Wright Show Tells: No Neutral Feelings

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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Wright Show Tells of the Wrangles in Creation of a Landmark House

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

There is a remarkable story in an exhibition that has just opened in two rooms of the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It is a story told in a few pieces of furniture, some leaded glass windows, letters and photographs. Called "An Architect and His Client: Frank Lloyd Wright and Francis W. Little," it will run through Sept. 9 and is a *teaser for larger things to* come.

The exhibition deals with the life and death of Northome, in Wayzata, Minn., built in 1912-14 by Wright for Francis W. Little, a structure started just too late to be immortalized in the famous Wasmuth Portfolio of 1910. The Little house, the last of Wright's landmark prairie houses, is therefore a less familiar masterpiece than such classic examples as the *Robie and Coonley houses.*

The show and the house detail with intriguing intimacy what might be called a love-hate relationship between the architect and the client, for whom Wright built two houses—the earlier was constructed in Peoria in 1902—including the wrangles, renunciations and compromises that gave birth to a major architectural work.

It is also a taut commentary on the end of the house, demolished last year by its owners, the Littles' daughter and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Raymond V. Stevenson, for a smaller replacement that might be called French provincial and is a lot easier to live in and care for.

No Neutral Feelings

Mrs. Stevenson, who grew up in Wright houses and brought up her own family in Northome, evidently repeated the love-hate relationship with it. No owner of a Wright house has ever been known to be neutral.

Out of the destruction of the Little house, the Metropolitan made one of its first great acquisitions in the American field: the building's great living room, 35 by 55 feet, and 14½ feet high. Other rooms went to the Allentown Art Museum and the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

The Metropolitan's room now awaits installation in the new American wing rising in Central Park in combination with the Temple of Dendur construction as a Bicentennial bonanza or catastrophe, depending on how you look at museums and buildings in the park.

It will be carefully put together again, with its Wright-designed artifacts, to serve as a library and study room, with the original window-seat benches that once looked out on Lake Minnetonka providing Central Park views.

The show gives samples—windows, chairs, table and lamps, pictures of the original house and some lovely drawings of elevations as Wright designed it.

Importantly, the exhibition, while more of a piccolo note than a trumpet blast, marks the Metropolitan's recent move from total concentration on 18th- and early 19th-century Americana to more recent American architectural and decorative-arts history. This is a belated, but most welcome and appropriate, broadening of its horizons.

Northome was in a sense a transitional building—the last of the prairie houses and the beginning of motifs found in Taliesin at Spring Green, Wis.—the house united with the hill; oak furniture with "free-floating" articulation, and more natural treatment of wood.

Francis Little was a client who knew exactly what he wanted. This, from the outspoken correspondence on both sides, of which the show contains examples, was not necessarily what Wright intended to give him. The client's letters to the architect frequently suggest terminal frustration. The architect's letters protest and cajole. The Little refrain was, "You don't get what we want at all."

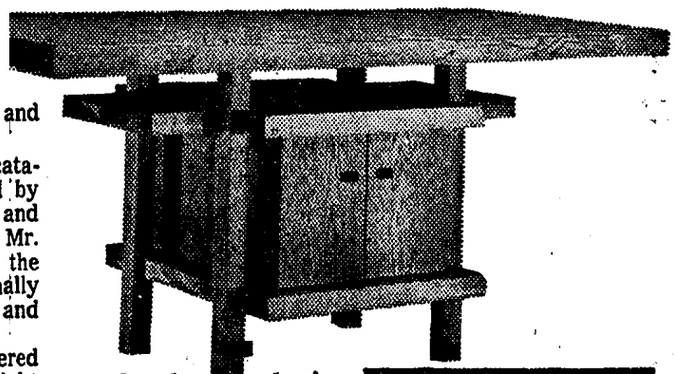
What the client got, among other things, by badgering Wright, was a far finer glass design for the windows than first proposed, and a worse dining room. Documentation of the design is complete in some respects, such as the glass, and incomplete in others, lacking material from private collectors and the Wright Fellowship at Taliesin.

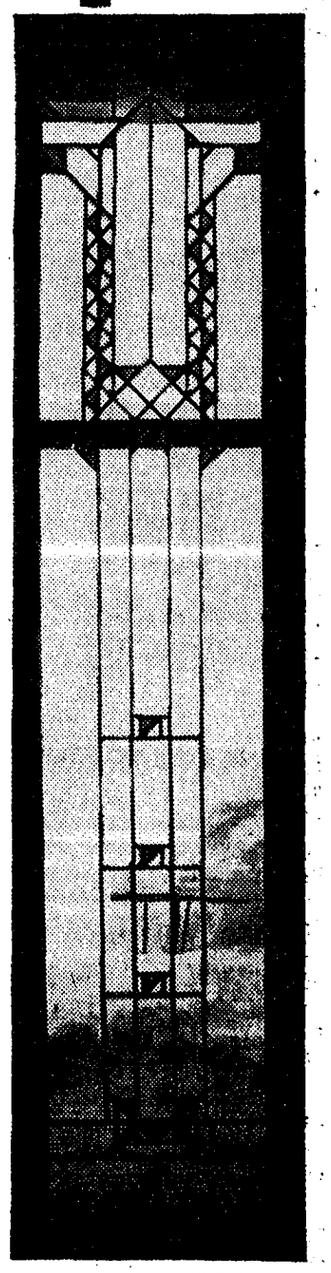
He also got a tremendous living room, in its own pavilion, that was virtually a public space. It was meant for entertaining and recitals. Mrs. Little had studied with Liszt, and the original scheme included a Wright-designed piano that was never executed.

The house, however, in spite of many years of family occupancy and a secure place in art history, proved ultimately vulnerable because of changing needs and higher taxes, and the survival of some of its parts is only slightly less than a miracle. Credit must go to concerned Wisconsin architects; to Don Lovness, collector, and Edgar Tafel, architect, for essential assistance, and to the Stevensons for help and cooperation.

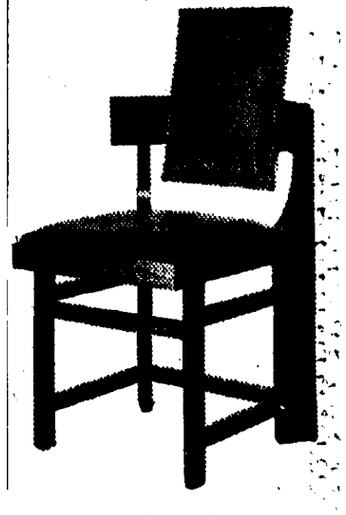
An excellent small catalogue has been prepared by Morrison Heckscher and Elizabeth G. Miller. Mr. Heckscher, curator in the American Wing, personally saw to the dismantling and transferral of the room.

If anyone has wondered what people wore in Wright houses when they were new, a substantial and handsome Mrs. Little is pictured about 1915 in a floor-sweeping, man-tailored skirt suit, a likely forerunner to the Saint Laurent pants suit. Radical chic, no doubt.





A table, above, and window with leaded glass patterns, right, from the Little house, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, in the exhibition at the Metropolitan.



A side chair