THE SKY LINE MAY 25, 2009 ISSUE

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S FINAL GIFT

Staff at the Guggenheim like to refer to the museum's building as the most important object in its collection. So why did it take fifty years to stage a major exhibition of its architect's work?

By Paul Goldberger

May 18, 2009

The museum, which opened in the fall of 1959, six months after Wright's death, represents the culmination of his achievement. **Photograph by Dennis Stock / Magnum**

In 1959, when the Guggenheim Museum opened, traffic on Fifth Avenue moved in both directions. As you drove northward, the bulbous form emerged from behind flat-fronted apartment buildings like a balloon in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. I first saw the

museum that way, as a nine-year-old, and the idea that this beguiling object had been created to display art, or that it might not be up to the task, seemed beside the point.

Fifty years later, it still does, even though the charge that the building upstages the art has become part of its legend. Staff at the Guggenheim like to refer to the building as the most important object in the museum's collection, which makes it odd that the Guggenheim hasn't had a major exhibition of Frank Lloyd Wright's work until now. Its fiftieth-anniversary show also marks the recent completion of an extensive restoration of the building and the fiftieth anniversary of the death of its maddening, egotistical, duplicitous creator. Wright died, at ninety-one, in April, 1959, six months before the museum was finished. He last saw the building in January of that year, when he was photographed looking out from the spiral ramp with the contractor, George Cohen.

Notably absent from that picture was the museum's director, James Johnson Sweeney, who fought with Wright over almost every aspect of the building. Once the architect was gone, Sweeney painted the interior white, instead of the ivory that Wright had wanted; rather than hang the paintings directly on the backward-sloping walls, where Wright wanted them to appear as if they were on artists' easels, he installed them upright, on metal rods projecting from the walls. Over the years, the building has been pushed and pulled in all kinds of directions, rarely to its benefit. Taliesin Associated Architects, the inheritors of Wright's practice, put up a garish addition behind the museum; later, it was demolished to make way for a limestone slab by Gwathmey Siegel, and a bookstore was stuck in the open space beside the rotunda. It's wonderful now to see the Guggenheim at least a bit closer to its 1959 condition, the reinforced-concrete surface of the exterior smooth and voluptuous rather than cracked and shabby. Planters, complete with live plants, and a fountain that Wright installed in the rotunda are back in use. They're hardly his most sophisticated gesture, but it's pleasing that the Guggenheim resisted editing them out.

Wright envisaged the Guggenheim as "a curving wave that never breaks." When it opened, John Canaday, in the *Times*, called it "a war between architecture and painting in which both come out badly maimed." But Wright's conception has always functioned better than its critics have admitted, if never as well as he himself predicted. Works of artists like Alexander Calder and Ellsworth Kelly play off well against the curves, but the space overwhelms anything small,

delicate, or highly detailed. This makes the Guggenheim the progenitor of every architecturally assertive museum since, and beside works like Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao or Daniel Libeskind's glass-and-metal shards in Denver and Toronto, it now looks almost demure. What strikes you when you walk into Wright's rotunda today is how intimate and comfortable its magnificence is. Art is none the worse for half a century of being seen here.

Wright imagined the Guggenheim as "a curving wave that never breaks." **Photograph by Werner Bischof / Magnum**

Wright's career spanned more than seven decades; he was born two years after the Civil War and died at the dawn of the space age. The exhibition is therefore a journey from architecture

that, on the swirling ramp of the Guggenheim, can seem almost old-fashioned to work that closely resembles the museum. The strong horizontals, open interior spaces, and overhanging roofs of Wright's early Prairie House style combine nineteenth-century sumptuousness with potent modern thrust. In his great house Fallingwater, of 1936, powerful cantilevers lent some of the crispness of European modernism. And then there are the hexagons, hemicycles, triangles, and spirals that pervade his late work. It's appropriate that the exhibition's section about the Guggenheim itself, unquestionably the culmination of Wright's achievement, comes at the top of the spiral. Then again the Guggenheim spiral, ascending toward the sky, can be an overbearing metaphor for a chronological exhibition. (Wright would probably have loved it.) Not every œuvre fits such a narrative, and in Wright's case the curators decided that some work was better treated thematically than chronologically. Residential designs and major urban projects are in separate galleries—mini-exhibitions that remind you of the limitations of Wright's ramp.

Among other things, the exhibition confirms the emergence of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, which co-organized it, from the shadow of Wright's widow, Olgivanna. For a quarter century after his death, she maintained his studio, more like a cult than like an architectural firm. She died in 1985, but it wasn't until recently that Taliesin Associated Architects, which for years purveyed lacklustre imitations of Wright's work, closed down. The foundation's architecture school has broadened its reach to the point of admitting that there are other architects worth learning about. And the drawing archive, surely one of the great architectural collections, is now free of paranoia and eager to share its treasures.

Wright was vastly prolific, and the curators wisely decided to concentrate on key projects rather than show everything. They are smart in defining what is key: not just famous buildings like Unity Temple and the headquarters of the Johnson Wax Company but also the Larkin Building, in Buffalo, senselessly demolished for a parking lot in 1950, and, from 1924, the wonderfully named Gordon Strong Automobile Objective, an unbuilt design for a mountaintop planetarium reached by a spiral road. There are some models big enough to look into and get a sense of Wright's great interior spaces, but the most moving model, of Wright's property surrounding Taliesin, has minuscule buildings, the better to show you the reach of the rolling hills around them. Suddenly you understand the depth of Wright's love for the expanse of American landscape and what he meant when he said that buildings should not be on

hilltops but, rather, on hillsides, so as not to destroy the contour of the land. The exhibition also includes computer-generated animations that give you the illusion of walking through a building. This is no substitute for the real thing, but in the case of nine unbuilt or demolished projects virtual reality is as close as you are going to get.

The exhibition's most important elements are the most traditional: more than two hundred drawings, including soft pencil renderings and lavish watercolors, from throughout Wright's career. They have been installed in glass cases, most of which are set at angles along the spiral ramp. Not much has been placed on Wright's slanted walls—a tacit admission of the Guggenheim's issues as a museum—but the idiosyncratically positioned cases feel almost like pieces of sculpture floating free in Wright's space. You're not sure whether the curators are jousting with Wright or protecting him, but there isn't a moment when you are not aware of, and reacting to, his space. This is exactly how he wanted it. ♦

Published in the print edition of the May 25, 2009, issue, with the headline "Spiralling Upward."