as Darwin Martin) and those that did not (William E. Martin); those buildings such as the Susan Dana House that have survived with a full complement of Wright-designed furniture intact versus those from which a significant portion of Wright furniture is missing (Darwin Martin House) versus others still for which Wright designed no furniture at all (Stockman House). Within a total of 380 extant works, the number of variables seems almost endless, the challenges truly formidable. Given the steadily increasing turnover of Wright buildings from private ownership to public museums—from twenty-five in 1984 to sixty-two today—it is important that each commission is carefully assessed in terms of its unique strengths and weaknesses.

Such is the nature of Wright's work that a single facet of one commission, such as the treatment of the walls and ceiling of the unit room (dining room–living room–library) of the Darwin Martin House, provides insight into the scope of Wright's self-created universe and the difficulties it presents to preservation. Although Wright treated wall and ceiling coloration in a number of different ways during the Prairie period, these surfaces, owing to the roughness of their textures, the difficulty of cleaning them, and the tendency of glazes to darken over time, have rarely survived intact.⁴

A letter from Wright to Martin dated 25 October 1905 announcing that Wright would come to Buffalo "late this week" and "daub your walls for you good and plenty" indicates that the architect took a very active role in the coloration and textural treatment of the interior surfaces of the Martin House.⁵ Expert analysis by Robert Furhoff has

revealed that under Wright's direction pigments were washed into the roughly troweled wet plaster, allowed to dry, and then sealed with a clear varnish in which tiny flecks of gold and silver were suspended.⁶ Wright intended soft light to penetrate the outer glaze and cause the wall to become visually active—glowing would be too strong a term—rather than inert. Moreover, in the principal (69-foot) unit space, the molding-enframed central ceiling panel, which was itself darker than the ceiling surface surrounding it, was graded from a darker tone in front of the living room fireplace to a lighter one at the north and south extremities of the space—in other words, at the library and dining spaces.⁷ Wright apparently hoped to draw attention along the north–south axis of the unit space outward into the surrounding landscape.⁸ Thus, in addition to the complexities of the intervening architecture, Wright's concerns ranged between the most minute particles suspended in the glazed ceiling to the crossing axes that anchored the house to the four cardinal points of the compass, a micro- to macrocosmic ambition that variously manifested itself in many subsequent commissions.⁹

While every effort is being made to simulate the visible material nature of the Martin House and many other Wright houses in the name of authenticity, the impetus falls off sharply thereafter. Two issues stand out as especially worthy of attention: Wright's structural engineering and his interior furnishings, in particular how the interiors are experienced by visitors. Although Wright's engineering has not yet been the subject of a comprehensive study, abundant evidence indicates that he was especially inventive, in a freewheeling and intuitive sort of way, with structure. In addition to such prominent examples as the revealed chain truss in Wright's Oak Park Studio, the hidden I-beams that make the Frederick C. Robie House cantilevers possible, and the ramps and web-walls of the Guggenheim Museum, restoration architects report a variety of less familiar but nevertheless highly inventive structural solutions at the Ward Willits, Avery Coonley, Harley Bradley, E. E. Boynton, first and second Herbert Jacobs, and Francis V. Little houses.¹⁰

In recent years, dire necessities at Fallingwater, the Edgar Kaufmann House at Bear Run, Pennsylvania; the Meyer May House in Grand Rapids, Michigan; and Wingspread, the Herbert F. Johnson House in Racine, Wisconsin, have required substantial alteration of the original structural systems in order to preserve the buildings. In Grand Rapids, the wood-framed, brick-veneered Meyer May House (1908) was retrofitted by architect John Tilton with a lightweight steel roof truss and support structure buried invisibly within the walls and under the roof of the house. In a parallel instance the

directors of Fallingwater employed engineer Robert Sillman to post-tension (reinforce with steel cables in tension) the major concrete beams—also beginning to fail during the 1980s—that provide the building's prominent living room cantilevers. While no one is likely to favor allowing these buildings to fail, a significant loss of authenticity accompanies these solutions.

For obvious reasons, historic preservation is heavily weighted toward that which is visible, but in the case of Wright's architecture, contemporary preservation practice has failed adequately to address the vital structural aspects of the work. At a minimum structural models, diagrammatic renderings, or digital displays concerning structure should be made more readily available for public edification, and in the interest of a notion of authenticity, the discrete opening up of portions of walls and ceilings to reveal the intricacies of the structural assembly should be given serious consideration. Many Wright houses have unfurnished secondary rooms where this can be done without significantly altering the impact of the total design.¹¹

The furnishing of Wright buildings has long been a juggernaut for both public and private preservation efforts. Wright fully furnished only a small fraction of the more than 430 buildings that he realized, and many more were partially furnished—some, like the Robie House, quite extensively; others much less so; and others still, not at all. Access to an accurate account of the original furniture of a given site is frequently clouded by a dearth of interior photographs (particularly in second floor spaces), by a lack of documents and archival drawings, and by years of attrition, particularly since the 1970s when the market value of the furniture increased dramatically.¹² As a result of these conditions, today the majority of Wright's buildings are missing significant amounts of their Wright-designed furniture. The problem is exacerbated by the influence wielded by professional photographs commissioned by Wright for the publication of a relatively small number of representative buildings—such as the Dana, Robie, and Martin houses in the Prairie period and the Affleck, Lewis, and Hanna houses in the Usonian years—and further, by Wright's persona, aspects that exert pressure on the majority of the public sites to somehow measure up to the iconic ideal.¹³ This is acutely evident at the Burton Westcott House in Springfield, Ohio, a large-scale Prairie house for which almost no Wright-designed furniture or evidence of furniture drawings or photographs exists. Any attempt to simulate a *Gesamtkunstwerk* at such a site would be pure guesswork and wholly inauthentic. Alternative solutions, whether undertaken in the spirit of Wright or as a departure from it, should respect what is authentic in the building and clearly

differentiate it through interpretation from the new direction.

In view of the varying degrees of completeness of furnishings in Wright's work, both in the buildings' original states and in their present condition, no single, universal solution to interior restoration is possible. Each site's situation has to be assessed individually, preferably in a spirit of flexibility rather than one of rigidity. Where individual pieces are missing from one of Wright's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a carefully made copy of the original can be inserted, or the space can be left incomplete and interpreted by a docent. Since Wright went to considerable lengths to design individualized furniture in such cases, the reproduction of Wright furniture from one house does not make much sense in another house. Yet, an empty room or an entirely unfurnished building may be primarily of interest—and so interpreted—for its qualities of space, light, materials, structure, and siting. Preservationists and directors of Wright buildings that were commissioned with little or no Wright-designed furniture have to wrestle with, and perhaps build into the interpretation of the site, the limitations that the cost of furniture design imposed upon many clients.¹⁴ In many cases Wright designed only a few major pieces, such as a dining room table and chairs, and either recommended mission furniture or advised the clients to furnish the interior with pieces from their previous homes.¹⁵ Photographic documentation of the original non-Wright furniture arrangements of some sites, such as the Walter V. Davidson House in Buffalo and the C. E. Gordon House in Portland, Oregon, reveal a state of authenticity—a few Wright-designed pieces of furniture complemented by the family's own furniture store accumulation—at odds with the prevailing ideal established by Clarence Fuermann's interior photographs of such Prairie-period works as the Coonley, Robie, and Dana houses.

Even as many public Wright sites struggle either to maintain or simulate a *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal, the prevailing conventions for touring the buildings, which in many cases contain highly valued Wright-designed furniture, dictate that visitors remain in groups, listen to a docent, and move through the building's spaces without the opportunity to be seated. While this practice is an understandable measure to preserve the furniture, the fact is that Wright worked with a rather diminutive scale, said to be keyed to his own 5-foot 8-inch height, and insisted that his houses should be experienced and photographed from a low, preferably seated, position (Figure 1). In some of the photographs of the Martin House taken in 1907 by Fuermann, the camera is positioned just 36 inches from the floor level. Only from such a vantage point does the full impact of Wright's pow-



Figure 1 Frank Lloyd Wright, Darwin D. Martin House, view of living room, Buffalo, New York, 1903–6. Photograph by Clarence Fuermann, 1907

erful orthogonals and the beams and moldings that intersect them become evident as a dynamic cross-axial plan expressed in three dimensions. Serious consideration at public Wright sites must be given to allowing visitors to be seated on reproduction chairs or discretely designed and positioned benches.¹⁶

A similar and related impediment to an authentic experience within a Wright building stems from the immense popularity of the work. Throngs of visitors at the major sites make it impossible to provide the opportunity for quiet contemplation and discovery within these spaces; like the complexities of structure that lie hidden behind walls, the spirituality of the work—one of Wright's finest achievements—lies beyond the grasp of all but the few.

The spectrum of challenges inherent in Wright's architecture notwithstanding, the predominant problematic force in Wright preservation remains Wright himself, owing to the inextricable entwinement of Wright's work and his public persona. Even as he spun out scores of buildings, during his periods of high production, Wright wrote and lectured extensively, gave interviews and press conferences, affected bohemian costumes, and made frequent, highly calculated uses of photography to enhance and insure the enduring fame of his work and, by extension, of himself. Such statements as "I had to choose between honest arrogance and hypocritical humility and I deliberately chose honest arrogance" and "not only do I intend to be the greatest architect who has ever yet lived, but the greatest archi-

tect who will ever live" contributed to the fabrication of a mythic persona that weighs heavily upon Wright preservation today.¹⁷

At the 1993 Martin House scholars' conference, the majority favoring a restoration of the building as it was in 1907 argued that the public would come to the Martin House to see Wright's architecture, that the alterations made by the Martins and others over eighty-five years simply did not matter and should be relegated to docent commentary and a few historic pictures. Alternatives, such as leaving intact the south-facing second-story wall that the partially blind Isabelle Martin had moved outward three feet in order to bring more light into her bedroom, or leaving traces of the foundations of the intrusive 1950s apartments in the surrounding lawns, were rejected out of hand on the grounds that they would only diminish the perfection of Wright's 1907 vision.¹⁸

The modernist-based outcome of the scholars' conference has yielded some extraordinary benefits in that it is once again possible to enter the Martin House and be arrested by the distant specter of the plant-enshrouded Nike of Samothrace, the cynosure of the entire six-building complex (Figure 2). In addition, it is now possible to walk the length of the pergola and experience a faithful rendition of its structural rhythms, materials, textures, spatial openness, and its considerable elevation above the surrounding lawns and gardens, none of which are quite what they seem in the 1907 photographs by Fuermann.

Yet, the newly constructed buildings do not withstand close scrutiny. The color of the new Roman bricks is slightly off, by choice, with the understanding that the authenticity of the original construction should not be confused with the new construction—that is, authentic, but not too authentic. The deeper one penetrates into the interior of the newly constructed stable, chauffeur's apartment, and hayloft—spaces for which documentation is the thinnest—the farther one travels from the realm of the authentic. The new construction, the result of careful research, some guesswork, and modifications necessitated by contemporary building codes and the alternative uses of these spaces, constitutes a schematic rendering of Wright's original intention from which any evidence of history in the form of patina, wear, or damage is necessarily absent. Hence, a major feature of the Martin House complex—Wright's vision of Nike as a metaphor for Darwin Martin's triumph over adversity and rise to wealth—was restored at the cost of inauthenticity of some component parts, a trade-off that seems eminently justifiable and a possible model for other similar situations.¹⁹

Less justifiable is the eradication of the history of the Martin House since 1907. The preservation of Wright's buildings must strive to restore a balance between the mythologized Wright on one hand and history, understood as a continuum, on the other. Tying the site to a date of significance stultifies it and privileges Wright over everything else.²⁰ Wright's genius is a given and will take care of itself, but the many other participants in the creation and life of the house—the Martins, the Bartons, Walter Burley Griffin (Wright's office superintendent), Oscar Lang (the contractor), and the Martin House staff as well as subsequent owners, prominent visitors, and those involved in the restoration—are all woven into the fabric of its history. While the impact of all those people cannot be directly reflected in the physical restoration of the house, representative voices—particularly that of Isabelle Martin with her pragmatic objections to Wright's preoccupation with concerns of an aesthetic nature—warrant inclusion.

Although it may seem counterintuitive to preservationists committed to the ideal of a perfect replication of the original, a paradigm shift is in order for the preservation of such buildings as the Darwin Martin House. In recognition of what Daniel Sui has characterized as “our de-centered, destabilized, fragmented, spontaneous, socially constructed, multiple and inter-subjective realities,” the new paradigm must be flexible, inclusive, and multivalent.²¹ Just as Wright's role can no longer be viewed as exclusive, so the hegemony of the visual must be expanded to encompass the other senses. New technologies such as directed sound, holography, telematics, and aural collage offer extraordi-



Figure 2 Frank Lloyd Wright, Darwin D. Martin House, view of Nike of Samothrace in the conservatory. Photograph by Clarence Fuermann, 1907

nary opportunities for capturing and interpreting the past. Moreover, in the light of our postmodern condition, the role of the docent in the interpretation of the site bears reevaluation and reorientation. Preservation must move beyond modernist hagiography and the frozen moment both to give greater agency to the visitor and to meet the challenge of history more fully.

Notes

1. Participants included Bruno Freschi, dean, School of Architecture and Planning, University at Buffalo; restoration architects and consultants Carla Lind, Robert Burley, John Vinci, Wilbert Hasbrouck, Eric Lloyd Wright, John O'Hern, Theodore Lownie, and John Eifler; architectural historians H. Allen Brooks, Jack Quinan, and Elizabeth Cromley; Thomas M. Schmidt, president, Wright's Fallingwater; Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, director of Archives, the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation; and John Lovell, assistant director, Bureau of Historic Sites, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation.

2. William Allin Storrer, who has made a career of cataloging Wright's work as accurately as possible, has this to say about authenticity: “Wright dis-owned structures built from his plans but slightly modified in construction. . . . Any project supervised by Wright, builder, or Taliesin Fellow is consid-

ered authentic.” Storrer, introduction, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright: A Complete Catalogue* (Chicago, 1979), n.p.

3. In a conversation with the author in the late 1970s, Lucille Zimmerman said that although she and her husband often invited Wright to see their house in Manchester, N.H., he never did.

4. Wright stippled some fresh plaster surfaces working with a stiff brush and a palette and commissioned others, such as Orlando Giannini and George Niedecken, to create murals at his own home, at the Dana House, and in the Coonley living room. The walls and ceilings of the Darwin Martin House were covered with a cream-colored latex paint sometime after the Martins’ departure.

5. Frank Lloyd Wright to Darwin D. Martin, 25 Oct. 1905, Wright-Martin Papers, Archives of the University at Buffalo.

6. Robert Furhoff, interview by Jack Quinan, Summer 2006.

7. The long rectangular molded panel that extended across all three subspatial units was made darker than the ceiling surface surrounding it so that it would seem detached and free-floating. This was one of the many ways that Wright “broke the box” of conventional architectural practice.

The outward extension of the axes of the Martin House was anticipated in Wright’s small plan and bird’s-eye rendering of a block of four identical versions of the “Home in a Prairie Town,” each rotated 90 degrees from its neighbor, in the Ladies’ Home Journal of Feb. 1901.

8. Augmenting the gradation of color were the large, clear plate windows through which the axis passed and the intense orthogonal lines created by the horizontal raking of the mortar joints in the deep piers that began five feet inside the house, passed through the window membrane, and extended four feet into the exterior.

9. In each of these commissions as well as many others, Wright has aligned the principal axes of the buildings with prominent landscape forms. For an in-depth analysis of the Martin House living room, see Robert McCarter, *Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect* (London, 1997) 54–61.

10. I am indebted to architects John Eifler, John Thorpe, and Donald Kalec for sharing their collective wisdom and experience with me over the years.

11. In instances where the thought of interfering with Wright’s design aesthetic is too excruciating, hinged panels can be devised for revealing the underlying structure unobtrusively.

12. Even when drawings exist but the furniture is missing, there is no certainty that the pieces were ever built or built according to the drawings since Wright often modified his designs during the construction process.

13. Interior photographs of the Susan Dana and Darwin Martin houses were published in the *Architectural Record* of Mar. 1908, and the Dana and Martin houses and the Frederick Robie House interiors appeared in *Frank Lloyd Wright. Ausgeführte Bauten* (Berlin, 1911). Interior photographs of the Paul Hanna and Malcolm Willey houses were published in *Architectural Forum* of Jan. 1938, and the Lloyd Lewis House interior was depicted in

Architectural Forum of Jan. 1948.

14. In a letter of 28 Dec. 1905, Wright made an elaborate case, after having designed the Martin furniture, for payment at the rate of 15 percent for furniture design instead of his usual fee of 7 percent of the total cost of the house. Wright-Martin Papers.

15. On his wife’s behalf, Darwin Martin petitioned Wright in a letter of 23 Jan. 1905 to have the guest bedrooms in the Martin House trimmed with mahogany rather than oak to accommodate the bedroom furniture from their previous residence. Wright-Martin Papers.

16. United States Government statistics indicate that the height and weight of the average American male has increased from 5 feet 8 inches and 166 pounds in 1960 to 5 feet 9 inches and 191 pounds in 2002. The ceiling height in the Martin House living room is 8 feet, but the height of the beams that subdivide the unit space into dining, living, and library rooms is just 6 feet 5 inches—apparently a comfortable height for the Martins in 1907, but no longer so to many visitors today.

17. The first statement is quoted on the video *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* (1983), written and directed by Murray Grigor for The Arts Council of Great Britain and ABC Video Enterprises. The second statement is from John Lloyd Wright, *My Father, Frank Lloyd Wright* (originally published as *My Father Who Is On Earth* (New York, 1946)); New York, 1992), 33.

18. The suggestion that remnants of the foundations of the apartment buildings that had been built on the site of the pergola and garage-stable be left at grass level as a reminder of the history of the site quickly were dismissed.

19. In opting to employ a geothermal heating and ventilation system for the Martin House, the combined forces of the Martin House Restoration Corporation; the Bureau of Historic Sites; the New York Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation; and Hamilton Houston Lownie Architects LLC, with Ernest A. Conrad, P.E., LEED, AP, took a decisive step in the spirit of Frank Lloyd Wright, but they sealed the house and thwarted Wright’s intention to open the house’s interior spaces to the surrounding landscape through the use of casement windows and pier and cantilever construction.

20. An immediate problem with the 1907 date in the Martin House restoration was that the Martins continued to acquire Wright-designed furniture, Japanese prints, and many decorative arts objects after 1907.

21. Daniel Z. Sui, “Visuality, Aurality, and Shifting Metaphors of Geographical Thought in the Late Twentieth Century,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 2 (2000), 322–43

Illustration Credits

Figure 1. Courtesy of the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives

Figure 2. Courtesy of the Archives of the University at Buffalo