An Exercise in Chinese Irony
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

An Exercise in Chinese Irony

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INTERESTED New Yorkers can see 24 windows designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Martin house of 1904 in Buffalo and the Coonley playhouse of 1912 in Riverside, Ill., at the downtown outpost of the Richard Feigen gallery, 141 Greene Street, from 12 to 6, Wednesdays through Sundays until Dec. 16. They cannot buy them, because all have been sold at prices ranging from $400 to $1,800 each. They were snapped up before the exhibition opened.

Photographs, as the saying goes, do not do the windows justice. Suspended as *objets* in space, swaying and glittering gently, they are confirmation, as if any were needed, of the consistent talent and style of a man who was as great as his own publicity claimed.

They stand — or rather, hang — as crystalline statements of the characteristic Wrightian geometry: ruler-straight leaded lines, square, rectangular or V-shaped "tree of life" inserts of iridescent or chalky colored glass, patterns that are at once "modernistic" and contemporary classics. Each window has the evanescent imprimatur that separates the artifact from the work of art; as in all of Wright's accessory details, the two are fused.

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These examples of one element of Wright's creativity have been avidly acquired by collectors, architects and museums. It is nice to see them on tasteful, jewel-like display and to know that they are appreciated and even coveted, and it would be even nicer to stop right there.

But the windows in their gallery isolation start a whole chain of troubling thoughts. The Martin house still stands, recently returned to life and history by a sensitive patron and architect. It has been restored for Martin Meyerson, president of the State University at Buffalo, by Edgar Tafel, who spent his early professional years as a student at Wright's Taliesin Fellowship.

But all connected with the project admit that much has been irreparably lost through neglect and the vandalism of ignorance and economic expediency. The building had been cut up into apartments and offices; the magnificent wisteria-theme gold mosaic of the mantel wall and the study's gold ceramic floors had been destroyed without a trace; every movable Wright detail was either stripped out or demolished. Still, persistence and sensibility have gained a notable victory.

Of Wright's most famous landmark structures, the Larkin Building of 1904, also in Buffalo, was the object of a bitter battle to save it more than a decade ago. The preservationists failed and it was leveled to rubble. The 1909 Robie House in Chicago is caught between a foundation-tenant that seems to have a gut-resistance to and deep dislike of everything that Wright intended and an architect trying to translate that distaste into functional, contemporary uses. The result is ambiguous, to put it mildly.

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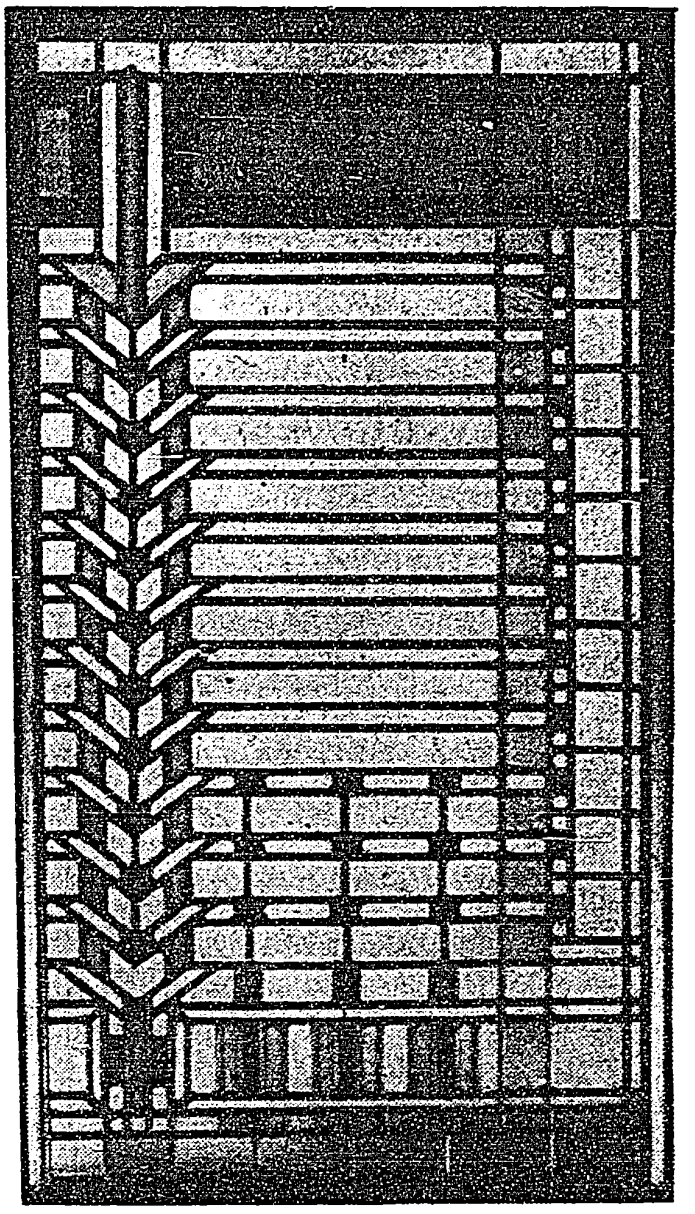
The Imperial Hotel was demolished in Tokyo this year. It is quite possible, considering the present collector's market for Wrightiana, that if the building could have been taken apart carefully, making all the decorative details, artifacts and furnishings available to dealers, enough money could have been raised to save a good part of the structure, which, of course, would no longer have existed. The irony there does not need to be underlined.

The market is strong for bits and pieces of Wright structures or other celebrated historic buildings — Sullivan ornament is scattered in museums, university galleries and private collections across the country. Where the Sullivan buildings stood there are parking lots. The bits and pieces, all of which clearly show the hand of the master whose masterpiece is gone, are grist now for the dealer's mill, who is not to be blamed for picking up the stuff when it is so callously made available. (Another switch: the wrecking firm that demolished New York's Jerome Mansion installed the interior woodwork in its own office.) As a work of architecture, of course, the source has ceased to exist.



A Frank Lloyd Wright window from the Martin House
Being avidly acquired by collectors

So, while buyers stand in line for architectural fragments — the Museum of Modern Art was beaten to it by Joseph Hirshhorn for some of the Feigen-Wright windows but consoles itself with the thought that something better is bound to come along — attrition continues of the art that provides these objects and that gives them their meaning.

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Few are the collectors who can be interested in preserving a work of architecture. That is a selfless and very expensive gesture, with far less status value than the bulging collection. You can pay millions for a Monet but it doesn't need an endowment. A contribution to society rather than a personal acquisition does not go over big among the patrons of the arts.

The whole subject has irony within irony, like Chinese boxes. The ultimate irony is the location of the Wright window exhibition. The Feigen Gallery is a building on Greene Street between Houston and Prince Streets, an area christened Hell's Hundred Acres by New York's Fire Department because of repeated, tragic fires due to code violations and bad housekeeping in the flammable waste industries that tenant the neighborhood. With that name, the street doesn't need an enemy.

But it is also known, internationally to architectural historians as one of the finest and most complete — as yet — rows of cast-iron-fronted buildings of the 19th century in existence anywhere. Considered of singular stylistic and structural significance, these continuous iron colonnades filled with huge expanses of glass offer a grimy, but handsome, testament to New York's superiority in this phase of architectural development, as well as an urban survival of considerable technological, esthetic and historic importance.

Greene Street would have gone long ago, since it has been repeatedly pronounced dead by conventional real estate reasoning, except that the city made a study of the area and discovered that its low-rent loft space supports essential small industries that provide employment for unskilled workers. That saved it from demolition and development.

The acknowledged monument of the cast iron period in New York, the Haughwout Store slightly farther south on Broome Street, and the remainder of this remarkable cast iron district, will not be so lucky. They will be destroyed by the Lower Manhattan Expressway—another Chinese box irony.

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The Greene Street area deserves the biggest preservation fight that New York can muster. But it will not get it. Too few understand its architectural and urban values, in spite of increasing lip service to such values, or comprehend its proper development potential when, and if, conditions dictate change.

Unlike European cities, New York is just not that knowledgeable, sophisticated or concerned. It will be, eventually, when it is too late. Even cities grow up. But it is more likely that there will be some stunning cast iron columns and Corinthian capitals in some enterprising gallery to be snapped up by the discerning collector. We point no moral. We just tell it like it is.