

# Fifth Avenue Shocker: The Building Wore Red

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

**F**RANK LLOYD WRIGHT made his name as an architectural revolutionary, but in the case of the color of his 1959 Guggenheim Museum, he started out waving a flag of red, but ended up with PV020 Buff. The 50th anniversary exhibition now on view will surprise anyone who thinks the spiral is the most startling aspect of his design.

Historically, New York's colors have been red brick and the white and buff of marble, limestone and, in the 1960s, glazed brick. Indeed, we often complain bitterly when someone violates the norm. Thus, the 1962 blue-glazed brick apartment house at Madison Avenue and 65th Street was a target of indignation, as if the ubiquitous white glazed brick was somehow preferable. The building became brown in 2004, ending the argument.

Although most attention focuses on Wright's shapes, he had a strong sense of color. He wanted the concrete of his 1937 house Fallingwater, in southwestern Pennsylvania, to be gold-leafed, and the Fallingwater Web site, [www.fallingwater.org](http://www.fallingwater.org), describes "his signature Cherokee red."

Anyone who visits Wright's Johnson Wax Building in Racine, Wis., comes away with the warm orange glow of the same color, which is also used for the floors and furniture.

Hilla Rebay was the art adviser to Solomon R. Guggenheim, the mining entrepreneur, and in 1943 she approached Wright to design a museum. Several of the architect's early proposals are shown in "Frank Lloyd Wright: From Within Outward," organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, and on view at the museum through Aug. 23.

Dating is uncertain for many of the early drawings, but in 1944 Wright proposed a polygonal structure, partly in blue. He also made designs in pink, peach, red and a sort of ivory. These are illustrated both in the exhibition and in Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer's new book,

"Frank Lloyd Wright, Complete Works 1943-1959," published by Taschen and the first of three volumes.

Joan Lukach, in her 1983 book "Hilla Rebay: In Search of the Spirit in Art," quotes a number of letters between Wright and Rebay. In January 1944, Wright described his choice of color and material as "exterior: red-marble and long-slim pottery red bricks."

Wright recommended that he make a model "completely furnished and in color — a type of model for which we are famous." Rebay's reply was crystal-clear: "Red is a color which displeases S. R. G. as much as it does me," she wrote in a 1945 letter. She suggested "yellow marble, and if not, green."

The book says the model was red — "the color of creation," Wright informed Rebay. He also suggested black marble.

But the usually intransigent architect backed off, perhaps keen on a plum commission in New York City. He wrote that any color would be acceptable, and the entire matter dropped away. Had Wright been so accommodating with other clients, his reputation would be quite different.

The book "The Guggenheim: Frank Lloyd Wright and the Making of the Modern Museum" accompanies the exhibit, and contains an essay by Gillerm Zuaznabar that says that by 1952 Wright was proposing an exterior of white concrete and polished marble gravel, "to look similar to alabaster."

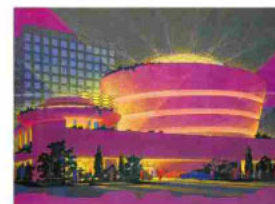
But the marble was canceled for budgetary reasons, Zuaznabar writes and Wright finally specified plain old "PV020 Buff." For an architectural revolutionary, it was a tepid statement when construction started, the buildings at the flanking north and south corners were the buff of limestone.

By the time of the opening in October 1959, Wright was dead and the color had been changed on the job to a tint of cream and very soft yellow. In the hub-bub only a few reviewers mentioned color — it was the spiral that seemed so entrancing.

But in a news story earlier that year, The New York Times quoted Robert Moses criticizing the Guggenheim's "jaundiced skin." And Lewis Mumford, writing in The New Yorker, objected to the color's "congenial mediocrity" calling it "a sort of evaporated-milk ochre."

The Guggenheim has been repainted several times, and the book accompanying the exhibit includes a color microphotograph of the various layers, going from indeterminate beige or buff to the more recent near-white light gray.

The exterior has been completely renovated, and during review by the Landmarks Preservation Commission color became a point of discussion. Preservation groups like the Historic Districts Council favored returning to



TONY GENOVALI/THE NEW YORK TIMES

#### THINK PINK

The Guggenheim Museum is painted near white today, but Frank Lloyd Wright's preliminary drawings show it in various colors. When the museum opened in 1959, it was a toned-down buff. At left is an undated sketch by Wright of an interior. More drawings:

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the original darker shade.

But the museum wanted to keep the lighter, brighter color of recent decades. One rationale was that the buff color of the limestone addition of 1992 was chosen to be distinct from the near-white of the museum as it stood at the time.

Another was that the original color disappeared after only a few years. The commission allowed the later color, as it is now, and Wright's beloved Cherokee red was not seriously considered.

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