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Frank Lloyd Wright at 150: Unpacking the Archive

Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY (June 12–October 1, 2017)
(Exhibition Review)

Peter Clericuzio

This monumental exhibition of Frank Lloyd Wright's work celebrating the sesquicentennial of his birth does not disappoint either the casual visitor or the seasoned scholar.¹ Highly anticipated, it delivers on its promise to showcase the great buildings of Wright's career alongside more obscure projects.² It coincided serendipitously with the relocation of Wright's archive from the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation at Taliesin West outside Phoenix to its new home at the Avery Library's Architectural Archives at Columbia University in New York. The exposition takes the archives' transfer and contents as its premise—an unusual tactic for a retrospective—and this provides fertile ground for new avenues of investigation.

The exhibition is also unconventional because it is not structured as we expect it to be. Its sections do not correspond to a certain chronology, nor do they coincide with individual Wright buildings. Instead, we are introduced to a set of twelve themes that encompass groups of projects and ideas. Though somewhat disconcerting and jarring, the organization offers us a fresh way of looking at Wright's accomplishment that encourages curators of future exhibitions to explore alternative ways of approaching his work.

Because we frequently assume that an architect's archive contains drawings, correspondence, photographs, and sometimes three-dimensional models, the issue of what records that specifically relate to design are preserved in such a repository becomes a pressing question that the show helps answer. The exhibition opens into an oblong gallery of walls that are populated with stunning presentation drawings spanning Wright's entire career. Although these are indeed spectacular and were the show's mainstays, visitors would have been drawn even more to the gems of design featured in the surrounding galleries: the chairs and tableware from the Imperial Hotel, the architectural ornament samples, the fabric colors and swatches, and the systems of motifs, such as the circular geometries extrapolated throughout his buildings (see Figure 1). The graphics and objects in the section

1 Accompanied by the catalog *Frank Lloyd Wright: Unpacking the Archive*, eds. Barry Bergdoll and Jennifer Gray (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2017), hardcover, \$65.

2 Dietrich Neumann, "Preview of Frank Lloyd Wright at 150: Unpacking the Archive," in *Artforum International* 55, no. 9 (May 2017): 146.



Figure 1
Installation view of *Frank Lloyd Wright at 150: Unpacking the Archive*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 12–October 1, 2017. ©2017 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar.



Figure 2
Installation view of "Ornament" gallery, *Frank Lloyd Wright at 150: Unpacking the Archive*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 12–October 1, 2017. Photo: Peter Clericuzio

“Ornament,” for example, are showstoppers, and some quite tangibly illuminate the program of the buildings for which they were designed, such as the bubbly shapes for the Midway Gardens that evoke the patrons’ fizzy drinks (See figure 2). As a result, the pieces of design become some of the most surprising and unpredictable items on view, which made them some of the real magnets for visitors.

The exhibition reminds us that although Wright relished his unique artistic gifts applied to individual projects, the idea of design—and the possibility of putting his stamp or signature on mass-produced items—became a key preoccupation for him, particularly in the postwar era. Despite public statements to the contrary—in a famed 1957 interview with Mike Wallace he declared that he did not fear death—Wright had to be keenly aware of his mortality, particularly after 1945.³ The idea that design and the manufacture of small-scale objects and decor on a mass scale could function as the conduit for perpetuating his legacy as a designer long after his death is a subtle theme running through the exhibition that could have been pushed much further, as it preoccupied Wright throughout his life. Nonetheless, the show illuminates a few of these moments in his career that have not received much attention, such as the apparently well-marketed American System-Built houses from 1915 to 1917. Here, Wright’s insistence on control of all aspects of his projects, even in what were to be essentially pattern-book Prairie-style houses, is brought to the fore with his meticulous schemes for the interiors. The section “Building Systems,” including these projects, is tucked into a back room at the end of the exhibition and deserve to be highlighted more prominently.

Most significantly, the show demonstrates that design constitutes arguably the most political aspect of Wright’s work. The section “Ecologies and Landscapes” examines an undated graphic designed for Jens Jensen’s environmentalist group Friends of Our Native Landscape, probably from the mid-1910s, which includes Wright’s handwritten notations for various symbols representing the prairie, weeds, seedpods, and Indian swastikas that index the politically contested aspects of the Midwestern landscape. Here we can see parallels between Wright’s artistic thought and the politically charged natural imagery used by Art Nouveau designers contemporaneously in Nancy and in Barcelona, suggesting that rooting within definitive geographies was key to the sustained global development of modern architecture and design.⁴ Oddly, despite the prominence of this graphic in the show, it is hardly mentioned anywhere in the exhibition catalog. Likewise,

3 Frank Lloyd Wright, interview by Mike Wallace, *The Mike Wallace Interview*, ABC-TV, September 28, 1957.

4 On Nancy and such imagery, see Peter Clericuzio, “Memory and Mass Mobilization: The Material Culture of the Alsace-Lorraine Question, 1885–1919,” in *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 27 (special issue, Souvenirs and Objects of Remembrance) (2015): 172–95. On Barcelona, see Judith Rohrer, “Artistic Regionalism and Architectural Politics in Barcelona, ca. 1880–ca. 1906” (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1984).

5 Spyros Papapetros, "The Finial and the Mousetrap: Ornament from Midway Gardens to the V. C. Morris Gift Shop," in *Frank Lloyd Wright: Unpacking the Archive*, eds. Barry Bergdoll and Jennifer Gray (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2017), 114–51.

only Spyros Papapetros's catalog essay provides us with an analysis of how design played a central role in Wright's conception of organic architecture, demonstrating that Wright deferred many ornamental motifs to later projects because of economic concerns.⁵ These shortcomings, however, do not detract from the overall achievement of the exhibition, a veritable smorgasbord for enthusiasts of Wright, modern architecture, and design alike.