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BOOKS

In search of Frank Lloyd Wright

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Sifting through clues identifies buildings previously unattributed to the master architect.

Frank Lloyd Wright was prolific during his life — and even afterward, as his designs were used (and sometimes copied) after his death. His renderings numbered more than 1,000, of which 423 were constructed. They range from a gas station and a lighthouse to New York's resplendent Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. In addition, Wright often conceived of the furniture, light fixtures and artwork that accessorized his architectural creations. He even had a side job dealing in Japanese prints.

Despite Wright's voluminous output and status as arguably the most well-known American architect, it's not always easy to determine which buildings should be attributed to him. Some of his structures were modified in later years or even lost altogether, to Hurricane Katrina in one case and to a parking lot in another. Identification efforts can be hampered by two other facts: Wright freelanced during his early-career day job with Chicago's Adler & Sullivan — creating what are known as his "bootleg" houses, designed in violation of his employment contract — and he designed affordable prefab houses sold through American System-Built Homes from 1911 through 1917.

William Allin Storrer, author of *The Frank Lloyd Wright Companion* and four editions of *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright: A Complete Catalog*, is an architectural detective of sorts, working with the Rediscovering Wright Project to determine which works should be credited to Wright's oeuvre. Thirty-seven new sites were added to the fourth edition of the catalog, including an entire block of buildings in Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago. The book, organized chronologically, contains color photographs and the history of each existing building, as well as information on buildings lost over time and a key indicating which sites are open to the public.

Wright and his third wife invited young architects and students to live and work with them at Taliesin — the 800-acre estate encompassing Wright's home, studio and school in Spring Green, Wis. — as part of the Taliesin Fellowship. After suffering pneumonia in 1936, Wright established a winter home in Scottsdale, Ariz., Taliesin West, where the group traveled each year to study, create and enjoy the warmer weather. These snowbirds flew in a flock, piling into cars to trek from Taliesin to Taliesin West as one convoy.

How do you determine if a building should be attributed to Frank Lloyd Wright?

It's in the details. It's hard to describe. I can't just say, "This detail is Wright." But you go into a building and you can immediately recognize whether it's Wright. A building that isn't Frank Lloyd Wright doesn't have the details that would speak Frank Lloyd Wright. I can't say this detail is Frank Lloyd Wright, that detail isn't. I say these things together are Frank Lloyd Wright.

If somebody said, "Hey, I've got a Frank Lloyd Wright house and nobody knows about it," the first thing I'd do is go and look at it. If it didn't say Wright, that would be it. If it did say Wright, then I would say, "Where's the plan?" They would have to produce the plan they built from, and I would trace that back to Taliesin and see whether there was such a plan in the archives.

Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer was the archivist at Taliesin West. He gave me his file so I could track down [undiscovered creations], see what was built and what wasn't. If they got built, it was known because Taliesin would have to supply the working drawings, and they wouldn't supply the working drawings unless they were getting paid 10% of the cost of building the house. You don't pay 10% of the cost of building it if you're not going to build.

In 2019, eight of Wright's works were named to UNESCO's World Heritage list, including the Guggenheim Museum. Yet the Guggenheim was heavily criticized when it was completed in 1959. The museum's exterior unravels like a white tornado on New York's Upper East Side, while the unorthodox interior whisks visitors by elevator to the top floor, where they wind down a whirling walkway in ever-smaller circles to view the art. How did the Guggenheim go from reviled to revered?

If you were an artist, would you want to be walking on an incline down from the top of the building to the bottom, when the paintings are horizontal and you are at 120 degrees? That's the problem. People said, "This is absurd." Yet it has survived.

Eventually, people realized this guy was a genius and they should be preserving his stuff, not tearing it down. He developed a cult following, you might say.

In a nod to democratic ideals, in 1937 Wright started to design Usonian houses, which were individualized, affordable homes meant for the middle class.

That came really late in his career, when he was established and could do that. He had time to think of things like this, and he came up with the 90-degree Usonian house. The first was Jacobs House, which has at its center what he called the workspace, which is really the kitchen, and everything pivots from there. The living room, with a fireplace between the living room and kitchen, and then the wing going straight off from the kitchen is the quiet space — the bedroom space. A very simple design, which he turned into many variants. He invented the ranch house, and nobody gives him credit for it: the idea that a house could be one floor. He did it when he was getting to an age when he didn't like climbing stairs.

Often, a house would be built based on the topography of the site. This way, the first thing he would look for was "Where is the view?" And then your living room would be placed facing that view, and everything else would be built off that living room.

Wright was complex, but his houses weren't.

Do you think there are houses out there that should be attributed to Wright that haven't been uncovered yet?

We might uncover one here and there, but they'd be mostly something like the American System-Built Homes, where somebody got the plans and built it. They can be anywhere in the country. We wouldn't know about them because

there were no records held by the company that sold the plans and the parts. They just sent stuff out, and that was it. I couldn’t go into their records and find any of these, so they can pop up anywhere anytime — and do.