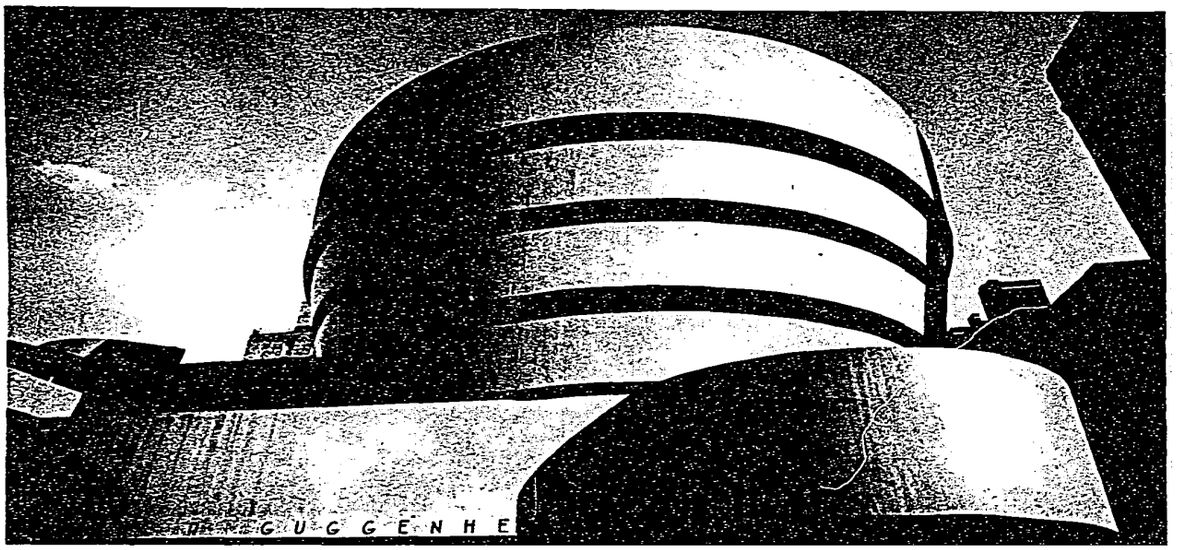


NEW FACE ON UPPER FIFTH—A view of the Guggenheim Museum. It is Frank Lloyd Wright's only structure in Manhattan.

That Museum: Wright or Wrong?

Frank Lloyd Wright's unconventional structure has opened amid fiery debate. Is it a museum, or a monument to Mr. Wright?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

EVER since Frank Lloyd Wright's controversial Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum began to take shape on upper Fifth Avenue, New Yorkers have been playing a guessing game, "What Is It?" The massive, circular concrete building has been likened to an inverted cupcake, a washtub without handles, a giant Jello-mold, and the last outpost of the Maginot Line. Now the museum has been opened, but far from solving the riddle, the unveiling has only added fuel to the fiery debate, and the argument promises to grow hotter on all fronts.

According to all advisements and pronouncements, the late Mr. Wright's unconventional architecture is a museum of the arts—specifically, of the more advanced painting and sculpture of the twentieth century.

"A museum," says the dictionary, "is a building in which are preserved and exhibited objects of permanent interest in the arts or sciences."

"A museum," said Wright, a man who made his own definitions, "is an organic building where all is one great space on a single continuous floor." The Guggenheim, he explained, was to be an unusual container for an unusual collection, and by "organic" he meant that it would grow simply and logically out of the nature of its materials, "like a tree," or, in this case, like a sort of snail, with a circular ramp spiraling upward around an open court, crowned by a dramatic skylight.

"Walls slant gently outward forming a giant spiral for a well-defined purpose: a new unity between beholder, painting and architecture," said Wright. "Here, for the first time, you will see twentieth-century arts and architecture in their true relation."

In this new concept of a museum, advance notices (and Mr. Wright) told us, the paintings would be displayed around the perimeter of the rising ramp, leaning gently at an easel-like angle against warm ivory walls, washed by daylight ("You will never lose the sense of the sky"), with supplementary artificial light as necessary.

"In a great upward sweep of movement the picture is seen framed as a feature of architecture," explained Wright. "This is the liberation of painting by architecture."

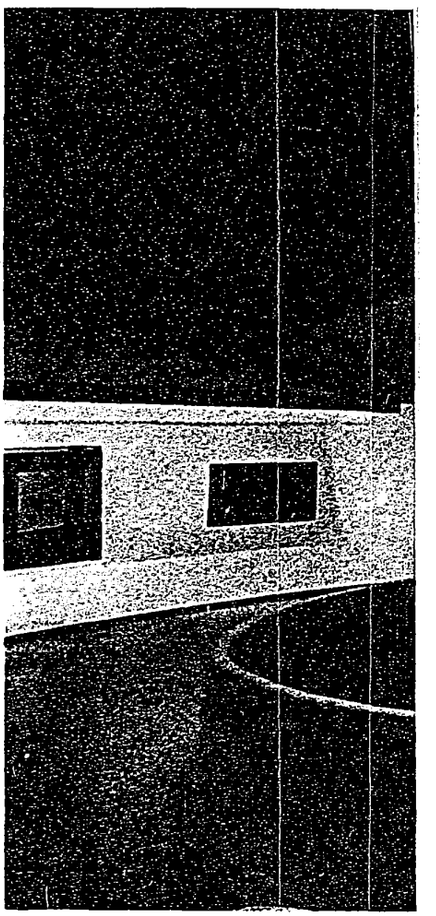
The paintings would become part of the building, "as a signet is in a ring." The whole interior would be an open, luminous, floating, uninterrupted space, with each picture existing "within the whole space, the whole atmosphere, not within its rectilinear frame in a rectilinear room." Said Wright: "The eye encounters no abrupt change, but is gently led and treated as if at the edge of the shore watching an unbreaking wave." Added Mrs. Wright: "It will become the Mecca of mankind."

AS Mecca rose, people gathered. The building has never been without its cluster of spectators; taxi drivers added new myths and legends to their architectural lore. Confusion, resentment and admiration of the strange exterior were mixed, with confusion running well ahead. Many found the heavy, rounded concrete forms too unconventional for their tastes—a jarring note in the city scene. Others, more tolerant, did not reject the building, but considered it an odd and unbecoming neighbor to adjacent apartments; in argument, they moved it out of the city, or relocated it in the park.

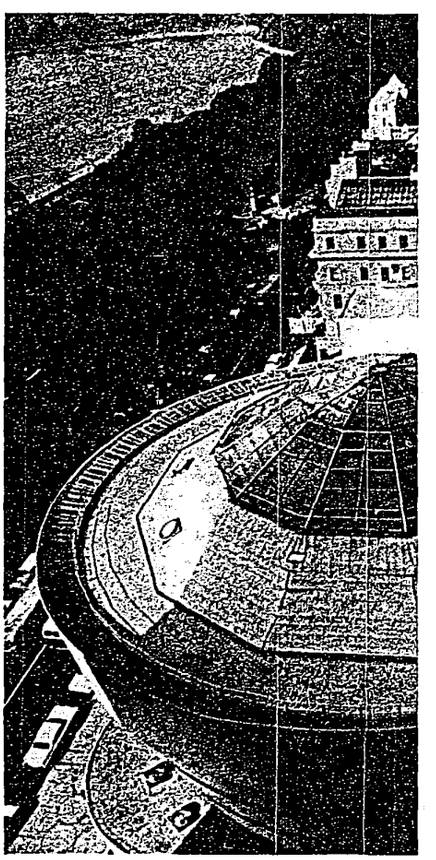
Champions of Wright welcomed the structure in spite of its belligerent strangeness, reminding objectors that the first baroque building in Rome looked just as startling in the city street. Rumors of interior problems grew with the building: difficulties of installation, inadequacy of facilities, conflict of ideas. Inside and out, it was a gigantic puzzle. People asked: "Will it work as a museum?"

NOW the visitor can see for himself. As he enters the building, he experiences what Wright promised him—a luminous, soaring, unified space, the circling ramp leading his eye to the delicately detailed, handsome skylit dome ninety-five feet above the terrazzo floor on which he stands. Concrete ribs descending from the dome divide the circular wall into bays; two pylons containing utilities and exits interrupt the smooth spiral rhythm with punctuating sculpturesque shapes. The warm ivory color of the court and the ramp frame the sharp white inner wall on which the paintings "hang," for actually they do not "hang" at all. Nor do they rest casually, at the romantic easel-angle specified by Wright.

James Johnson Sweeney, director of the museum, has projected most of them from the wall, so that they seem suspended, foursquare, in air; or, rather, in the uniform glow of the artificial light in the white-painted niches. The effect is stunning, if not quite what Wright intended. In this even, artificial white light behind the creamy outer wall of the ramp, the canvases float independently; at some points the spectator sees five stories of paintings at a glance, apparently *(Continued on Page 91)*



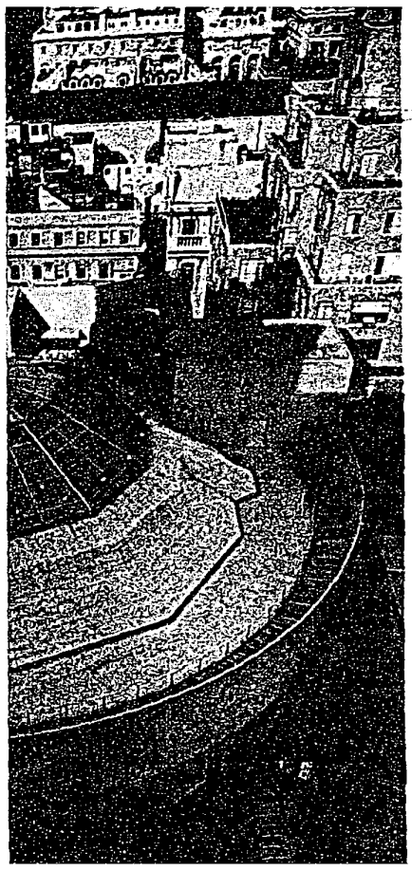
BEHIND THE FACADE—Inside the massive,



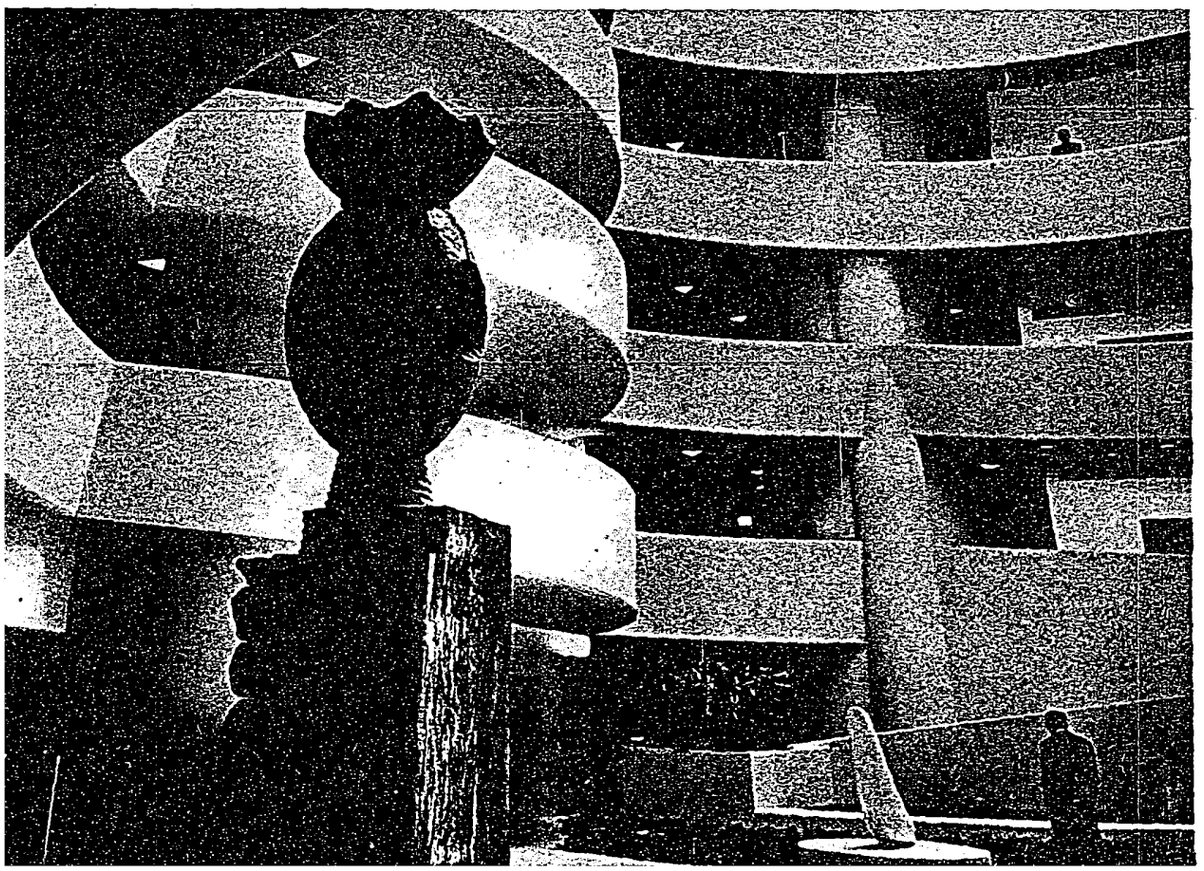
LONG VIEW—The museum's dome, with Fifth

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE is currently working on a guide to the architecture of New York City under terms of a Brunner Fellowship from the American Institute of Architects.

circular building, modern paintings are placed around a ramp spiraling upward for what Wright termed "a well-defined purpose: a new unity between beholder, painting and architecture."



Avenue and Central Park seen behind it.



SETTING FOR SCULPTURE—On the ground floor, works by Brancusi and others are bathed in light from the dome ninety-five feet above.

That Museum

(Continued from Page 16)

detached from the walls, even detached from the museum itself.

Mr. Sweeney's approach to the difficult problem of installing paintings on curving, slanted surfaces in a setting of overwhelming architectural character is not Wright's. In any case, the architecture is so strong (and, to this viewer, so striking) that at first glance it seems to overpower the paintings.

FOR this is less a museum than it is a monument to Frank Lloyd Wright. Ninety per cent of it is a display of Wright's virtuosity. A man of extraordinary genius, he and his work would take second place to nothing. When Wright built, there was no other form of art: architecture was all. His designs are personal, positive, overpowering. This building, like all Wright buildings, is an artistic whole that demands undivided attention, a visual and sensuous experience that fills the eye and the mind completely. It is inescapable, whether one likes it or not.

What Mr. Wright has given us is an impressive demonstration of modern construction in reinforced concrete at its most imaginative: the open spans, the daring cantilevers, the unorthodox building shapes that add up to a spectacular new architecture of great visual excitement.

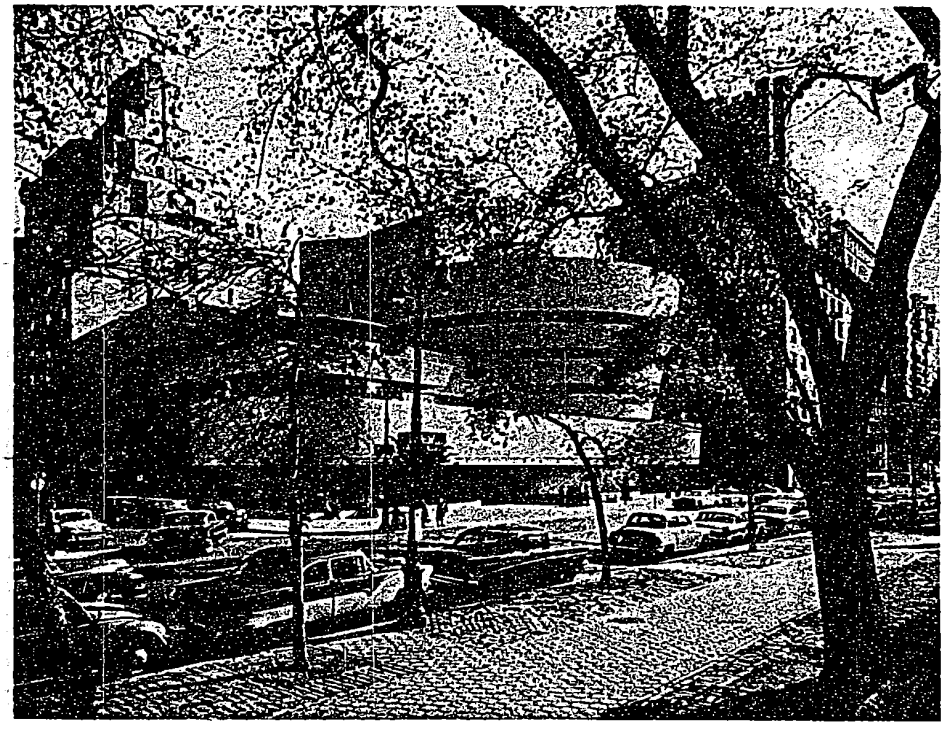
But is it a museum? It is too soon to say, even though one visitor is tempted to put in a resounding negative. A museum's purpose is primarily to be a background; it is a setting created to serve other forms of art. In spite of Wright's repeated picturesque statements that man and his needs were at the center of all that he did, one has the persistent impression that human and practical considerations were always subordinate to his personal work of art.

ARCHITECT—Mr. Wright at the museum before his death last April.

WHAT answer do the sponsors make to those who say this is not a museum? Harry F. Guggenheim, president of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, says: "The continuous ramp and galleries of the museum make looking at pictures easier and pleasanter for the viewer. Most museums, a series of boxlike rooms, are upsetting and unpleasant because they're like labyrinths, confusing the visitor. Wright's continuous spiral eliminates this problem and provides the double pleasure of experiencing both art and architecture at the same time."

Mr. Sweeney claims, for the record, that he finds Wright's design a stimulating challenge. Asked if he would prefer a more conventional building and a simpler installation, he replies firmly that no museum director is without problems, and that his have the distinction of being unique. A museum without architectural limitations, he explains, would be like tennis without a net—no rules, no restrictions, no game.

Whether it is a success as a museum or not, Mr. Wright's edifice is certain to attract many sightseers. They are there—even those who know nothing about art or even what they like. They may be enticed into looking at the pictures and so begin to feel some interest in, and perhaps appreciation of, art.



WRIGHT'S WORK—A full view of the Guggenheim Museum through the trees in Central Park.