CORE
Metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
Provided by Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College | Bryn Mawr College Research

Bryn Mawr College
Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

Growth and Structure of Cities Faculty Research and Scholarship

Growth and Structure of Cities

1996

Review of *Frank Lloyd Wright: Presentation and Conceptual Drawings*, by Luna Imaging, Inc.

Jeffrey A. Cohen
Bryn Mawr College, jcohen@brynmawr.edu

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities_pubs

Part of the Architecture Commons, History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons, and the Urban Studies and Planning Commons

Custom Citation
Cohen, Jeffrey A. Review of *Frank Lloyd Wright: Presentation and Conceptual Drawings*, by Luna Imaging, Inc. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 55 (1996): 334-336, doi: 10.2307/991154.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. http://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities_pubs/11

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

reconfigured to connect differently scaled parts, link structural and ceremonial aspects, and provide a narrative decoration that would transform the building form. Betsky refers to this approach as the architecture of pragmatism, explicitly drawing a connection to Pragmatism because Rogers designed many institutions that promoted the Chicago School of Pragmatic philosophy (the School of Education at the University of Chicago, where John Dewey and George Herbert Mead taught; Yale and Northwestern universities, where followers of Dewey were presidents; and the Harkness-funded commissions, which were designed to organize education and health care into modernized businesses) and because he drew upon traditional formal architectural languages to order the process of constructing modern buildings with modern materials and technologies.

However, Betsky's portrayal of Rogers as a "Pragmatic" seems to be untenable. Yes, he was practical and a modern businessman, but linking him directly to William James and John Dewey and suggesting he was intellectually committed to Pragmatic beliefs may be overstating the case for Rogers's intentions. Betsky's profile of Rogers emphasizes the architect's extraordinary concern with personal style, his ability to listen to and articulate a client's ideas, and his apparent disdain for intellectual discourse. From that evidence, I suspect that Rogers merely gained the confidence of some of the Pragmatists and Progressive educators without actually sharing their philosophy. Throughout his practicing career, Rogers rarely seemed personally invested in the philosophical underpinnings of his work, but consistently paid considerable attention to social and economic relationships with donors or clients. He even delegated much of the design details—the "artistic" side of the business—to specialists such as Otto Faelten (the Beaux Arts–trained designer who worked on the Yale buildings), E. Donald Rabb (a Gothicist who had worked for Cram and Goodhue and provided skillful renderings of the Memorial Quadrangle buildings at Yale), Ainslie Balantyne (a New Zealand–educated architect who worked on Rogers's more modern buildings of the 1930s), and Beatrix Farrand (a relative who provided landscape designs).

Betsky's portrayal of Rogers as a Pragmatist may also follow from the author's concentration on the designer's institutional work after 1910. If one were to consider Rogers's domestic work, somewhat overlooked by Betsky, a fuller picture of the architect might emerge. Examination of clients, programmatic plans, and choice of exterior styles would help to build the case of Rogers as an extremely accomplished professional who cultivated and maintained contacts with a wealthy and powerful class, listened carefully to his clients' needs and wishes, used his own refined planning skills to develop a building direction, and drew upon a staff of sympathetic specialists to focus that plan. Perhaps his domestic clients, like Yale and his other institutional clients, were also creating artificial history or recreating an image.

Rather than characterize Rogers as a Pragmatist, it might have been more accurate to use the same evidence to emphasize his success as a design professional. He combined his interest in historical detail with a commitment to contemporary planning and technology to satisfy the demands of a diverse clientele, from the East Coast conservative elite eager to build exclusive mansions to progressive educators who sought to restructure learning. The reliance on a corporate office team and a decidedly anti-intellectual approach would seem to characterize the Rogers office not as a Pragmatic one but as a modern American office that constantly sought to build in a more rational and moral manner.

— Edward S. Cooke, Jr.
Yale University

Luna Imaging, Inc.

Frank Lloyd Wright: Presentation and Conceptual Drawings

New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. $1500.00 (4 CD-ROMs).
ISBN 0-19-509576-X.

This CD-ROM publication is in many ways a remarkable accomplishment. It presents some 5,000 drawings, representing 862 of Wright's projects, and displays them with a visual richness—in terms of color and scale of reproduction—that no book or microform publication is ever likely to match. It provides a formidable surrogate for the originals, one that spares travel, staff effort, and the wear and tear of retrieval to offer simultaneous users at remote sites an immediacy and breadth of access otherwise unimaginable.

The drawings included here were chosen from among some 21,000 produced by Wright and the Taliesen office that are now held by the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation archives at Taliesin West. A focus on presentation and conceptual drawings—over preliminary, design development, and working drawings—creates a clearly defined subset that can be treated in its entirety, and that can claim a further coherence inasmuch as they "record Wright's shaping of the architectural idea, from its initial record on paper to the more formal vision of his work presented to clients" ("Introduction," 37). One might sometimes wish for the integration of complementary photographs or graphics not drawn by Wright in order to get a fuller understanding of his design schemes. But this is a first step; the remaining drawings and over 15,000 historic photographs at the archives will be tapped for future publications planned by Luna and the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.

The images are stored on four CDs at a range of resolutions, the most detailed of which can show an image on screen at 2,048 x 3,072 pixels with 24-bit color (allowing 16.7 million colors). They can be printed out in shades of gray; color reproductions must be ordered. The images are linked to database entries that laconically summarize information on each drawing and commission, including impressive exhibition and publication histories and some inscriptions. The databases also allow searching using a wide range of parameters. The data and images are both served up by Luna Insight software, which can flexibly orchestrate the content from other Photo-CDs and is planned as the interface for future titles. This separation of the informational substance from the image- and data-handling software also permits independent enhancements to that software, supplied on diskette and installed separately from the content on the CDs.

The main task here, to disseminate visual information, was carried out with extraordinary care and fidelity. This task can present unexpected complexities, both technical and conceptual. Some of the most important technical issues, such as color correction and data control, will be appreci-

ated mainly in a lack of shortcomings in those areas, but other difficulties may intrude into the forefront of the experience for some users. The publication is designed for use with Windows 3.1, and the user may encounter frustrations getting the software installed and the publication running optimally. Even after a year of prodigious growth in the typical PC's capacities, the product remains rather demanding in terms of its "preferred" platform: a 486DX processor with "16+" megabytes of RAM, a 20-megabyte swap file, and, ideally, 60 megabytes free on the hard drive so that one won't have to change CDs so often, along with a double-speed CD-ROM drive, a graphics adapter, and a 17-inch monitor. Given these requirements, the publication's price, and its likely use as a reference work, many users will have access to it only in a library or computer laboratory, which can further complicate matters. Configurations on such machines tend to be locked or subject to competing preferences for screen size and resolution, swap files, drivers, etc.; most of the glitches encountered were probably attributable to this kind of limitation. In any case, it is a good idea to have someone very familiar with Windows 3.1 nearby when starting out.

The Luna Insight software is both functional and flexible. The interface employs three main windows: the user starts with the omnibus "group window" to identify drawings of interest, then moves to the "full data window," with facts on each item next to a slightly larger thumbnail image, and finally to the "image workspace," to view and compare full-screen images. Some aspects of the interface design seem less than ideal, even allowing for the range of what seems intuitive to different users. Moving from the full data window to the image workspace requires backtracking to the group window and double-clicking on the image there—a detour in one's attention stream. The image workspace allows various controls over the image, but not the simultaneous display of associated data. The user can view different images together, define groupings for later consultation, and even annotate the help screens, but cannot tag personal annotations to the images or the groups. When the image workspace buffer is exceeded, as happens frequently at less than optimal configuration settings, one is unceremoniously bounced out of the program.

For all its visual richness, the publication is conceptually restrained. It lacks the interpretive apparatus or contextualizing prose that normally accompany even the most laconic catalogues of architectural drawings. That restraint undergirds the whole enterprise and seems, in a way, characteristic of a significant share of the architectural historiography of the last two decades. For better or worse, we appear to be less at ease than an earlier generation of scholars with those magisterial statements of why something is important and why some artifacts are privileged over others. Many historians seem to feel more comfortable delivering the artifacts with minimal apparatus, as if the basis of their preeminence were self-evident, or with the idea of providing a useful service to posterity, if a distinctly component one. A new wealth of annotated documents and systems for expert use offers itself as the less vulnerable and less ephemeral scholarly enterprise, creating works of indisputable lasting value but imbued with a certain defensive restraint.

So what is presented here is mainly the images, at sizes that range from modest thumbnails to detailed enlargements that one must pan across to view parts at a time. An effort has been made to treat all images with consistency: all drawings, regardless of their actual size, are displayed at precisely the same five standard resolutions. One sees the advantage of a standard treatment, but might quibble that the issue of actual size, obscured by transference to film and digital media, does indeed matter. A scaled, movable image of a ruler on screen would allow some measured drawings to be more fully informative, but there is also a subtler issue here: what is big on the original—say, a house amid an expansively rendered setting on one of the very large drawings Wright sometimes favored—can be displayed at less than actual size, even when shown at the highest resolution. For smaller drawings, that high-resolution image may appear way beyond actual size, zoomed to exhibit the structure of the paper and details of the calligraphy. The design of this publication seems always to deal with the calculus of the overall sheet rather than bend to the special circumstance. One might ask if it would be better to surrender this standard of consistent image management for one that takes actual drawing size as a reference point, and results in a fuller range of resolutions for larger drawings. Choices like these recur in this project, coloring the undertaking as a mechanistic archival tool geared to serve the document more directly than the user.

The software is accompanied by two thin softcover volumes, one the "User's Guide," which the newcomer will find indispensable at installation, and will consult upon reaching the functional limits of what was thought to be intuitive in the interface. The other volume, titled "Introduction," combines a series of short sections—one by Michael Ester—about the background, goals, and means involved in creating this work, along with a building list and a short essay, "Designs for Living: The Drawings of Frank Lloyd Wright, 1885–1959" by R. Nicholas Olsberg. This essay is unillustrated, raising a critical issue in a discipline in which we have come to expect that we will be prompted to discover and confirm with our own eyes rather than simply accept a scholar's judgments. Readers will encounter comparanda in this essay that will leave most of them at a loss, and that are also absent from the CDs. This immediately conjures an ideal situation in which such images could be marshaled into synchronization with the presentation of the thesis, and could indeed simultaneously serve many theses. Images could be preloaded to appear as the reader scrolled toward a callout, offering timely access, richness, and even a multiplicity of commentators.

Luna and the Wright archive plan further titles, compatibly treated, for this medium. Already there is a CD with 1,000 images of eighty of Wright's houses, featuring a fuller range of image types, more narrative treatment for each, and a much more reasonable price. Even with that new product's admission of some exposition, the focus of the publication program remains internal, on illuminating Wright's work by looking solely at *it*. If that is the guiding mission, would one ever find here the drawings by Mendelsohn alluded to by Olsberg as influential in the 1930s? Would one see the kind of houses in Chicago to which Wright might have reacted in the 1890s? An understanding of Wright's drawings would certainly be enhanced by contextual and comparative images, even if their choice would introduce the vagaries of exposition. Such elements may be viewed as belonging to that narrative territory best

left to print, but one wonders if this overlooks the possibility of a narrative of unprecedented visual richness, or of a panoply of scholarly voices placed amid these archival resources. A line surely has to be drawn somewhere, but in stepping so firmly away from exposition and contextualization, perhaps this project follows Wright himself in reinforcing the sense of his own independent genius, sui generis.

—Jeffrey A. Cohen
Bryn Mawr College

Maya Moran

Down to Earth: An Insider's view of Frank Lloyd Wright's Tomek House

Foreword by Robert Twombly;
Carbondale and Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995, vii + 132 pp., 99 illus. $39.95 (cloth). ISBN 0-8093-1559-9. $24.95 (paper). ISBN 0-8093-1560-2.

In the growing literature about Frank Lloyd Wright and his work, there is not likely to be another book like *Down to Earth*. One suspects that few later owners of Wright buildings are likely to develop the kind of effusive enthusiasm that motivated Maya Moran to write so forcefully about her stewardship of this work of art. And then there is Maya Moran herself, whose captivating and intriguing personality seems to match that of the house about which she writes. The aficionados, scholars, and students to whom she has opened her extraordinary home over the years on moment's notice will recognize her in the remark: "In the beginning of our ownership I used to clean the house before visitors arrived. Now I have developed a more relaxed attitude: if people come to look for dust instead of architecture, I will leave them some" (103). For certain, there will be no one else quite like her to write about the art of Wright.

The book opens with two chapters discussing Emily and Fred Tomek; Riverside, Illinois; the architect and his clients; subsequent owners; the design of the house; and the place of the house in Wright's work. The reader will find these interesting and useful, but, as Moran does not claim to be a scholar—she is, in fact, a painter—it is in the two chapters that follow that Moran really brings her home to life.

But before turning to those parts of the book, it should be said that we are indebted to Moran for providing documentation in these introductory chapters (and in an appendix) which, when augmented by a few additional citations, finally permits the firm dating of this important house. It can now be stated with certainty that the year commonly associated with the design of the house, 1907, is actually the year of its completion. It was designed two years earlier in the autumn of 1905, most likely early in November following Fred Tomek's acquisition on 25 October 1905 of a large parcel in Riverside, which he subdivided into three lots, selling two of them on 27 October and keeping the other, at the intersection of Bartram and Nuttal roads, for himself. With the $15,000 in proceeds from the sale of the lots, he was prepared to go to Wright for a design. Five months later working drawings had been completed, as was noted in *American Contractor* of 24 March 1906, where it was reported that Wright was receiving bids for construction of the house. Evidently something went wrong after that, for, according to the same journal, the general contract was not let until 13 October 1906. The house was nearing completion on 17 April 1907 and presumably was occupied by the Tomeks in late April or June of that year.

This chronology means that the Tomek House design falls about halfway between those for Unity Temple (September 1905) and the University of Wisconsin Boathouse (December 1905), a dating supported by the severe geometry which characterizes all three buildings, especially noticeable if one momentarily substitutes the flat roofs of the other two buildings for the hip roofs of the Tomek House. While it is true that Moran, not satisfied with her own documentation, prefers to believe that the house was designed in 1904 and finished in 1906 (6, 11–14, 34–37, 112–115), this reviewer does not find her reasoning in support of these dates convincing.

In the third section of the book, Moran tells the story of her restoration of the house, extending over many years, which anyone who has lived with an old building will understand and appreciate, the more so here, where an acknowledged work of high art is involved and needs to be respected. This is followed by Moran's account of her attempts to give the house the proper setting it never had under previous owners, including the Tomeks. For it she designed, planted, and maintained informally arranged gardens which could not have been better planned by architect Walter Burley Griffin, who designed the landscape settings for Wright's houses between 1901 and 1906 whenever clients requested the service. The gardens are well illustrated in the book though, unfortunately, not in color.

Moran's aesthetic responses to the house are most exquisitely rendered in the last section, where she exalts in the light that fills the house throughout the day and the seasons. It is something that even the ordinary person remembers distinctly after a visit to the house, not merely for the quality of light but for the way it is admitted through the grouped art glass casements carefully situated for maximum effect. But Moran does not restrict herself to light and color alone; she examines every visual aspect of the building inside and out for its impact on the user.

The book is handsomely laid out and is well illustrated with nicely printed black and white photographs. It ends with an appendix on dating and costs, references, and an index. The absence of color is partly overcome by the reproduction on the cover of one of Maya Moran's paintings of the house and its landscape.

— Paul E. Sprague
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

C. M. Harris, editor, and Daniel Preston, assistant editor

Papers of William Thornton, Volume 1: 1781–1802

Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1995. lxxxvi + 614 pp., 39 illus. $60.00 (cloth).ISBN 0-8139-1344-6.

William Thornton won the competition for the design of the U.S. Capitol in 1793. As one of the three Commissioners of Public Buildings he oversaw the development of the new federal city, served as Commissioner of the Patent Office, befriended five presidents, worked as a fervent abolitionist for the recolonization of African Americans in Africa, and was an inventor of substantial ability. For thirty-five years this multitalented man was a minor character close to