Art Imitates Polygons

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT LETTERS TRILOGY
Edited by Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer.
Letters to Apprentices.
Illustrated. 211 pp. Cloth, $17.95. Paper, $8.95.
Letters to Architects.
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By Ada Louise Huxtable

THE mortality of great buildings is shattering. They disappear, or are ruined beyond recognition, while their images are fixed forever in familiar photographs that have become more real than the buildings themselves. All are prey to the passage of time, the vicissitudes of climate, the unreliability of materials and construction, and changing ownership and taste. But nothing is more vulnerable than the house, that personal, emotional compact and battleground between architect and client that is inevitably and almost instantly vandalized in degrees from simple insensitivity to total sabotage. Only the pictures keep faith. And depending on how skillfully the architect's image has been manipulated, they can tell eternal truths or eternal lies.

Even more shattering than the vulnerability of the great modern houses is the realization of how old they are. They have all reached, or are well past, the half-century mark. The golden anniversary of Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater was celebrated recently by a scholarly symposium at Columbia University. Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye will rise from a grassy hillside in France until the end of time in the austere black and white of the textbook pictures, promising a future that never came, but the image is pure, arrested, 1929. A spalled and peeling relic 35 years later, it was restored through an international appeal. Walter Gropius's revolutionary modern house in Lexington, Mass., is now the property of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. Wright's earliest houses, staples of art history, were designed a century ago.

Fallingwater, which may be the most famous house of our time, has been more fortunate than most. Owned and maintained by the Pennsylvania Nature Conservancy under the watchful eye of Edgar Kaufmann Jr., the son of the man who built it, the house retains both its image and its integrity through a carefully endowed and monitored bargain with fate. The dramatic, cantilevered forms hover above the rushing falls in a freeze-frame likeness of the classic 1936 view — image as icon in an enduring harmony of man and nature.

Another wonderful Wright house, the Freeman House in the Hollywood Hills, is a macabre semiruin, barely kept alive by a devoted curator with token funds. What has not succumbed to weather and neglect since 1924 has been dismembered by the marital and territorial battles of the spirited Freeman family and the ingenious adjustments of their subsequent architect, Rudolf Schindler, who attacked Wright's interiors with the peculiar sadistic energy architects reserve for one another's work. Still, passages of extraordinary, evocative beauty remain.

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To go beyond mutation or mutilation, to know a structure as the architect conceived it, means going back to primary sources, to the evidence of the architect's own hand and words. If, as in the case of Frank Lloyd Wright, there are the extensive archives of drawings and documents that have been preserved at Taliesin and Taliesin West, the architect's homes and studios in Wisconsin and Arizona, a wealth of material waits to be explored. Sketches and studies that lead to the finished rendering reveal the initial vision. Records supply materials, construction, costs and the reasoning behind important decisions. Letters provide a firsthand account of the relationship between architect and client and the intimate details of the design process. It is the letters, in particular, that illuminate the present through the past and forge the connections between life and art.

The publication of the "Frank Lloyd Wright Letters Trilogy," edited by Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, director of archives of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundations, is therefore particularly welcome. The letters add both new and familiar material to the expanding body of Wright literature that has been coming from the presses in recent years. The 10-volume collection of Wright's work in preparation by Mr. Pfeiffer promises to be not only a major publishing event but also the kind of illustrated *oeuvre complète* that is long overdue. Although the letters volumes are slimmer and far less complete than one might have hoped for, they provide valuable source material for scholars engaged in the re-evaluation that is part of the revisionist trend in art and history today.

Still, one constantly wishes for more than is given. Replies from clients are rare or totally absent here; the one-sided communications often resemble a conversation between a gifted monologist and a statue. Much reading must be done between the lines. In the case of the correspondence with his client Darwin Martin, which deals with Wright's important early work in Buffalo, the entire collection was recently purchased jointly from an outside source by the State University of New York, Buffalo, and the University of California; we must wait for publication by a professor at Buffalo, Jack Quinan.

Because most manifestoes offered by architects are badly flawed exercises in pseudophilosophy, we learn more from the letters than we ever can from Wright's formal, preachy statements. What they give us is real: the battles won, lost and finessed, the sustaining faith and the inevitable compromises, the hopes dashed and fulfilled, the trials and uncertainties that form an insistent and inescapable background (and impediment) to any large or noble work. Truth in trivia, one might call it; the real-life drama of architecture — the passion, the problems, the genuine *cris de coeur*. But always, and above all, the letters are dominated by the driving belief that the architect is capable of producing a fine, or a beautiful, thing.

M. SCHWERTZ, ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

Frank Lloyd Wright in 1958 at Taliesin West near Scottsdale, Ariz.

Obviously, considering the source, nothing in this selection will destroy Wright's myth or legend or fuel the popular soiled-linen school of psychohistory. His well-known scandalous behavior has long since ceased to shock. His desertion of his family for the wife of a client in 1909 was enough to ostracize him, an event referred to elliptically in a letter to Darwin Martin: "I am accustomed to being alien but not to see women drawing their skirts aside as they pass and my old friends(?) crossing the road to avoid me. . . ." The murder of his second wife by a crazed servant who also set fire to Taliesin in Wisconsin is the conventional stuff of soap opera today.

His emphasis on his own genius, considered a professional sin before the if-you've-got-it-flaunt-it era, became a tiresome bore. His publicly expressed opinions of fellow architects was another violation of approved professional behavior. "Aalto's work on M.I.T. affects me as inspirational as a clumsy grub," he wrote clearly, if ungrammatically. He called Mies van der Rohe "a constipated architect." His redundant tongue-lashings reached their apogee in his acceptance speech for the American Institute of Architects' Gold Medal in 1949, a curious brew of bitterness, idealism and pride implying clearly that he, alone, had built with courage, vision and honor. "Therein lies the source of my arrogance, why I can stand here tonight, look you in the face and insult you," he concluded, somewhat anticlimactically.

WRIGHT insisted on his identity as a nonconformist and loner. To the distinguished Dutch architect Hendrik Berlage he wrote, "I am branded as an 'Artist' architect, and so under suspicion by my countrymen — and especially as I have been an 'insurgent' in private life as well as in my work; and my hair is not short nor my clothes so utterly conventional as to inspire confidence in the breast of the good American Business Man." (One wonders how he could have maintained his insurgency after the sexual and sartorial revolution.) He saw himself above the crowd, trying to give the world something better than it had ever known, or perhaps than it deserved.

We get a fair sampling of the famous arrogance and his clients' notorious intransigence here. The letters are full of the pride and irascibility for which Wright was known — a reputation he seemed to cherish. They beg, plead, persuade, coax and cajole; clients are seduced and dragged into Wright's vision of the future. "What is the matter?" he asked Rose Pauson. "Your little house was the darling of our hearts and enough creative energy went into getting it done . . . to build a battleship. . . . I can't see for the life of me how you can afford to turn all this love and loyalty to your little house down." To Darwin Martin: "If Mrs. Martin could not feel in the atmosphere of the work something as true and simple as it was broad and capable, she would be a very foolish woman to entrust me with the designing of her home. She would be wasting the opportunity of her life. . . ." To Ludd Spivey of Florida Southern College: "I can assure you that we shall have a college unequaled in the beauty of use or the use of beauty anywhere on earth."

There are lengthy, acrimonious arguments. Wright reacted with fury when Edgar Kaufmann ordered independent engineering tests of the cantilever construction at Bear Run: "I have assured you time and again that the structure is sound. . . . Your tests have not been tests at all but ignorant abuse." But there is always charm and wit and the obvious belief that the ends justified the means. When Malcolm and Nancy Willey moved into their house after the usual

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