

ARCHITECTURE

Fresh views of a builder like no other

The number of books on Frank Lloyd Wright by now must rival the number of buildings designed by the tempestuous architect during his 91-year life — biographies and tributes, analyses and novels, coffee-table volumes of voyeuristic heft.

By John King

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So it's no wonder the stream continues this year, the 50th anniversary of the debut of New York's Guggenheim Museum, the landmark most associated with Wright. The surprise is that two of the newcomers have enduring merit: never straying from the architecture, but going beyond hagiography to let us glimpse the icon's heavy feet of clay.

The Guggenheim is quintessential Wright, defying all trends except those that it spawned. The propulsive spiral of concrete at Central Park infuriated artists and purists when it opened in 1959, yet it showed once and for all that urban architecture can be willfully mesmerizing sculpture. It's also the precursor to every eye-catching cultural facility since, up to and including the Contemporary Jewish Museum that opened in San Francisco last year.

For the true Wright believer, this is a tale of genius receiving its due: FLW conquers the Big Apple. But the story's more fun than that, as we see in an excellent volume produced by the museum itself, "The Guggenheim: Frank Lloyd Wright and the Making of the Modern Museum."

The selection of illustrations is predictably rich, from early visions of a red marble spiral telescoping inwards to photographs of installations inside the rotunda by such artists as Jenny Holzer. But the irresistible element is the 48-page timeline of the project.

The saga starts in 1943 when Hilla Rebay, Solomon R. Guggenheim's art adviser, approached Wright because "I need a fighter, a lover of space, an originator, a tester and wise man." Letters and telegraphs go back and forth for the next decade, while Wright battles wary clients and bureaucrats, and the press weighs in ("Odd Building is Puzzler," intoned the Flint (Mich.) Journal).

The timeline's detail is fastidious — and as Wright defends his designs against doubters who want this or that flourish toned down, he often comes off less as a "wise man" than as a prima donna. In one note he chides Rebay as "neither intelligent nor true." Later he takes to calling the Guggenheim an "archeseum" — until one family member sends a brusque note stating, "please lay off for all time this 'archeseum' stuff."

That tension — the visionary as self-promoter — flavors the most imposing of this year's

books, "Frank Lloyd Wright: 1943-1959."

Clocking in at 13 pounds and \$200, it's a book for cultists or poseurs. But it's also irresistible: a presentation of every commission Wright accepted during the last 16 years of his life. This includes not just high points, like the Guggenheim, but dozens of beguiling what-ifs that never left the concept stage.

This includes several in the Bay Area. Yes, there are six pages devoted to the V.C. Morris shop on Maiden Lane with its interior ramp. The lunging grandeur of the Marin Civic Center is awarded the cover of the book. But there's also an electrical factory in San Carlos, as well as a pair of audacious house designs for V.C. Morris perched steep above the ocean in our Sea Cliff neighborhood.

The first Morris house is Wright by-the-numbers, the master churning out drama. The second, though, clings to the cliff with an exuberance that defies imagination — especially because his client had asked him beforehand to contain costs by toning things *down*.

That's what makes "Wright: 1943-1959" so compelling. Genius at work? Absolutely. But this is a genius who can't say no, who pays the bills in part by dashing off concepts for anyone dazzled by his reputation. There's a spa for Elizabeth Arden, a post-"Fountainhead" cabin for Ayn Rand, an Arizona shopping center and a delicatessen for Yosemite National Park. And even the goofiest dead ends could bear fruit: a 1945 Milwaukee laundry, oddly enough, contains hints of the Marin Civic Center's domed sweep to come.

The third book this year worth noting is the catalog that accompanies the exhibition on display at the Guggenheim through Aug. 23, "Frank Lloyd Wright: From Within Outward."

This is the most rounded

volume of the group, a survey of Wright's career from his final triumphs all the way back to the young architect's first (and still fresh) houses in the suburbs of Chicago. It's an overview of clarity and depth, capturing the arc from Prairie Style to sci-fi modernism. But the essays tilt toward minutiae (one focuses on Wright subdivision plans), and the hero worship is thick. That thoroughness is laudable;

this is a fine one-volume guide.

But Wright's legend endures because of his willfully idiosyncratic flair. That spirit can't be defined by any one building — or by any one book.

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Frank Lloyd Wright

1943-1959

The Complete Works

By Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer

(Taschen; 584 pages; \$200)

The Guggenheim

Frank Lloyd Wright and the Making of the Modern Museum

(Guggenheim Museum; 248 pages; \$65 hardcover; \$40 paperback)

Frank Lloyd Wright

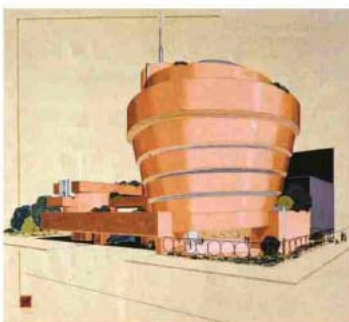
From Within Outward

By Richard Cleary

(Skira Rizzoli; 360 pages; \$75)



Renderings from the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation



A rendering of a Sea Cliff home, above, from Frank Lloyd Wright's firm. At left, a spiral telescoping inward was one of his early visions for the Guggenheim Museum.