

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Other Name/Site Number: Guggenheim Museum

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 1071 Fifth Avenue

Not for publication:

City/Town: New York

Vicinity:

State: New York County: New York Code: 061

Zip Code: 10128

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: ___

Public-State: ___

Public-Federal: ___

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: ___

Site: ___

Structure: ___

Object: ___

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

0

0

0

1

Noncontributing

0 buildings

0 sites

0 structures

0 objects

0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ____ nomination ____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- Entered in the National Register
- Determined eligible for the National Register
- Determined not eligible for the National Register
- Removed from the National Register
- Other (explain):

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

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Summary

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is nationally significant as one of Frank Lloyd Wright's most important commissions during his long, productive, and influential career. Built between 1956 and 1959, the museum is recognized as an icon of mid-twentieth-century modern architecture. Being one of his last works, it represents the culmination of a lifetime of evolution of Frank Lloyd Wright's ideas about an "organic architecture." Within its building typology, the Guggenheim is one of the early examples of "architecture as art" for major twentieth-century museums. It is one of a group of sixteen Wright buildings singled out in 1959 by the American Institute of Architects and the National Trust for Historic Preservation as his most important "to the nation...which ought to be preserved in their original form."¹ The original building remains essentially unchanged and exhibits an unusually high degree of integrity, clearly conveying its character-defining form.

As one of the most recognizable, benchmark buildings within Frank Lloyd Wright's body of work, the Guggenheim meets the threshold for NHL Exception 8, which acknowledges situations where properties aged less than fifty years might be found to hold "extraordinary national importance." In addition to the large corpus of scholarly and professional commentary focusing on the building in the years since its completion, the Guggenheim was recognized as early as 1959 by architects and preservation professionals as exceptionally significant among his completed commissions, and was identified as one of a group of Wright properties most worthy for NHL consideration in a 1998 study produced for the NHL program by three Wright scholars.

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**Location and Site**

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is located at 1071 Fifth Avenue on the upper east side of Manhattan. The building occupies an entire rectangular block (201' x 120') on the east side of the avenue between East 88th and East 89th streets.² The museum is oriented west toward Central Park, which is directly across the street, and is surrounded by late-nineteenth and twentieth-century, multi-story buildings, generally of brick, stone, or concrete construction. Buildings on the side streets are primarily four to ten story buildings, while those lining Fifth Avenue north and south of the museum, are larger in scale. Residential use predominates in the neighborhood; however, this particular stretch of Fifth Avenue is known as the "Museum Mile" because, in addition to the Guggenheim, several other notable cultural institutions stand within a twenty-block area including: the Museum of the City of New York, The Frick Collection, The Jewish Museum, the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, El Museo del Barrio, The Neue Gallerie, The National Academy Museum and School of Fine Arts, The Goethe-Institute/German Cultural Center, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (NHL, 1986).

¹ See: Aline Saarinen, "Preserving Wright's Architecture," *New York Times*, April 19, 1959, X-17, "Watch on Wright's Landmarks," *Architectural Record* 126 (September 1959): 9, and Anne E. Biebel et al., "First Unitarian Society Meeting House," National Historic Landmarks Nomination (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2004), 17-18, fn. 27. The list included: W. H. Winslow House, River Forest, IL; Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio, Oak Park, IL (NHL, 1976); Ward Willitts House, Highland Park, IL; Frederick C. Robie House, Chicago, IL (NHL, 1963); Aline Barnsdall "Hollyhock" House, Los Angeles, CA (NHL, 2007); Taliesin, Spring Green, WI (NHL, 1976); "Fallingwater," Bear Run, PA (NHL, 1976); S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc., Administration Building, Racine, WI (NHL, 1976); Taliesin West, Phoenix, AZ (NHL, 1982); Unitarian Meeting House, Madison, WI (NHL, 2004); S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc., Research Tower, Racine, WI (NHL, 1976); V. C. Morris Shop, San Francisco, CA; H. C. Price Tower, Bartlesville, OK (NHL, 2007); Beth Shalom Synagogue, Elkins Park, PA (NHL, 2007); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY; and Paul R. Hanna House, Palo Alto, CA (NHL, 1989). Sometime between 1959 and 1964, Unity Temple in Oak Park, Illinois (NHL, 1970) was added to the list, making a total of seventeen buildings. See: R. R. Cuscaden, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Drawings, Preserved," *Prairie School Review* 1 (1964): 18.

² In order to meet the requirements of the NHL Program, the description in Section 7 is an edited and expanded version of the text in the recent National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) documentation. See: Kathleen LaFrank, "Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum," NRHP Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2005), Section 7.

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Distinguished by its modern aesthetic and dramatic sculptural qualities, the Guggenheim presents a striking contrast against its neighbors. In 1992, the Guggenheim Museum constructed a ten-story, deep and narrow annex behind the original museum building that is oriented toward East 89th Street. Based loosely on a concept devised by Wright himself, the addition reads on the exterior as essentially a separate building within the cityscape and does not diminish the presence and integrity of the original portion of the building.

Structure

The Guggenheim is mainly constructed of reinforced concrete, yet gunite—today commonly known as shotcrete—is the material of the exterior curved walls. Normal weight cast in place, concrete is the material of the lower levels and light weight cast in lieu of concrete is the material of the interior radial walls and the ramps. Gunite, at the time generally used for building swimming pools and recreate stone at zoos, is a mixture of sand and concrete that is sprayed through a steel mesh onto a wooden mold. Gunite is the material used for the exterior of the spiral curved walls and Wright's innovation was using this material as a structural one for this building. The pairing of the different types of concrete, which caused some visible cracks and the marks on the façade of the wooden molds from the gunite, were a cause of distress for Wright, from the early stages of the project, in searching for a seamless monolithic façade. Also for this reason, Wright did not specify expansion joints for the building.

Exterior

The Guggenheim was originally finished with a buff-colored vinyl plastic coating called "Cocoon." As a total composition, a seamless integration of form and materials characterizes the building. The museum can be divided into four principal components: the enormous spiral-shaped gallery or rotunda, which anchors the building at the southwest corner; the monitor to the north of the rotunda; the sweeping, horizontal bridge, which wraps around the south, west, and north sides of the building at the second story level; and the annex, at the northeast corner of the property. As was typical of Wright's work, he premised the entire design of the building on basic geometric modules. For this composition, the primary modules were circles, triangles, and lozenges; however, variations of these—such as half circles and cones—were also employed in addition to squares and rectangles. These motifs carry the design from the ground level to the dome, determining the form and structure as well as such features as sidewalks, terrazzo floors, fountains, planters, stairways, and screens.

The building's composition is based on interlocking forms, a formula also typical of Wright. The rotunda-gallery is composed of two interlocking spirals—the smaller one intersects the ramp on the north side and is visible on the interior. The spirals are anchored by a triangular-shaped shaft penetrating the northeast side of the spiral and enclosing the stair and elevator. Similarly, the circular monitor engages a lozenge-shaped stair. The monitor, originally an administrative wing, is also premised on circular modules; however, it is much smaller in scale and less singular in form. On the exterior, each of the four levels is slightly different in form and material; however, each has the same radius and together they define a cylinder. The ground floor and second level are enclosed within rounded concrete forms, while the third and fourth levels are multi-faceted and almost completely glazed. A large square concrete terrace, which serves the fourth level, features walls that slope out. These rectilinear forms bisect the cylinder horizontally, separating the two, glass-enclosed levels and providing additional geometric complexity. The monitor features a wide fascia with a decorative pattern based on lozenges and it is surmounted by a hexagonal aluminum dome. The lozenge-shaped stair tower interrupts the monitor's circular form and provides a vertical anchor for this feature. Interior lozenge-shapes columns also provide support.

The rotunda and monitor are connected by the sweeping horizontal bridge that encloses and unifies the entire composition. This feature is generally rectangular with rounded corners and a deep semicircular projection at

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the southwest corner. The bridge shelters the main entrance, which is on the west side of the building at the ground level and is lit by recessed lighting in the soffit of the bridge. The building was constructed with an entrance drive that passed between the rotunda and the monitor. Traffic entered from Fifth Avenue, approached recessed entrances to the rotunda and monitor and continued to the left, past a sculpture garden, before exiting on East 89th Street. In 1975, the drive-through was enclosed, eliminating the sculpture garden and allowing the creation of a new entrance in the space between the two sections of the building. The entrance is now defined by a recessed glass wall within an aluminum frame and several single glass doors and one revolving door.

The entrance forecourt is detailed with inlaid metal circles and the property defined at ground level by low concrete walls that create planting beds, some of which are sunken gardens. Original metal railings atop these walls have been removed. The museum's name stretches across the bottom edge of the bridge in Wright's large, signature letters. To the south of the entrance, a ramp winds around the bottom of the spiral to an emergency exit for the basement and entrance to a mainly underground theater. The theater features a floor that curves upward and the sides like the bottom of a boat and a circular, coved ceiling with recessed light fixtures.

The ten-story, limestone-clad annex sits to the northeast of the museum proper and is oriented toward 89th Street. Conceived as an extension of an earlier, four-story annex (built 1968), the present structure occupies the same footprint and incorporates the foundations and framing of its predecessor. Construction of the 135-foot tall annex in 1992 saw removal of the walls of the earlier building, extension of the framing to support six additional stories, and facing of the entire building with limestone detailed in a grid motif. It serves as a backdrop for the Wright-designed portion of the museum and screens the view of adjacent buildings, thus performing the essential visual function of an annex originally proposed by Wright.

Interior

Rotunda

The rotunda, the dominant feature of the museum, takes the form of a giant spiral, a spring rising from the ground floor and coiling five times around an open rotunda to a sky-lit dome, or oculus, ninety-five feet above. In Wright's conception of the building, the spiral was a pure cantilever, one continuous piece from top to bottom with the ramp integral with the exterior wall and the interior balcony wall. This idea was somewhat modified in execution, in response to the concern of building inspectors, with the addition of twelve narrow reinforced concrete partitions, or "web walls," which pierce the spiral and serve as stiffeners. These "fins" are eight inches thick and of graduated depths to a maximum of twenty-four feet deep at the top. They are set at thirty-degree intervals and divide the gallery into seventy individual niches, or bays. The ramp is one-quarter of a mile long and rises at a grade of five percent; it is 25' wide at the bottom but increases in depth to 32' as it climbs. The gallery walls are 9'-6" tall and slope slightly outwards at ninety-seven degrees from the floor. Designed to hold paintings, the tilt of the gallery walls was intended to replicate the slope of an easel.

Although Wright's design for the interior walls specified a soft, ivory-colored paint, they were originally painted a stark white. Several years after the museum opened, the walls were repainted off-white, and in 1992 they were repainted in a shade similar to Wright's original specification. The gallery is lit by a narrow band of skylights set between the coils of the spiral. The lights are recessed and feature rectangular, frosted-glass lenses. The twelve-sided dome is formed of ribs that are extensions of the structural partitions; the top of the dome, supported by the ribs, is circular. The dome is glazed in panes of various geometric shapes. The interior features and finishes include plastered and painted gallery walls, terrazzo floors with inlaid metal circles, lozenge and circular planters, triangular light fixtures, a semicircular oak information desk, and a telephone alcove.

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The triangular-shaped service core, which contains one elevator and a stair, serves as a structural anchor for the spiral and provides an alternate vertical circulation system. As Wright conceived the building, the visitor would take an elevator to the top and then descend through the gallery via the ramp. In reality, the stair and elevator allow the visitor a choice of entering and exiting at any level and thus changing the order in which sections of the gallery are viewed. A triangular gallery is situated above the stair.

Monitor

The interior of the monitor was originally intended to accommodate work spaces, offices, a library, and an apartment—an element that Wright eliminated before the final design stage. In 1963, the second floor of the monitor was converted from a library into a gallery space now known as the “Thannhauser Gallery,” with an opening cut through the wall to connect with the main exhibition space. In 1980, a portion of the monitor’s fourth floor was also converted for the same use. As part of the 1992 alterations, the monitor’s ground floor was incorporated into the museum’s main lobby, while the second, third, and fourth levels are now open, connected to the rotunda and entirely devoted to gallery space.

Bridge

The bridge was originally accessible from both the gallery and the monitor and featured garden spaces; the surface is also interrupted by skylights lighting the lobby. The space under the bridge between the rotunda and the monitor—once the entrance drive and now enclosed—contains the bookstore and provides access to the museum’s original circular entrance.

Annex

The annex contains four floors of exhibition space, three of which are double height, as well as additional office, storage, and space for building infrastructure and mechanical systems. The new exhibition areas are connected to the rotunda behind the triangular stair tower at the fourth, fifth, and seventh floors.

Interior modifications to the Wright-designed museum building since its 1959 completion have included rehabilitation of the entire monitor as gallery space and creating connections between the rotunda and the new exhibition spaces in the annex. Other changes involved restoring original features such as the oculus and basement theater and executing features of Wright’s design that were never built. These include creation of a cafeteria under the High Gallery and repainting the gallery walls in the soft shade for which Wright vociferously argued.

Integrity and Legacy

The Guggenheim Museum retains an outstanding level of integrity to its period of construction. All renovations, additions and rehabilitations have seriously considered retaining the building’s historical character and integrity as an icon of modern architecture. Even the most significant and controversial change—the 1992 annex—is sympathetic in massing and presence and does not negatively impact the original Wright design.

Several renovations and small additions preceded the 1992 expansion and renovation. In 1963, William Wesley Peters of Taliesin Associated Architects directed the rehabilitation of the original library in the monitor as exhibition space to house the Thannhauser Collection. An arched opening was cut through the concrete wall separating the rotunda with the monitor, thereby connecting the existing and new exhibition spaces. These changes led to the construction of an annex located on 89th Street to house the offices previously located in the monitor. Completed in 1968 on a design by Peters, the annex was constructed of concrete and embellished with octagons and squares in low relief based on Wright’s 1951 drawings. The leadership at the museum anticipated that the annex would eventually provide structural support for a taller tower on the same location.

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In 1975, a rehabilitation enclosed the original drive-through to provide the museum with space for a bookstore, restaurant, and a relocated tea room. The 89th Street outlet of the original driveway was converted into a service entrance and a small outdoor dining terrace. The Fifth Avenue driveway entrance was enclosed with glass panels modeled on the original “Hope’s” window sections used by Wright elsewhere in the building; the revolving glass doors were modified to permit passage to the newly enclosed area. At this time, the Thannhauser Wing received a new mechanical system.

A 1978 interior renovation by Richard Meier & Associates rehabilitated the original “Architectural Archives” on the rotunda’s second floor as the existing “Aye Simon Reading Room.” During the renovation, the architects modified the original door opening to create a keyhole entrance meant to represent reading as the key to knowledge. Although executed in the spirit of the Wright building, the reading room has a more sinuous vocabulary that establishes its own character. The new furniture includes built-in bookshelves and reading tables sculptured according to the location of the existing original skydomes (hemispherical skylights). In 1980, a portion of the fourth floor in the monitor was converted to gallery space in order to house an installation drawn from the permanent collection.

The most significant intervention to the Guggenheim is the ten-story annex completed in 1992 on a design by Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects as part of a two-phase institutional expansion and renovation. The new construction removed most of the 1968 addition by Wesley Peters—excluding the structure—and built a taller tower instead. The overall inspiration for the annex tower came from a ten-story scheme developed by Wright for the location in 1951 for offices and studio apartments. Wright’s proposed annex was a rectangular slab with its broad side elevation parallel to Fifth Avenue and its narrow elevation oriented to East 89th Street. The Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects’ addition originally received mixed reviews when its proposed initial design was presented to the public in 1985; however, approaching the building’s fiftieth anniversary, the addition is already part of the collective memory of the general public. Oriented to a secondary street and sensitively detailed, the annex maintains its own presence and does not detract from the original building which remains intact and the strength of the Wright design is fully evident. Further, since it opened in 1992, the annex has provided much-needed exhibit and work space for the institution that has permitted the museum to raise its profile as a world class cultural institution.

Importantly, the completion of the annex allowed for the second phase of the project to proceed, which focused on necessary renovations to Wright’s Guggenheim including: insulation on the interior faces of the rotunda’s gunite walls; upgrading of the original HVAC equipment; and cleaning and reinstallation of the main rotunda skylight and perimeter lay lights, as well as the roof. At this time, the original terrazzo floors, plaster ceilings, storefronts, and doors were selectively replaced, the building was painted, and a ground-floor cafeteria created. Additionally, a new vault was excavated under the sidewalk. The Board of Standard and Appeals approved the project by October 1987 and construction was largely completed in 1992. This work was followed in 1996 by a restoration of the lower level according to Wright’s original specifications. In 2001, lower-level office spaces were renovated by Gwathmey Siegel into an educational facility housing state-of-the-art classrooms, a new media theater, a resource center, and offices.

Currently, the Guggenheim Museum is undergoing a restoration of the building’s famed exterior. Although much admired, the innovative concrete and gunite structure has been plagued by surface cracks almost since its opening in 1959. In 2005, some twelve layers of paint applied over the past forty-six years were removed and the building’s concrete surface revealed, allowing for close analysis. Detailed monitoring of the movement of selected cracks over an entire year, laser surveys, ultra sound radar, and other studies were used by the

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restoration team to formulate an appropriate methodology for repair and assuring the building's long-term health. The repair and repainting is expected to be completed in 2008.

In conjunction with the restoration of the exterior gunite and concrete surfaces, necessary mechanical and glazing upgrades are being done to improve the interior environmental conditions. To this end, all single glazed window units and skylights will be replaced with new thermally improved frame and insulating glass units. New insulation interventions are also being devised to avoid interior condensation along the rotunda apron-wall and Thannhauser floor-wall junctures. The reduction of interior condensation will reduce the potential for interior moisture infiltration into the gunite walls, thereby protecting them from further deterioration.

The 2005-07 restoration is the first time since opening to the public in 1959, that the Guggenheim Museum has undergone a thorough exterior restoration program. While much of the interior of the building was rehabilitated in 1992 as part of a capital expansion project, the exterior of the building was not addressed at the time. The current restoration will provide long term repairs to the Guggenheim Museum and is guided by the goal to preserve as much significant historical museum fabric as possible, while accomplishing necessary repairs. The approach of the 2005-07 restoration follows the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* and reflects the highest standards of contemporary thinking within the field of built heritage conservation worldwide.

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**Introduction**

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is nationally significant as an iconic masterpiece of modern architecture designed by world renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright (FLW). The Guggenheim Museum is one of the architect's key works from his last period and is an exceptionally coherent and unified demonstration of the architectural ideas that he nurtured over his long career. The dramatic, reinforced concrete and gunite building and its seamless integration of program, form, structure, and materials is an outstanding illustration of Wright's principles of organic architecture. Commissioned in 1943 by philanthropist Solomon R. Guggenheim (SRG) to house his collection of European Non-Objective paintings, the FLW designed and constructed the building between 1943 and 1959. He specifically intended to provide an appropriate environment for the appreciation for Guggenheim's collection and to create a building that would be a visible symbol of the unity of art and architecture. The primary component of the design is the enormous spiral-shaped rotunda, which serves as the main gallery and expresses both the form and function of the building. The Guggenheim is the architect's largest and most significant commission in New York City and one of his few executed urban designs. It was recognized as a stunning success immediately upon completion and has achieved iconic status as one of the most distinctive and recognizable of Wright's works. The Guggenheim is also significant as one of the three most important twentieth-century museums in New York City devoted to the collection of Modern and contemporary art. Along with the Whitney Museum of American Art (1914) and the Museum of Modern Art (1929), the Guggenheim (originally the "Museum of Non-Objective Painting," 1939) was central to the introduction of Modern art to America and unique for its exclusive collection of European art and emphasis on a single aesthetic philosophy. While conceived by FLW to compliment the character of Guggenheim's collection and enhance the experience of the art, the Guggenheim's national significance must also be situated on its place within the museum typology as one of the pioneering "blockbuster" art museums that have proliferated nationwide (and worldwide) over the past half-century.

As one of the most recognizable, benchmark buildings within Frank Lloyd Wright's body of work, the Guggenheim meets the threshold for NHL Exception 8, which acknowledges situations where properties aged less than fifty years might be found to hold "extraordinary national importance." In addition to the large corpus of scholarly and professional commentary focusing on the building in the years since its completion, the Guggenheim was recognized as early as 1959 by architects and preservation professionals as exceptionally significant among his completed commissions, and was identified as one of a group of Wright properties most worthy for NHL consideration in a 1998 study produced for the NHL program by three Wright scholars.

Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959)

The Guggenheim Museum stands in a rarified group composed of the most important buildings and iconic designs by Frank Lloyd Wright, an architect whose contributions to architecture and overall influence in this country and across the globe were unmatched in the twentieth century.³ His life paralleled a period during which the United States moved from a pre-industrial agrarian society with an open frontier to a fully industrialized one in which large segments of the population crowded into urban areas. Raised a Unitarian, a religion founded on the basis of pluralism, Wright inherited an idealized vision of American democracy and a heroic image of its founders. Influenced by the Jeffersonian idea of a decentralized society and having grown

³ Kathleen LaFrank's recent work documenting the national significance of the Guggenheim Museum for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) has been reused in Section 8, with editorial contributions provided by Monica Ramirez-Montagut. See: Kathleen LaFrank, "Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum," NRHP Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2005), Section 8.

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up in the Midwest, Wright's concept of the free and autonomous individual was intimately linked to the values he believed to be inherent in an agrarian, land-holding society. Like others in this period of rapid social change, he concerned himself with the threat to individualism posed by centralization and cultural unity. As such, Wright's artistic philosophy was grounded in Romantic ideas about individualism and emotional authenticity. Romanticism developed in response to the social upheavals that marked the end of the eighteenth century. Events such as the failure of the French Revolution posed a threat to the rational principles of the Enlightenment. In questioning reason as the source of a single external truth, Romantics looked inward to their won subjective feelings and perceptions, and the resulting acknowledgement of multiple truths both legitimized the self as the ultimate authority and led to a new artistic freedom.

Embracing Romanticism allowed FLW to filter the threads of individualism through the idea of an enlightened democratic society in which the individual was free to reinvent him- or herself. He equated the intellectual freedom and great geographic expanse of America with the possibility and choice inherent to national identity. As long as there was wilderness left to conquer, the individual was free to move on and stake out a new life. As an artist who undertook providing shelter for the citizen as his mission, Wright believed that he could embody democracy in architecture by giving form to his concept of the sovereign self. Over a long career, he worked to integrate man, nature, and society in an architectural form that offered a fully developed model of the place of an individual within a democracy while attempting to resolve the inherent conflict between the individual and society. Wright looked to nature to provide a system of order a framework for personal expression. He developed the idea of an organic architecture based on the perception and expression of natural rhythm, pattern, structure, and growth toward a "clear direct expression of the...Nature of the thing itself."⁴ As a Romantic artist, he assumed the authority to learn the secrets of diversity and unity for himself so that he could use them to give form to essential ideas about structure and shelter, the diverse needs of each individual, and a society premised on the autonomous individual.

Deeply inspired by his farm upbringing, Wright drew his major inspiration from the American landscape. He was captivated by the broad horizontal line of the American prairie—though his home state of Wisconsin was characterized by gently rolling hills—which he equated with endless freedom, diversity, and choice. As such, the prairie became one of the most important reference points in his entire body of work, an endless horizontal line that found expression in the design of ornament, the siting, form and amassing of buildings, and the planning of cities. Despite his preference for the horizontal, Wright also explored the vertical form, most dramatically in the proposal for the Mile High Skyscraper (1956) but also in a number of other projects, including the 1929 proposal for three residential towers surrounding St. Mark's in the Bowery in Manhattan. Although the latter project was unrealized, the design reappeared in 1956 when it was used for the Price Tower in Bartlesville, Oklahoma (NHL, 2007), where the nineteen-story building dominated the skyline of the small city and was visible for miles across the broad, flat country that surrounded it. FLW referred to the Price Tower as "the tree that escaped the crowded forest," as if to suggest that although the building was intended for an urban setting, its "flight" had gained it a certain freedom and autonomy.

Although Wright was anti-urban in the sense that he believed that the modern city denied the citizen the opportunity for growth, an essential freedom, he was also captivated by cities and designed numerous works – theoretical, unbuilt, and built – for urban environments. He was keenly interested in creating a model for individuals to live autonomously and cooperatively in groups. Perhaps his most significant comment on urbanism was his conceptual plan for Broadacre City which represented a radical reconception of the city as a decentralized, horizontal expanse. The plan incorporated the form and symbolism of the prairie, especially its references to infinite freedom, diversity and choice. Broadacre City was premised on allocating citizens (or

⁴ Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (New York: Horizon Press, 1932), 336.

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households) on individual one-acre lots on which they would construct a single-family house. Although the plan included a variety of civic, commercial, and utilitarian features, these were dispersed throughout the landscape rather than concentrated in centers. Instead, Wright reversed the usual hierarchy by allocating the largest number of lots to houses and by platting these lots in the choicest, centre section of the plan. Wright believed that with their status as the central element in society thus affirmed, the citizens of Broadacre City would regain control of their lives, thus correcting the central flaw in the contemporary urban experience. Wright envisioned a utopia of human scale with home in the center.

Wright established the design ideas that were the basis of his organic architecture early in his career and spent the rest of his life refining them in an almost endless variety of forms. Above all, he advocated simplicity and integrity, often citing the wildflower as an example of something that exhibited a perfect unity of form, structure and aesthetics with nothing extraneous. More specifically, organic architecture was characterized by plasticity, an expressive flow of continuous space, and by continuity, in which form and function, aesthetics and structure are one. His work was grounded in an appreciation of the variety in nature and the need for each building to relate to its environment, and he welcomed technology and new materials because they allowed for a greater expression of continuity. Wright held that buildings should appear to grow from their sites, expand the horizontal line, harmonize with their surroundings, reveal the nature of their materials, and employ natural ornamentation.

During his long career, Wright worked on well over one-thousand projects including houses, office buildings, churches, schools, libraries, bridges, stores, and museums. Of these projects, an estimated 430 were seen to completion (not including work that may have been done on projects with other principal architects) and a vast majority of these are still standing.⁵ Wright pursued these projects during five chronological periods that provide a flexible framework for comprehending the constancy and change in his work over time. The divisions are as follows: Early Period (1890-1900), First Mature Period or Golden Age (1900-12), Second Period (1913-29), Third Period (1930-41), and Fourth Period or Second Golden Age (1941-59).

Wright's Fourth Period or Second Golden Age saw the creation of a group of monumental buildings, all but one public and urban, which embody his ideas about architecture and design to an exceptional degree. These buildings, which include the S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc., Research Tower (Racine, WI, 1944; NHL, 1976), the First Unitarian Society Meeting House (Shorewood Hills, WI, 1949; NHL, 2004), the Beth Shalom Synagogue (Elkins Park, PA, 1954; NHL, 2007), and the Guggenheim Museum, are among his best-known and highly regarded works. These commissions gave him the opportunity to realize, on a grand scale and in public forum, his ideas about program, form, structure, and materials. They are also major works of art in that they were canvases upon which he realized his Romantic vision of self. If the Usonian house was Wright's most concise statement about the individual citizen, these were his most concise statements about himself as an artist. At the time of the Guggenheim Museum commission, Frank Lloyd Wright was enjoying a major resurgence of his career, life, and fame. In its temporary quarters, the Guggenheim Museum exhibited his work as *Sixty Years of Living Architecture: The Work of Frank Lloyd Wright* (1953) and his own writing at the time included *Genius and the Mobocracy* (1949), *The Future of Architecture* (1953), *The Natural House* (1954), and *The Story of the Tower: The Tree That Escaped the Crowded Forest* (1956). Soon after Wright's death in April 1959, *The New York Times* called for measures to be taken to preserve the evidence of Wright's "immortal greatness."⁶ This article made "an earnest plea" for architectural historians to acknowledge a handful of Wright's most influential buildings and lay the foundations for their future preservation. The following month, *Architectural Record*

⁵ For a catalog of Wright's work, see: William Allin Storrer, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright: A Complete Catalog* (1978) (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995).

⁶ Aline Saarinen, "Preserving Wright's Architecture," *New York Times*, April 19, 1959, X-17.

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mentioned the joint effort between the American Institute of Architects and the National Trust for Historic Preservation to select properties of significance “to the nation” that should be “preserved in their original form”—among them was the Guggenheim Museum.⁷

Nonobjective Art

The history of the Guggenheim is closely tied to the history of its collection. “Non-Objective” art refers to a specific genre of non-representational painting that developed in Europe in the 1910s. Nonobjective artists aspired to represent a spiritual reality rather than a temporal one. These artists, primarily Russian and German painters, were influenced by Rudolf Steiner, a German philosopher who believed that art was a vehicle for understanding the spiritual.⁸ Literally, the term Nonobjective was intended to describe art without an object, a description that conveys its disciples’ alienation from the material world and their underlying doubt about its reality. Their unease with the visual world extended even to a nature, which they perceived as unbearably chaotic; they held that the only way to establish any sort of control over such an uncertain or chaotic world was to shed materiality for a purely spiritual state. Thus, Nonobjective painters attempted to embody spirituality using imagery that was not derived from anything found in nature. Hilla Rebay, a German artist who emigrated to America in 1927 and became Guggenheim’s advisor on art and, later, the museum’s first curator, stated that Non-Objective painting “represents no object or subject known to us on earth.”⁹ In this aspect, these painters differed from Abstract Expressionists, who used images that were abstractions or interpretation of natural forms.

Without imagery derived from the visual world, Nonobjective artists were left with the task of creating art embodying universal laws using only patterns that originated in their own minds. Their paintings relied on colorful combinations of shape patterns in which identifiable subjects disappeared and formal qualities were meaningful only as they represented the artist’s feelings. In working out a way to represent their spiritual lives visually, these artists drew upon the theories of Gestalt psychologists, who postured that that shape, color, and spatial organization could produce specific effects, suggesting that meaning may be intrinsic to forms themselves, independent of their context.¹⁰ Vasily Kandinsky (1866-1944), one of the most important Nonobjective artists, compared colors to musical tones and shapes to emotional states.¹¹ As he explained in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), “painters can revive the inner spirit and give it some objective representation by utilizing the natural association between colors and spiritual states. Colors suggest sounds, order and moods. Some...are rough and sticky, others are smooth and uniform.”¹² The idea of trying to give form to the “purest” spiritual reality suggests a quest for the absolute. Their rhetoric implied that these artists saw themselves as mediums through which an all-embracing spiritual energy could be transmitted. In this they also distinguished themselves from Abstract Expressionists, whose work relied on the expression of a personal relationship with higher powers (the sublime). In addition to Kandinsky, the most well-known Nonobjective

⁷ “Watch on Wright’s Landmarks,” 9. *Architectural Record* reported in 1959: “In the first such joint effort in their history, the American Institute of Architects and the National Trust for Historic Preservation have selected sixteen buildings by Frank Lloyd Wright for recommendation ‘to the nation’ as important landmarks in American architectural history which ought to be preserved in their original form. This action, which in effect sets up a national watch over the buildings named, was formalized...less than three months after Wright’s death.”

⁸ Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *The Visual Arts: A History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1986), 597.

⁹ As quoted in *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Guggenheim Correspondence*, ed. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (Fresno, CA: Press at California State University, Fresno, and Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 1986), 28.

¹⁰ Honour and Fleming, *Visual Arts*, 597.

¹¹ Thomas Krens, “The Genesis of a Museum: A History of the Guggenheim,” in *Art of the Century: The Guggenheim Museum and Its Collections* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1993), 8.

¹² As quoted in Honour and Fleming, *Visual Arts*, 597.

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artists included Rudolf Brauer, Robert Delaunay, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.

Hilla Rebay (1890-1967) introduced Nonobjective art to the United States upon her arrival in 1927. Rebay had been strongly influenced by Nonobjective artists, in particular Kandinsky and Bauer. She had exhibited her own paintings in Europe as early as 1917 and had her first American show in 1927. Rebay embraced Nonobjective art as both a style and an aesthetic philosophy and, once in the United States, she devoted herself to promoting an appreciation of the genre in America.¹³ Rebay coined the term “Nonobjective,” which was a loose translation of the German word “gegenstandlos,” or “object-less,” in a 1936 catalog for a traveling exhibit of the collection she had assembled for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.¹⁴ The success of this exhibit ultimately culminated in the construction of a museum entirely devoted to Nonobjective art.

The Guggenheim Collection

The Guggenheim was one of three important museums devoted exclusively to Modern art that opened in New York during the first decades of the twentieth century. All three were established through the interest and support of wealthy patrons and each was slightly different in focus. The Whitney Museum of American Art, the earliest of the three, grew out of the collections of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, who began acquiring the work of contemporary American artists in 1908. Whitney opened her first gallery in 1914 and the collection outgrew several spaces before the Whitney Museum, designed by Marcel Breuer, opened on Madison Avenue in 1966.¹⁵ A group led by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Lillie P. Bliss, and Mary Sullivan founded the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1929. Unlike the Whitney, MoMA’s collection was not limited to American artists and it included a full range of the visual arts, including painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, prints, books, and films. Rockefeller donated a large portion of her personal collections of Modern art to MoMA, and the Rockefeller family subsequently endowed the museum with a substantial purchase fund. MoMA also moved several times to accommodate expanding collections until 1939, when it built the first portion of its current home on West 53rd Street. Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durrell Stone designed the original building and the institution has been added to and portions renovated over time by Philip Johnson, Cesar Pelli & Associates, and, most recently, Yoshio Taniguchi.

Although the Guggenheim Museum considerably broadened the scope of its collection after Hilla Rebay’s tenure as curator ended in the early 1950s, it was distinctive as an institution premised on a single aesthetic philosophy and in its collection of exclusively European art. The singular nature of the museum’s collection reflected the influence of Rebay, whose passion for Non-Objective art was based on her belief in its power to advance civilization. Rebay described the progression from objective to Non-Objective art as a “step forward from the materialistic to the spiritual” and called Non-Objectivity the “religion of the future.”¹⁶ To promote a social transformation of this scale, Rebay envisioned a home for Guggenheim’s collection that would be more than a gallery. She described the commission as a “museum-temple,” a building in which there would be space both to exhibit art (galleries) and to create it (studios).¹⁷ Her concept for the museum also included a library, a movie theater, and a shop to sell educational materials and reproductions, all to a constant soundtrack of classical music.¹⁸ Rebay’s ideas about the building program evidently influenced her patron’s goals for the

¹³ Krens, “The Genesis of a Museum,” 7.

¹⁴ Hilla Rebay, “Definition of Non-Objective Painting,” in *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings, an Exhibition from March 1, 1936 through April 12, 1936, Presented by the Carolina Art Association at the Gibbes Memorial Art Gallery, Charleston, South Carolina* (New York: The Bradford Press, Inc., 1936).

¹⁵ The Whitney Museum was determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986.

¹⁶ Krens, “The Genesis of a Museum,” 7; Brendan Gill, *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: G. Putnam’s Sons, 1987), 43.

¹⁷ New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, “Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Designation Report,” 1989, 6.

¹⁸ Gill, *Many Masks*, 432.

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project. SRG embraced the idea that they were creating something completely new, telling Wright when they met in 1943 that “no such building as is now customary for museums could be appropriate for this one.”¹⁹

As the Guggenheim’s founder and first director, Rebay exercised rigid control over the growth of the collection, the development of exhibits, and the design of exhibition space. This was natural given her intimate role in the development of SRG’s collection; however, his 1949 death coincided with a movement to expand the museum’s program, which was led by artists and critics who failed to appreciate the transformative powers of Non-Objective art and saw its singular aesthetic as limited and retardataire. Aline Louchheim (later Saarinen), art critic for the *New York Times*, dubbed the museum an “esoteric, occult place in which a mystic language was spoken.”²⁰ Harry Guggenheim, SRG’s nephew and the new president of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, created by SRG in 1937 to administer the collection, responded with the announcement that programming would henceforth also include examples of objective art.²¹ This pronounced change in administration was not enough to shift the institutional culture that had flourished for so long under Rebay’s influence, and in 1952, she was replaced by James Johnson Sweeney.

Sweeney, a dedicated Modernist, immediately replaced a number of the staff assembled under Rebay’s direction and added works by a wide range of Modern artists, including a number of important works of Abstract Expressionism and sculpture. He also exhibited works from Guggenheim’s collection that had been placed in long-term storage because they did not fit within Rebay’s narrow definition of the museum’s program.²² In dismissing Non-Objective art, he also dismissed the “spiritual” function of the museum building itself, a position that was to affect the execution of Frank Lloyd Wright’s design.

The Sweeney era marked the beginning of the Guggenheim’s redefinition as an important repository of pre-Modern, Modern, and contemporary art. In about 1959, H. H. Arnason succeeded Sweeney, serving temporarily until 1961 and continuing Sweeney’s acquisition program. During his short tenure, Arnason was noted for mounting the first survey of Abstract Expressionism by a New York museum.²³ Thomas M. Messer, director from 1961 to 1988, furthered the effort to develop a modern facility and a professional staff. In addition to expanding its collection of Modern art, Messer steered the museum toward the work of contemporary artists like Francis Bacon, Robert Rauschenberg, and David Smith, as well as works by Latin American and Eastern European artists. In 1963, the acquisition to the Justin K. Thannhauser Collection gave the Guggenheim a number of Impressionist, Post-Impressionist and Modern French masterpieces, as well as works by Picasso and other artists whose work predated the examples of early Modern art that formed the core of the museum’s collection. In 1992, with the gift of the Robert Mapplethorpe Collection, the museum acquired its first collection of twentieth-century photography.

Guggenheim, Rebay, and the Wright Commission

Solomon R. Guggenheim (1861-1949) was a member of a Swiss family that made its fortune investing in silver, copper, and gold mines in the American West. The family immigrated to America in 1847 and moved to New York in 1889. Solomon Guggenheim married Irene Rothschild, and the couple participated in many philanthropic endeavors involving the arts. The Guggenheims also became avid patrons and collectors. Their interest in Non-Objective art was kindled by Hilla Rebay. Irene Rothschild Guggenheim had become friendly with Rebay after purchasing some works from her first American show. In 1927, Rebay painted Solomon

¹⁹ Frank Lloyd Wright to Harry Guggenheim, 14 May 1952, in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, 169.

²⁰ As quoted in Krens, “The Genesis of a Museum,” 11.

²¹ Krens, “The Genesis of a Museum,” 8.

²² *Ibid.*, 11-12.

²³ *Ibid.*, 19.

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Guggenheim's portrait; subsequently, she became his principal advisor and, later, curator of his collection. Rebay accompanied the Guggenheims on trips to Europe, where she introduced them to the school of experimental painters whose work she championed. There Guggenheim made many important purchases, including, in 1930, the first of more than one hundred works by Kandinsky that he eventually acquired. Other early acquisitions include works by Bauer, Chagall, Delaunay, Leger, Modigliani, Moholy-Nagy, and Mondrian. These paintings became the nucleus of a private collection that quickly outgrew its owners' ability to store it. By 1933, Guggenheim was seeking permanent housing for the collection, considering such sites as a proposed extension of Rockefeller Center and a pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair.²⁴ By 1937, when he created the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation for the "promotion and encouragement and education in art and the enlightenment of the public," SRG was contemplating constructing a museum specifically devoted to his collection.²⁵ In 1939, Rebay curated an exhibition in a temporary gallery, which opened as the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, in a building on East 54th Street. For this initial public showing, Rebay chose only what she considered to be the purest examples of Non-Objective art from Guggenheim's collection.²⁶ The success of this gallery, as well as that of several traveling exhibitions from the collection in the late 1930s, encouraged the foundation to pursue construction of a permanent museum.

As she helped Guggenheim assemble his collection, Rebay had put considerable thought into the choice of an architect for what she described as a "temple of Non-Objective art." She discussed such a project with important European artists and architects, including Kandinsky, LeCorbusier, Gropius, and Breuer, and she had been impressed with Austrian-born architect Frederick Kiesler, whose work incorporated organic forms and who had conceived a theoretical design for a fourteen-story windowless museum. In America, Nelson Rockefeller had also expressed an interest in the project, proposing that a museum designed by Wallace K. Harrison be constructed adjacent to MoMA. The latter idea apparently fell through when appropriate land could not be acquired.²⁷ Finally, in May 1943, serious planning for the museum began in earnest, Rebay asked Moholy-Nagy for a suggestion. The latter responded with a list that, in addition to himself, included LeCorbusier, Neutra, Keck, Aalto, Lescaze.²⁸

Although arguably a German architect might have been the most appropriate choice for a museum largely devoted to a collection of European avant-garde paintings, Rebay, a German citizen, was dissuaded from further consideration of this distinguished group of European Modernists by the advent of World War II.²⁹ Rebay turned her attention to American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who she had admired since viewing and exhibition of his work in Germany in 1910.³⁰ In June 1943, Rebay wrote to Wright, requesting that he "come to New York and discuss with me a building for our collection of Non-Objective paintings."³¹ In her letter, Rebay discussed the nature of the collection and her ideas for the building. She appealed both to the architect's ego and to his spiritual side, telling him that she needed a "lover of space, an originator, a tester and wise man"

²⁴ Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins, and David Fishman, *New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial* (New York: Monacelli Press, Inc., 1995), 808.

²⁵ As quoted in Krens, "The Genesis of a Museum," 8.

²⁶ Krens, "The Genesis of a Museum," 8.

²⁷ Gill, *Many Masks*, 432-33.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Gill, *Many Masks*, 433.

³⁰ Hilla Rebay to Frank Lloyd Wright, 1 Jun. 1943, in *The Guggenheim Correspondence*, 4: "In Berlin I once saw your exhibition which Mendelsohn arranged I believe—whose Einstein tower I witnessed. His functionalism does not agree with non-objectivity. I met once your sister in Belcourt, and she told me you would be interested in our work." Hilla Rebay to Frank Lloyd Wright, 1 Jun. 1943, in *The Guggenheim Correspondence*, 4: "Your three books which I am reading now gave me the feeling that no one else would do. I may not be wrong if you want to. And so I need your great advice."

³¹ Hilla Rebay to Frank Lloyd Wright, 1 Jun. 1943, in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, 4.

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and that she wanted “a temple of spirit, a monument.”³² Wright’s response expressed both his interest in the project and his appreciation for the opportunity; by the end of the month he had met with Rebay and Guggenheim in New York and signed a contract for \$750,000 (not including purchase of the site).³³

Although Wright began to conceptualize a design immediately, he was hampered by the fact that Guggenheim had not yet acquired a site for the building. Over the next few months Wright participated in the site selection process, touring New York with Robert Moses and discussing the project with John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Although the architect pressed for consideration of an expansive eight-acre site on Henry Hudson Parkway offered by Moses, the client’s preference for mid-town location led FLW to consider a number of sites on 54th Street, Park Avenue, and Madison Avenue. None of these proved satisfactory and Wright was especially vocal in his objection to sites that were tightly enclosed within the streetscape.³⁴ However, the client’s wishes, along with the high cost of land in mid-town Manhattan, motivated Wright to reconceive his design concept for a more compact site in a densely built-up area, and at the end of 1943, he wrote to SRG that he could “see a tall building of a new type perfectly appropriate to our purpose, having monumental dignity and great beauty, requiring about half the ground area we have been looking for.”³⁵

Even before the site had been selected, Wright’s correspondence reflects the fact that he was also considering a design in terms of the building’s specific function of housing Non-Objective art, and that he viewed his task as to create an optimal environment in which to appreciate the collection. In a letter to Rebay, he wrote:

If Non-Objective art is to have any great future it must be related to environment (...). And to flat background of various tonalities suited to the paintings. The less texture in the background the better. A museum should have above all a clear atmosphere of light and sympathetic surface. Frames were always an expedient that segregated and masked the paintings off from environment to its own loss of relationship and proportion.³⁶

Wright referred the museum as an “Archeseum,” a building in which to see the highest.”³⁷ The phrase was reminiscent of Rebay’s “museum temple,” suggesting that the architect shared Rebay’s belief that space could inspire a spiritual experience.

In March 1944, Guggenheim acquired a vacant site on Fifth Avenue at the southeast corner of East 89th Street. Although this was still too far uptown for Rebay, FLW was struck by the possibilities offered by its location across from Central Park, “...which ensures light, fresh air, and advantages in every way but one...congestion.”³⁸ In fact, Wright was so enthused he told Rebay that the design as he conceived it “suits the plot even better than the imaginary one.”³⁹ In reassuring Rebay, FLW also appealed to her idea about the building’s higher purpose, telling her that “one seeker of significant truth who has the desire to find it is better for us than any amount of merely curious hoi-polloi only seeking sensation.”⁴⁰

³² Ibid.

³³ Frank Lloyd Wright to Hilla Rebay, 10 June 1943; Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation to Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, 29 June 1943, both in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, 4-5 and 8-9.

³⁴ Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 809.

³⁵ Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 809; Frank Lloyd Wright to Solomon R. Guggenheim, 31 Dec. 1943, in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, 25.

³⁶ Frank Lloyd Wright to Hilla Rebay, 20 Jan. 1944, in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, 40.

³⁷ Frank Lloyd Wright to James Johnson Sweeney, 5 Oct. 1955, in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, 215.

³⁸ Frank Lloyd Wright to Hilla Rebay, 13 Mar. 1944, in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, 44-45.

³⁹ Frank Lloyd Wright to Hilla Rebay, 23 Mar. 1944, as quoted in Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 809.

⁴⁰ Frank Lloyd Wright to Hilla Rebay, 13 Mar. 1944, in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, 44-45.

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By July 1944, SGR had approved FLW's preliminary sketches and advanced the architect \$21,000 to initiate design work.⁴¹ Wright later recalled his client was more than satisfied with what he saw, excitedly saying: "Mr. Wright, I knew you would do it. This is it."⁴² With this vote of confidence, Wright went ahead with preparing working drawings. The following year, SRG purchased an additional thirty-foot lot on Fifth Avenue, permitting the architect to stretch out the horizontal elements of the design, and on September 7, 1945, the first twenty-nine sheets and thirteen structural drawings were signed.⁴³ By the time he presented a design to Guggenheim, Wright had made sketches and drawings for several different versions of the museum. These show variations in the choice of geometric forms, the arrangement of components, the use of color, and the choice of material; however, there were several consistent elements, including a design based on sculptural forms, the use of geometric modules and interlocking design elements, a large open volume with enclosing galleries, and light from indirect sources. Although all of these elements characterize the building as constructed, the design process was far from complete in 1945. Rather, as the project inched toward construction over the next fourteen years, the proposed shape, color, materials, and structural system of the building changed, the size of the lot and the siting of the building shifted, and the building program was affected by a significant turnover in the museum administration, a change in its philosophy, and the death of both client and architect.

Curator Versus Architect

In the first eighteen months after preliminary approval, many design changes were made to accommodate Rebay's more expansive thinking about the museum's permanent collection, a theater to show Non-Objective films, and a restaurant. Wright also altered details of the design in response to her objections, removing a roof garden because Rebay thought New York's air too dirty and changing the exterior palette because she objected to the color red.⁴⁴ Rebay also expressed reservations about more essential components of the design, including the proposals for sloping walls in the main gallery and indirect lighting, and by 1947, she had begun to question the choice of Wright himself as the most appropriate architect, accusing him of building "a great monument to yourself" and confessing that she could not "visualize how much (or how little) it will do for the paintings."⁴⁵ She took the opportunity to remind the architect that "a monument to painting...is our main interest."⁴⁶ The roots of the conflict between architect and curator reflect a struggle over which of them had the authority to interpret the program. In retrospect, it seems inevitable that Wright and Rebay would come into conflict. Each had a strong personality, a deep commitment to the project, and passionate ideas about art; however, their philosophical orientations were in direct opposition. Where Rebay, as a Non-Objectivist, sought an ideal truth, Wright sought an individual one.

While the design evolved and the debate between architect and curator continued, the client put the project on hold through 1947 and 1948 because the budget exceeded the one-million dollars he had originally allocated to it. During this time, the Guggenheim Foundation proposed moving the Museum of Non-Objective Painting from its leased space on East 54th Street to a temporary building it intended to construct on East 88th Street. To counter what he may have perceived as a threat to his commission, Wright proposed construction of a temporary building on a portion of the lot and prepared preliminary sketches for a design. Referring to this narrow structure as the "Annex," FLW suggested that it could eventually be attached to the larger building and adapted to serve as living space for the curator. Although the temporary museum building was not constructed,

⁴¹ Solomon R. Guggenheim to Frank Lloyd Wright, 27 Jul. 1944, in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, 49.

⁴² Frank Lloyd Wright to Harry Guggenheim, 14 May 1952, in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, 169.

⁴³ Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, "A Temple of the Spirit," in *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1995), 21.

⁴⁴ Hilla Rebay to Frank Lloyd Wright, 19 Jun. 1945, as quoted in Gill, 439.

⁴⁵ Hilla Rebay to Frank Lloyd Wright, 22 Oct. 1949, as quoted in Stern et al., 811.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

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the idea served as the inspiration for the ten-story building that Wright later added to the design.⁴⁷ Instead of moving into a Wright-designed annex, the museum relocated to a nearby townhouse at 1071 Fifth Avenue. In 1947-48, the latter building was acquired, gutted, and converted to a temporary museum by William Muschenheim, who had assisted Rebay with the design of the 54th Street gallery.⁴⁸

Despite this apparent setback, SRG remained committed to the Wright design, assuring the architect's anxious wife that "The House of Guggenheim never goes back on its word—the museum will be built."⁴⁹ Unfortunately, Guggenheim died on November 3, 1949 without having put similarly unambiguous language in his will. Following his benefactor's death, the museum was renamed the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in his honor; however, the lack of specific written instructions from SRG emboldened some of the museum's trustees and staff who were unhappy with both Wright's design and Hilla Rebay's direction to use this opportunity to dismiss them both. The project was further threatened by the Fifth Avenue Association's decision to object to the Wright design in 1950.⁵⁰ In the end, FLW's design won the support of the new foundation president, Harry G. Guggenheim, the client's nephew, as well as that of SRG's daughter and son-in-law, prompting Wright to request that an additional parcel of land on Fifth Avenue be acquired, enlarging the site to include the entire blockfront between 88th and 89th Streets. This purchase was completed in 1951 and SRG's estate was settled in 1952, thus allowing the release of funds for the building's construction. The year 1952 also saw Hilla Rebay's resignation as curator. Although Rebay was apparently suffering from ill health, her resignation had been requested by the trustees after repeated conflicts with Harry Guggenheim, who wanted to diversify the collection and effect a major change in the museum's program.

A New Curator, a New Direction, and the Existing Museum Commission

When James Johnson Sweeney arrived as the new curator for the Guggenheim collection, the museum commission was in its ninth year and Wright had already established the basic sizes, shapes, and organization of the museum building. Although Wright and Rebay clashed over the execution of the building program, their collaboration had begun with a shared purpose—to create a sacred space that would enhance appreciation of the art it housed. Both envisioned a museum that would reflect the unity of art and architecture. FLW expressed this poetically in a letter to Harry Guggenheim, referring to "the building and the paintings as an interrupted symphony such as never existed in the world of Art before."⁵¹ Wright and Sweeney established no such rapport. As a museum professional, Sweeney viewed the art of the building as subservient to that of the collection. His goal was to construct a museum that would provide a perfect physical environment for paintings rather than a spiritual context for their appreciation. Sweeney's ideal museum was more clinic than church, and he insisted that the design be changed to accommodate additional curatorial and administrative services, places in which to record and care for the collection.

Although FLW altered the interior plan to include the functional spaces demanded by Sweeney, the two reached an impasse over the design of the main gallery space in the rotunda, which both viewed as the heart of the building. Sweeney's Modernist sensibilities also dictated a different approach to art appreciation than that of the Non-Objectivists. He saw paintings as self-explanatory aesthetic objects and designed installations based on their formal or visual qualities, not their subjective or thematic associations.⁵² Similarly, he was not interested in creating a relationship between painting and viewer and even advocated removing explanatory labels. In his redesign of the temporary museum space at 1071 Fifth Avenue, Sweeney had replaced

⁴⁷ Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 811.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 812.

⁴⁹ As quoted in Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 812.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Frank Lloyd Wright to Harry Guggenheim, 15 Jul. 1958, in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, 270.

⁵² Krens, "The Genesis of a Museum," 11-19.

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Muschenheim and Rebay's dark tones and plush fabrics with clean white surfaces. He advocated similar finishes for the rotunda of the new museum, stark white walls and artificially controlled lighting that would create a neutral environment, pragmatic rather than atmospheric, and proposed adding support rods to the sloping rotunda walls so that the paintings could "float" free from the building and parallel to the floor.⁵³ In a way, Sweeney chose an arbitrary relationship between paintings and building over a subjective one between painting and viewer.

Wright's interior design for the gallery had been premised on providing a contemplative space in which to encourage the visitor to relate personally to the art. In a statement opposing Sweeney's preference for stable, controlled environments, the architect told the curator that "any painting in a fixed light is only a 'fixed' picture." He went on to equate something fixed in an ideal state with death.⁵⁴ As Wright designed it, the form of the gallery, with its narrow ramp and low ceilings, created a public space that was human in scale. The partitions that were later added to the design for structural reasons enhanced the sense of intimacy by dividing the spiraling ramp into "rooms" or niches, today called bays. Wright also wanted to create a "space in which to view the painter's creation truthfully...in the varying light as seen by the painter and in which it was born to be seen."⁵⁵ As such he planned the gallery so that natural lighting would flow from above the paintings (the main skylight, or "oculus") and from behind them (narrow window bands, or "laylights"). The walls were to be painted soft colors, which Wright viewed as sympathetic to the art rather than competitive, and the sloping walls were intended to replicate the angle of an easel.⁵⁶ The latter gave the viewer the same perspective as the artists, almost as if in viewing the painting, the museum-goer were him or herself engaged in the act of creating it.

In 1958, Wright prepared a series of perspectives showing how he envisioned the installation of a variety of sample exhibits for different types of paintings. These show not only the paintings as he hoped they would be mounted but the way that visitors might position themselves to view them. People, alone or in small groups, are depicted studying the paintings from different spots, as well as leisurely contemplating them from hassocks and benches. Nearly all of them are looking at the paintings rather than each other, and their poses suggest that they are engaged in a relaxed and thoughtful activity. Although Wright worked until his death to change Sweeney's mind, the curator was unyielding, and the museum opened with stark white walls and paintings installed in the "detached" arrangement that Sweeney preferred. Wright was vindicated only a few years later when Sweeney's successor, H. H. Aranson, had the gallery repainted in an off-white color.⁵⁷

New York City Weighs-in on the Museum

While this dispute raged on, preparation for construction went forward. During this time, FLW continued to work on revising and improving the design. Features and motifs were subtly changed to reflect the architect's continuing refinement of the design concept. Several alterations to the plan were requested by Sweeney while other changes were made to keep the building within budget. Still other design revisions were made in response to concerns raised by the New York City Department of Buildings. Upon its first review of the proposal in 1952, the department voiced objections related to thirty-two building regulations. Arthur Holden, of Holden, McLaughlin & Associates, was assigned the task of working with municipal authorities on building code issues. After resolving as many issues as possible, the architects forwarded the plans to the Board of Standards and Appeals to obtain needed variances for the others.⁵⁸ Among the most serious obstacles to

⁵³ Ibid, 19.

⁵⁴ Frank Lloyd Wright to James Johnson Sweeney, 5 Oct. 1955, in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, 214-15.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 215.

⁵⁶ For a discussion of Wright's decision for color see: Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, 248.

⁵⁷ As part of the 1992 rehabilitation, the gallery was repainted in a scheme similar to the one FLW originally specified.

⁵⁸ New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, "Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Designation Report," 1989, 9.

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construction was the city building department's uneasiness with Wright's proposal for coiled concrete cantilever. In response, FLW and structural engineer Jacob Feld worked out a solution (ca. 1954) in which twelve slender vertical structural partitions were inserted into the spiral to serve as stiffeners.⁵⁹

Meanwhile, in the fall 1953, a notable event drew the public's attention to the site, the architect, and the proposed museum. A traveling exhibition of Wright's work, "Sixty Years of Living Architecture," was installed in a temporary pavilion constructed on the site of the new museum, adjacent to the collection's temporary home at 1071 Fifth Avenue. This display included drawings, models, photos, murals, furniture, and decorative objects representing Wright's vast oeuvre. Sponsored by Gimball's Department Store, the exhibition had opened in Philadelphia in 1951 and toured Europe before returning to New York where it ran for a month beginning at the end of October 1953. Unique to the New York installation was the construction of a full-size model of one of Wright's Usonian houses, which had been specifically designed for the exhibit and built by David Henkin, a Taliesin fellow. The Usonian house was a central element to Wright's Broadacre City plan, his conception of a radically rearranged American city premised on the individual, and its appearance at this exhibition suggests Wright was using the forum to make a statement about the city. In the midst of a densely developed, affluent neighborhood in the world's largest metropolis, Wright had constructed a small single-family house intended for the middle-class market. Was this a subversive attempt to plot the seeds of a reformed America in Manhattan, or was he simply establishing an authoritative hold on the site claiming his right to build on it what he thought most appropriate?⁶⁰

In 1954, when construction seemed imminent, FLW established a New York City office headed by Taliesin architect William Wesley Peters. Later the same year, the architect himself took up residence at the Plaza Hotel in order to personally supervise construction; however, once construction began, Wright appointed William Short, of Holden, McLaughlin & Associates (the firm that had shepherd the design through the city building department) to provide on-site supervision. In 1955, after receiving five bids for construction, Wright selected builder George Cohen of the Euclid Construction Company and the city issued the building permit on May 23, 1956. Ground was broken three months later on August 15, 1956, continuing through 1957 and topping out in May 1958. During the construction, the temporary museum at 1071 Fifth Avenue relocated to a building on East 72nd Street.

The last days of construction were anxious ones for critics and designers. During late 1956 and 1957, numerous prominent critics and artists—including Hilton Kramer, Lewis Mumford, Milton Avery, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, among others—were outspoken in their criticism of both the building itself and the galleries. In December 1956 a group of twenty-one artists, primarily Abstract Expressionists from the New York school, went so far as to file a formal objection with the museum's trustees and administration.⁶¹ Offering an alternate point of view, the *New York Times* published an article by Aline B. Saarinen, formerly Louchheim, in which she reported that the incomplete building had already acquired a large public following and was particularly popular with students, who frequented the site hoping "to get a glimpse of...the world's best known living architect."⁶² Saarinen also reported on a tour of the building led by Wright himself during which the architect celebrated the museum's design and siting, particularly its relationship to Central Park. Wright

⁵⁹ Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 814.

⁶⁰ After the exhibition closed, the pavilion was demolished and the Usonian house was dismantled.

⁶¹ Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 815. "While Harry Guggenheim's reply was temperate, Wright was characteristically caustic: "I am sufficiently familiar with the incubus of habit that besets your minds to understand that you all know too little of the nature of the mother art- architecture." Frank Lloyd Wright quoted in "The Guggenheim Chides Critics of Museum," *New York Times*, December 22, 1956, 2.

⁶² As quoted in Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 815.

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boasted that the museum was the only building on Fifth Avenue that “sees” the park.⁶³

In his last written comment about the design in May 1958, Wright described the building as “a unique quiet retreat where the collection of the ‘Non-Objective’...art...could be greatly expanded.”⁶⁴ The architect was confident that he had fulfilled Guggenheim’s mandate and that the latter had “envisioned a museum pretty much as it stands. Unique, a genuine intelligent experiment in museum-culture where pictures could be better seen with less discomfort in an atmosphere peculiarly belonging to the free form of art [Guggenheim] loved for itself.”⁶⁵ Although Wright succeeded in guiding his vision virtually to completion, he did not live to see the museum’s opening day. He made his last visit to New York in January 1959 and died three months later. The opening of the museum was celebrated with an elaborate event on October 20, 1959, and the public was admitted to the building the next day. The building aroused tremendous interest and crowds gathered in long lines. Newspapers reported an opening day attendance of three thousand.⁶⁶

Frank Lloyd Wright’s Design Concept for the Guggenheim Museum

Wright conceived the Guggenheim Museum as a complete entity and described it as a “unique building...so symphonic in character that the least discord at any point echoes throughout the entire structure.”⁶⁷ The actual design evolved throughout the last decade of Wright’s career, assuming its final form only just before it was constructed. A study of Wright’s drawings for the museum executed between 1943 and 1957 illustrates the liberation of his aesthetic imagination as he abstracted and synthesized the formal idea of the museum. The delicate spiraling form of the museum’s final design emerges gradually from within the more awkward rectangular forms of the earliest designs, much like a sculpture chiseled from a block of marble. From the beginning, the overall form suggests the general style and massing of the piece but barely hints at the nuances that the artist developed as the commission evolved.

In Wright’s first drawings, from 1943, the rotunda is angular in character; in one perspective it takes a hexagonal shape. Corners are prominent; the building has jagged edges. In perspectives and elevations completed in 1944, the form has been softened and the spiral appears; however, it is balanced with strong rectangular shapes on the north and east ends and a very strong bridge. In the model of 1946, round forms are more pronounced but they emerge from a large rectangular base that competes with the more distinctive components above. Not until the early 1950s does the composition begin to show an overall smoothness and singularity. These details were gradually refined, and this continuity extends even to the smallest details of the end product. Wright described the final appearance of the Guggenheim as an “unbroken wave—no meeting of the eye with angular or abrupt changes of form. All is one.”⁶⁸

As built, the Guggenheim Museum expresses a harmony born from the balanced integration of simple forms and the exploitation of natural patterns. The preponderance of circular and ovoid shapes without beginnings or ends, the delicacy and seamlessness of the cast Gunitite shell, and the bold cantilevers all communicate an internal continuity of form and structure. From the earliest stage of his career, Wright experimented with combinations of non-rectilinear shapes, from asymmetrically related rectangles to triangles, hexagons, spirals and circles. As Wright moved closer to synthesizing the tenets of his belief in organic unity, he appeared to settle on the circle as its most appropriate symbol. His designs of the late 1940s and 50s, in particular, are characterized by integrated spiraling and circular forms. Wright also employed circles in his planned

⁶³ Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 815.

⁶⁴ As quoted in Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 815.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 815.

⁶⁷ Frank Lloyd Wright to Hilla Rebay, 12 May 1945, in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, 60.

⁶⁸ As quoted in “Frank Lloyd Wright’s Masterwork,” *Architectural Forum* 96 (April 1952): 141-44 (reprint).

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communities, where they defined individual lots as well as providing modules for individual house designs. Indeed, near the end of his life, Wright stated that “there is no square in nature—nature knows only circular forms.”⁶⁹

The subtle asymmetrical balance of the rotunda and monitor—the larger holding the smaller one in place—and the relationship of both to the triangular service core that anchors the entire building convey the impression of natural growth in harmony with nature. The integration of the circular rotunda and the triangular service core is a concept that Wright developed in one of his earliest designs, the 1896 “Romeo and Juliet” windmill, which is composed of an interlocking octagon and diamond, each of which is necessary for the structural integrity of the building. A similar concept was used for the Price Tower, in which the plan is formed around the intersection of a larger square and a smaller rectangle. Both Romeo and Juliet and the Price Tower relied on what Wright called “Taproot” construction. The windmill is anchored by a deep wooden post where the two sections intersect, while the structure of the Price Tower is defined by a deep steel reinforced concrete shaft with cantilevered floors. In both of these buildings the architect combined form and structure into a unified design. The design of the Guggenheim expressed an even more refined concept, as Wright intended the rotunda to take the form of a single cantilevered spiral with “no inside independent of the outside structure as one flows into and is of the other.”⁷⁰ Like the wildflower, the Guggenheim combined form, structure and materials into a seamless whole.

The spiral is a form of the circle that implies movement. One of the first commissions in which FLW employed a spiral was the unbuilt Gordon Strong Automobile Objective (1925), essentially a folly that was defined by a road spiraling around Sugarloaf Mountain outside Washington, D.C., to a planetarium at the top. The spiral can also be likened to the serpentine, the so-called line of nature, which had been used to represent diversity since the eighteenth century (as with Thomas Jefferson’s garden walls at the University of Virginia). At the Guggenheim, Wright’s use of the spiral may have been his attempt to refit the endless, expansive line of the prairie to the small urban lot, capturing the expansive horizontal flow of continuous movement in the spiraling and rising rotunda. The spiral also serves as the main gallery space. Wright intended the building as an environment in which patrons could experience art on a personal level, and thus decisions about size, shape, and scale of the gallery, the way patrons would move through it, the surfaces on which the paintings would be hung, how they would be lighted, and where the patron would view them as if Wright himself were the visitor. The ramp itself is narrow and low. The exterior walls of the building are slightly tilted to the angle of an easel to accommodate paintings, which were intended to be illuminated by natural light from a narrow band of skylights.

Among the most important tenets of Wright’s organic architecture was the relationship of the building to its environment. One of the most challenging aspects of the project was how to integrate what Wright considered the city’s first example of organic architecture into a densely developed urban context based on an arbitrary grid.⁷¹ Wright accomplished this by fitting the building comfortably within its urban lot without compromising the essential characteristics of its form. Despite its dramatically different appearance, the museum makes no attempt to overpower its neighbors. Its form is entirely contained within its site, and the height and setback are

⁶⁹ As quoted in Robert C. Twombly, *Frank Lloyd Wright: His Life and His Architecture* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1979), 321.

⁷⁰ Frank Lloyd Wright to Harry Guggenheim, 17 Mar. 1958, in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, 263-64.

⁷¹ See: Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Japanese Print: An Interpretation* (1912) (New York: Horizon Press, 1967), 16; Baker Brownell and Frank Lloyd Wright, *Architecture and Modern Life* (New York and London: Harper Brothers, 1937), 132; “The characteristic Japanese approach of any subject is, by instinct, spiral. The oriental instinct of attack in any direction is oblique or volute and become wearisome to a direct occidental, whose instinct is frontal and whose approach is rectilinear;” and Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Organic Architecture: The Architecture of Democracy* (London: Lund, Humphries & Co., Ltd., 1939).

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consistent with the neighboring buildings, maintaining an even street wall along Fifth Avenue; however, as with Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum (1963), Wright also made no attempt to contextualize his design with those of adjacent buildings, especially on the side streets. On East 88th Street, the museum terminates abruptly at its neighbor's wall; on East 89th Street, the museum (as originally built) floated free and was separated by a void above a garden and a low wall. In his later designs, Wright added a ten-story annex in this space. This tall, broad and flat building provided a backdrop for the more unusual sculptural forms of the rotunda and monitor and prevented a view of the adjacent, dissimilar townhouses. The building's location on Central Park was a decided advantage because it allowed the architect to appropriate the park landscape as an appropriate natural setting. The expansive naturalistic landscape that unfolds across the street, with its serpentine contours and sculpted plantings, offers a context for the organic forms of the building, while both park and building are characterized by a painterly arrangement of visual components.

The Contemporary Critical Response

The Guggenheim Museum has attracted the attention of critics and scholars since the initial design was revealed in the mid-1940s. A 1945 article in the *New York Times* noted Wright's announcement of the design and his claim that it was "the first time that a true logarithmic spiral has been worked out as a separate building."⁷² The article then went on to note that the architect displayed preliminary sketches of the building and "its radical features."⁷³ During the prolonged process of design approval and construction, debate on the building's merits intensified, culminating in an open letter of protest to the foundation from twenty-one artists criticizing virtually every aspect of the building in December 1956.⁷⁴ The group, which included George L. K. Morris, Milton Avery, Herbert Ferber, Adolph Gottlieb, Jack Tworikov, Willem De Kooning, Philip Guston, Franz Lines and Robert Motherwell, concluded that the building "was not suitable for a sympathetic display of painting and sculpture."⁷⁵

Upon the building's long-awaited opening in 1959, museum directors, architects, and critics swarmed to the site to gather first-hand observations so that they could add their voices to the contentious discourse. As Sanka Knox, who covered the opening for the *New York Times*, observed: "The most controversial building ever to rise in New York...lived up to all expectation of continuing controversy when it was opened to artists in a preview." Knox reported that some artists had "bitter, caustic verdict[s]," while others—in the minority, the reporter noted—found the building "exciting or different."⁷⁶ The *New York Times*'s architecture critic, Ada Louise Huxtable, commented that its "unveiling has only added fuel to the fiery debate and the argument promises to grow hotter on all fronts."⁷⁷

Among twenty-five museum professionals, architects, reporters, and critics who wrote about or commented on the design shortly after the museum's opening, many shared at least one immediate reaction—they were awed or overwhelmed by the building's interior. Philip Johnson called it "one of the greatest rooms in the twentieth century," and Edward Durrell Stone found it "one of the most exciting interiors in all of architecture."⁷⁸ Peter Blake proclaimed the great circular enclosed room "one of those spaces no one will ever forget," and Frank Getlein (*New Republic*) observed: "it gives you the sheer elation that comes from looking at, being in, and moving through large amounts of enclosed space."⁷⁹ While Bill Roeder (*New York World-Telegram*) seemed

⁷² "Museum Building to Rise as a Spiral," *New York Times*, July 10, 1945, 11.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 815.

⁷⁵ As quoted in John Taylor, "Born Again: The New Guggenheim," *New York Magazine*, June 1, 1992, 54.

⁷⁶ Sanka Knox, "New Art Museum Opens On 5th Avenue," *New York Times*, October 21, 1959, 1.

⁷⁷ Ada Louise Huxtable, "That Museum: Wright or Wrong," *New York Times Magazine*, October 25, 1959, SM16.

⁷⁸ Johnson and Stone quoted in Robert Alden, "Art Experts Laud Wright's Design," *New York Times*, October 22, 1959, 41.

⁷⁹ Peter Blake, "The Guggenheim: Museum or Monument?" *Architectural Forum* 111 (December 1959): 86; Getlein quoted in

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startled to discover that “indoors it’s as big as all outdoors...It’s all one room, six stories high but without any floors,” an editorial writer in the *New York Daily News* spoke with perhaps the least pretension when he termed it “one of Frank Lloyd Wright’s most joyous monstrosities...A building that should be put in a museum to show how mad the twentieth century was.”⁸⁰

The contemporary commentary suggests that the new museum was immediately acknowledged as a work of great architecture, even by those who otherwise disapproved of the building. For example, Robert M. Coates (*New Yorker*) noted that the question was not “Is it not art?,” which he agreed that it was, but whether the building would fulfill its mission to house art.⁸¹ Many offered unqualified praise for the design—Philip Johnson hailed it as “Mr. Wright’s greatest building, New York’s greatest building;” Katherine Coffey, director of the Newark Museum, called it “one of the great buildings of the city and the country;” Emily Genauer, art critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, proclaimed it “The most beautiful building in America;” and Lloyd Goodrich, director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, professed that it was “one of the greatest buildings of the city and of the country.”⁸² Russell Lynes (*Harper’s Magazine*) embraced it as a “work of originality, vision and undisputable grandeur of concept,” and Walter McQuade (*The Nation*) hailed it as “a brilliant success.”⁸³ The opening was also covered in the European press and writers’ responses echoed those of their American colleagues. Writing in the *London Observer*, Patrick O’Donovan hailed it as “unforgettable” and noted that the building itself “was probably a major work of art.”⁸⁴ A French critic was also impressed with the interior space but raised questions about its ability to function as a museum.⁸⁵

Although they were generous in their praise of the building itself, professionals representing some of New York’s most important museums either expressed reservations about how it would fare as a museum or were reluctant to express them publicly. James R. Rorimer, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, called the Guggenheim “exciting, thrilling, venturesome,” but noted that “it’s far too early to judge the success of what they’ve tried.” While Rene d’Harnoncourt, director of MoMA, asserted that the “city should be proud to have a...Frank Lloyd Wright of such quality,” he also reserved judgment on its success as a museum, observing that it contained “such a vast number of new ideas that [he wanted] to study it more.” Lloyd Goodrich of the Whitney Museum agreed that whether it fulfills the function of “showing works of art to best advantage is another question.” Franklin M. Biebel, director of The Frick Collection, acknowledged that the building had many advantages for the display of contemporary art but he didn’t know how it would serve over a longer period, adding: “only time will tell.”⁸⁶

The judgment of art critics was perhaps the harshest, and two of America’s preeminent art critics, John Canaday and Hilton Kramer, found little to recommend in the building. Nevertheless, their lengthy articles attested to the museum’s importance as a subject of debate. In an article called “Wright vs. Painting,” John Canaday of the *New York Times* compared the museum to “a war between architecture and painting in which both come out badly maimed.” Canaday dismissed Wright’s intentions toward the works being displayed, even suggesting that the architect “deliberately designed an interior to annihilate painting as expressive art and to reduce it to an architectural accessory.” Even so, Canaday grudgingly acknowledged that perhaps, “stripped of its pictures,”

Blake, “The Guggenheim,” 184.

⁸⁰ Roeder and *New York Daily News* quoted in Blake, “The Guggenheim,” 184.

⁸¹ Coates quoted in Blake, “The Guggenheim,” 180.

⁸² Johnson, Coffey, Genauer, and Goodrich all quoted in Alden, “Art Experts Laud Wright’s Design,” 41.

⁸³ Lynes and McQuade quoted in Blake, “The Guggenheim,” 93.

⁸⁴ O’Donovan quoted in Blake, “The Guggenheim,” 180.

⁸⁵ “Art D’Aujourd’hui, Musée De Demain,” *L’Oeil* 60 (December 1959): 106.

⁸⁶ Rorimer, d’Harnoncourt, Goodrich and Biedel quoted in Alden, “Art Experts Laud Wright’s Design,” 41.

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the design might have great merit.⁸⁷

If Canaday refrained from completely dismissing the building, Hilton Kramer did not hesitate to proclaim it an “architectural tragedy that [Wright] was allowed to build here what is probably his most useless edifice.” In a particularly vitriolic review in *Arts Magazine*, Kramer dismissed Wright’s design as a “cultural horror,” Sweeney’s installation as having “very little sympathy for the integrity of painting,” and even contemporary art itself, asserting that “most of the paintings are trash.” Kramer seemed to imply that the building and the paintings deserved each other, finding it a “sizable joke...that this building emulates in so many ways the motives often imputed to the paintings it was designed to bury,” and condemned it, and by inference its collection as “completely and unassailably self-concerned.” In the end, the critic threw his sympathies with the paintings, observing “even the worst paintings do not deserve a fate like this,” and even admitted that the Guggenheim “[had] now become a part of history: *our* history.”⁸⁸

Architecture critics Ada Louise Huxtable, Peter Blake, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., and Lewis Mumford all addressed the question of whether the building was a museum or a monument to the architect. In “That Museum: Wright or Wrong?,” Huxtable took the architect to task for his claim that a museum was an organic building that would express a “new unity between beholder, painting and architecture.” Although she agreed that FLW had delivered the “luminous, soaring, unified space” he promised, it was at the expense of overpowering the paintings. Huxtable argued that because the Guggenheim, “like all Wright’s buildings, is an artistic whole that demands undivided attention, a visual and sensuous experience that fills the eye and the mind completely,” it is at odds with what she perceived as its functional goal as a museum, which was “primarily to be background...a setting created to serve other forms of art.”⁸⁹

Peter Blake, editor of *Architectural Forum*, addressed the same issue in one of the most insightful contemporary pieces about the museum, entitled “The Guggenheim: Museum or Monument?”⁹⁰ Blake understood the design of the Guggenheim as the culmination of Wright’s theory and practice. Recalling Wright’s ideas about structure inherent to the “Romeo and Juliet” Windmill, the Larkin Building, Unity Temple, and Johnson Wax Building, Blake concluded that the architect had achieved in his final work the “complete marriage of fluid structure and fluid space,” a manifestation of the idea that the “flow of space...could take place in three and form dimensions.” Blake felt that the spiral, a three-dimensional circle that allowed people to experience space in motion, marked the architect’s final break with what he had once termed “the box,” the architecture of traditional forms and spaces that he began to challenge in some of his earliest designs.

Blake also assessed the building’s function. Unlike Huxtable, he maintained that the purpose of a museum was to glorify and dramatize art. In this sense, he argued that the Guggenheim’s powerful design overwhelmed only those works of painting and sculpture that lacked power. Calling the rotunda “one of the most beautiful spaces created in this century,” Blake deemed the building “undoubtedly the most valuable piece in the Guggenheim’s collection” and concluded that the interior was “a space of such grandeur that all the many, justifiable criticisms of the building as a museum soon to become insignificant by comparison.”⁹¹

Like Blake, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., himself an architect, Taliesin fellow, and owner of one of Wright’s

⁸⁷ John Canaday, “Wright vs. Painting: A Critique of Guggenheim Museum Finds Defects in its Function,” *New York Times*, October 21, 1959, 1.

⁸⁸ Hilton Kramer, “Month in Review,” *Arts Magazine* 34 (December 1959): 48.

⁸⁹ Huxtable, “That Museum,” 63.

⁹⁰ Blake was also an architect and later, the author of *The Master Builders* (1960)—a study of FLW, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe.

⁹¹ Blake, “The Guggenheim,” 90.

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masterpieces (Fallingwater; NHL, 1976), saw the architect's mastery of space as the most significant aspect of his final work. Kaufmann, who noted that Wright had been experimenting with "ways to vary the planes enclosing space...throughout his career," called the Guggenheim the "clearest and most powerful statement of architectural and artistic liberation yet made by Frank Lloyd Wright."⁹²

Lewis Mumford, one of America's greatest twentieth-century critics, devoted his column in the *New Yorker* to a substantial analysis of the building. Although he agreed with Blake that Wright's work represented a "defiant break with the past," Mumford criticized the Guggenheim as "nothing but a display of Wright's virtuosity," asserting that the exterior and interior are lost to "power and ego," respectively. Mumford regretted that the architect who championed organicism had produced "a shell whose form had no relation to its function." Mumford's conclusion echoed that of many others, finding the building "sublime in its own right but ridiculous as a museum of art."⁹³ Of all the critics, Marvin D. Schwartz may have summarized and expressed the contemporary assessment of the building best when he wrote: "the new quarters may not be practical but they are important as the fruit of Wright's genius and most suitable as a memorial to a revolutionary collector whose spirit continues to thrive in the museum he founded."⁹⁴ Whether favorable, unfavorable, ambivalent, the amount and depth of the critique lodged when the building was finished alone indicates the building's benchmark status within FLW's career, a status that continues to be accorded to it.

Retrospective Criticism and Museum Architecture as Art

Although the Guggenheim's merits as a museum are still being debated today, in the decades since Wright's death, numerous prominent architectural historians and critics have judged the building to be one of the architect's key works. Following Wright's 1959 death, it was included in a small group of Wright's completed buildings designated by the American Institute of Architects and National Trust for Historic Preservation as most worthy of preservation. Although many scholars have agreed with the assessment that the building did not serve the museum program particularly well, most also resolved that it was an architectural masterpiece, citing its structural achievement, sculptural beauty, and embodiment of Wright's organic philosophy.

Marcus Whiffen and Frederick Koeper expressed in 1981: "the dynamic interior of the Guggenheim is, for some, too competitive for the display of art, but no one disputes that it is one of the memorable spaces in all of architecture."⁹⁵ In 1982, William J. R. Curtis called it "the apotheosis of Wright's organic philosophy," noting that "perhaps only a spiral in concrete could have embodied his intentions, for this form combined centrality and procession, equilibrium and movement, and an inherent sense of growth and aspiration."⁹⁶ Likewise, in *The Master Builders* (1960, 1976), focused on Wright, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe, Peter Blake expanded on the points expressed in his initial review, calling the Guggenheim "the only completed work of uncompromising plasticity and continuity achieved by Wright."⁹⁷ Biographer Robert Twombly concurred, stating: "of all the buildings Wright designed, the Guggenheim Museum in New York may come closest to reaching the goals of organic architecture."⁹⁸

Kenneth Frampton asserted that the museum "must be regarded as the climax of Wright's late career since it

⁹² Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., "The Form of Space for Art: Wright's Guggenheim Museum," *Art in America* 46 (Winter 1958-1959): 70.

⁹³ Lewis Mumford, "What Wright Hath Wrought," *New Yorker* 5 (December 1959): 105.

⁹⁴ Marvin D. Schwartz, "New and Views for New York," *Apollo* 70 (December 1959): 190.

⁹⁵ Marcus Whiffen and Frederick Koeper, *American Architecture 1607-1976* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 369.

⁹⁶ William J. R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (Oxford: Phaidon Press Limited, 1982), 270.

⁹⁷ Peter Blake, *The Master Builders: Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright* (1960) (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1976), 400.

⁹⁸ Twombly, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, 316.

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combines the structural and spatial principles of Fallingwater with the top-lit containment of Johnson Wax.”⁹⁹ An entry on Wright in the *Encyclopedia of 20th Century Modernism* observed that the museum’s predominant form, the spiral, was the final realization of a theme Wright had been exploring since 1925.¹⁰⁰ Henry-Russell Hitchcock also focused on form, describing the museum as a “remarkable helical concrete building.”¹⁰¹ Leland Roth noted that Wright had been exploring “the mysteries of the helix” since 1925 and termed the Guggenheim “a masterwork, a dream realized of unified space and purpose [and] a fitting end to Wright’s long individualistic career;” Spiro Kostof termed it a “gift of pure architecture.”¹⁰² Writing in the *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architecture*, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. concluded: “Wright’s Guggenheim Museum stands as one of the irrefutably grand achievements of modern architecture.”¹⁰³ Within a context of a highly individualized “new expressionism,” presented as a mid-century alternative to the rationality of the International Style, Mark Gelernter situates the Guggenheim with such global monuments as Le Corbusier’s Notre-Dame-du-Haut (Ronchamp, France, 1950-52), Jørn Utzon’s Sydney Opera House (Sydney, Australia, 1957-73), and Eero Saarinen’s TWA Terminal at JFK Airport (New York, New York, 1956-62).¹⁰⁴

Critic Herbert Muschamp, who called the Guggenheim “Frank Lloyd Wright’s most famous building and one of New York’s most distinguished landmarks,” also argued for the building’s importance in a philosophical context. He contended: “the primary value of [Wright’s New York City work] lies...in illustrating the impact on American architecture of the Romantic tradition in art, an influence that...has been underestimated in surveys of Modern period.”¹⁰⁵ If, as Mushcamp puts it, “the avowed aim of Modernism was to reform architecture in conformity with democratic ideals, the achieved objective of the Modern era was to establish architecture as an autonomous art form, to place the architect on the same creative footings as the painter, the composer, the poet.”¹⁰⁶ This provides one explanation of how Wright, who “credited himself with creating the first truly democratic expression of our democracy in Architecture,” came to describe the Guggenheim Museum as though it were the masterpiece of the collection of paintings and sculptures it was designed to display.”¹⁰⁷

As an iconic building representing a particular institution, the Guggenheim Museum helped establish a trend for “blockbuster” buildings for museums that has developed and expanded over the past half-century. Occupying an entire block front across from Central Park, the museum is a dramatic component of the Fifth Avenue streetscape and one of New York’s best-known buildings visited by almost one million persons each year. The Guggenheim is also significant as one of the three most important twentieth-century museums in New York City devoted to the collection of Modern and contemporary art. Along with the Whitney Museum of American Art (1914) and the Museum of Modern Art (1929), the Guggenheim was central to the introduction of Modern art to America and unique for its exclusive collection of European art and emphasis on a single aesthetic philosophy. Other cultural reverberations were generated by the museum’s design that inaugurated the notion of a “walk-in work of art” building. In the years immediately following its opening, the design created an architectural sensation, and, as the *New York Times* reported in 1959, “All across the country, round buildings

⁹⁹ Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1985), 190.

¹⁰⁰ Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani, ed. *Encyclopedia of 20th Century Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrahams, 1986), 368.

¹⁰¹ Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 450.

¹⁰² Leland M. Roth, *A Concise History of American Architecture* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1980), 294; Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 70.

¹⁰³ Edgar Kaufmann, “Frank Lloyd Wright,” *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architecture*, ed. Adolf K. Placzek (New York: The Free Press, 1982), 446.

¹⁰⁴ Mark Gelernter, *Sources of Architectural Form: A Critical History of Western Design Theory* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995), 256-59.

¹⁰⁵ Herbert Muschamp, *Man About Town: Frank Lloyd Wright in New York City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 5.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

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are springing up like so many round pegs in a land where rectangular or square-shaped structures have so long been dominant.”¹⁰⁸ For example, paying apparent homage to the spiral, Philip Johnson designed his unrealized 1965-66 immigrant memorial for Ellis Island based on a spiral scheme.¹⁰⁹

The trend of “museum as art” architecture characterized an international architectural movement during the remainder of the twentieth century.¹¹⁰ Nationally, renowned architects were being increasingly commissioned to design iconic museums for world-class art collections: Marcel Breuer’s Whitney Museum debuted in New York in 1966, as did Louis H. Kahn’s Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1972, and I. M. Pei’s East Wing for the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in 1978. The trend has become well-established and, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, heightens still. Contemporary museums are exclusively designed by celebrated architects with the expectation that they will design a building that, in and of itself, is an identifiable entity in the cultural world. These new architectural icons translate into global attractions with international visitation. The expressionistic Guggenheim Bilbao, designed by Frank Gehry, positioned Spain as a cutting edge cultural destination in 1997.¹¹¹ Like Wright’s Guggenheim before it, the undulating edifice proved highly influential, controversial, and attractive, thus reaffirming the era for “museum as art” and paving the way for more expressionistic structures to come, including Santiago Calatrava’s Quadracci Pavilion (2001) at the Milwaukee Art Museum, Zaha Hadid’s Contemporary Arts Center (2003) in Cincinnati, and most recently, Daniel Libeskind’s highly expressionistic extension to the Denver Art Museum (2006).

Conclusion

The Guggenheim Museum holds national significance as one of renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright’s benchmark designs. It stands not just as one of the key buildings conceived and constructed during the final phase of his long and fruitful career, but as an iconic and highly-individualized moment in the overall development and evolution of an organic architecture, which was a constant theme of his professional life and output. After sixty years of reflection and active practice, Wright was able to take advantage of modern materials and construction techniques to create a building that distilled his principles of organic architecture to a single, revolutionary form. The unprecedented building, intended to compliment and provide an ideal exhibition space for the patron’s pioneering collection of Non-Objective art, stood confidently out from the New York cityscape. Before it was even finished, critique of its merits and potential shortcomings as a museum, were numerous; yet importantly, virtually no one—from that point to the present—has seriously questioned its power and genius as a design. Indeed, the Guggenheim helped to launch a great and continuing age of museum architecture, which operates on the understanding that the building is a central part of the museum experience on par with even its contents. The Guggenheim is simultaneously one of Wright’s most personal and public commission and bears exceptional value in representing his nationally-significant contributions to American architecture.

¹⁰⁸ John Canaday, “Two Torch Bearers,” *New York Times*, October 25, 1959, X-23.

¹⁰⁹ Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 1136.

¹¹⁰ Ada Louise Huxtable, “Architecture: A Museum Is Also Art, Exhibition Shows,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1968, 40.

¹¹¹ Martin Filler, “Museums and the Maecenas Touch,” *Architectural Record* 193 (November 2005): 99.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

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Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.

Designated a National Historic Landmark.

Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #

Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

State Historic Preservation Office

Other State Agency

Federal Agency

Local Government

University

Other (Specify Repository):

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: 0.6647 acre

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	18	587803	4514963

Verbal Boundary Description: The Guggenheim Museum is located on Manhattan, in New York, New York, on a lot bounded by Fifth Avenue to the west, 88th Street to the south, and 89th Street to the north. The lot is a bit irregular along its eastern boundary, which begins 127' from Fifth Avenue along 88th Street, jogging slightly to the west in the middle of the block before continuing northward to 89th Street.

Boundary Justification: The boundary encompasses the property historically associated with the Guggenheim Museum.

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