THE FACTS OF WRIGHT'S GREATNESS: THE ARTIST SMALL FLAW
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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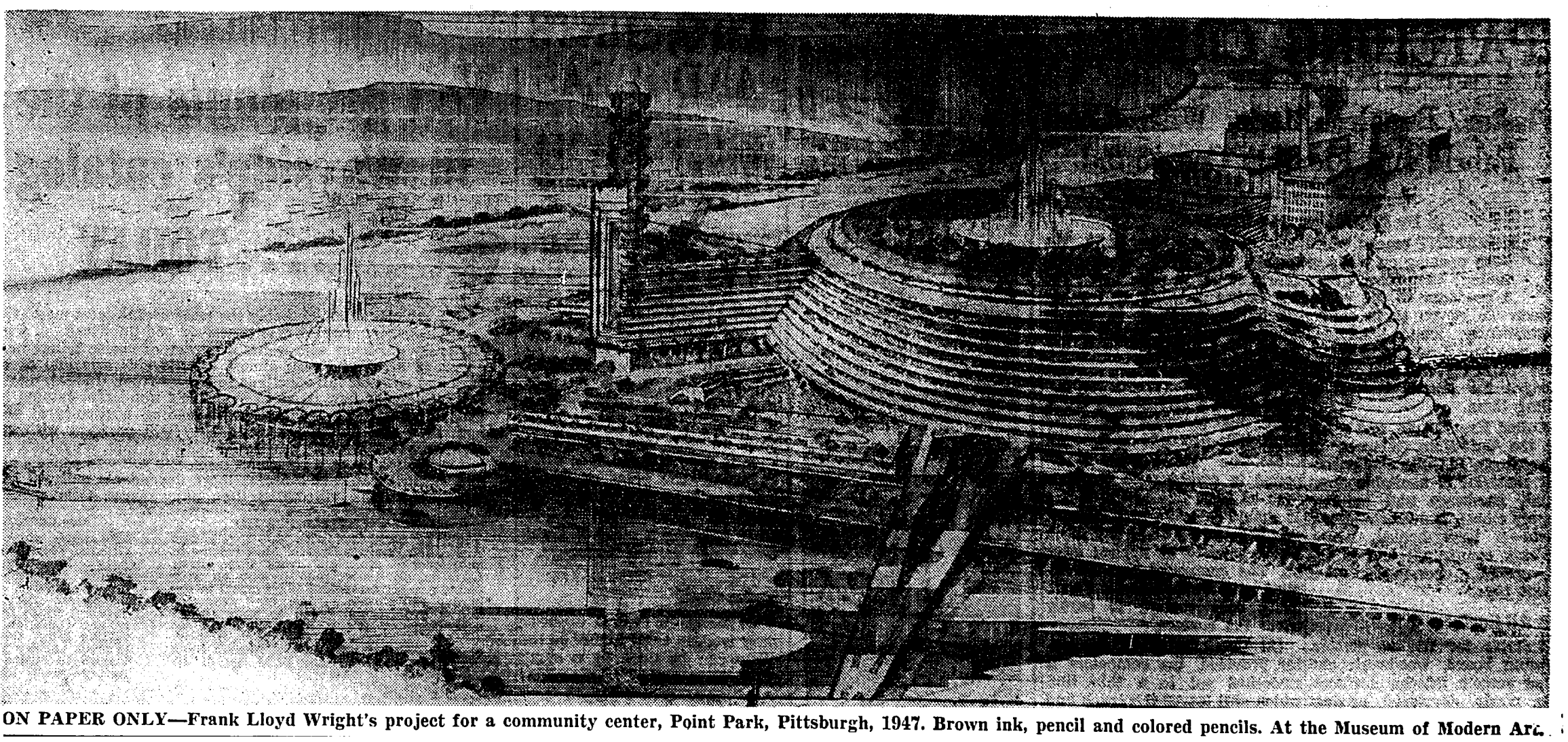

ON PAPER ONLY—Frank Lloyd Wright's project for a community center, Point Park, Pittsburgh, 1947. Brown ink, pencil and colored pencils. At the Museum of Modern Art.

THE FACTS OF WRIGHT'S GREATNESS

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ANYONE interested in the reality of Frank Lloyd Wright rather than the legend — and the legend of his eccentricities, since his death, has been substituted more and more frequently for the facts of his greatness — will find it in the superb show of the architect's drawings that opened last week at the Museum of Modern Art. More than 250 examples, culled from approximately 8,000 in the Wright Foundation archives, form a staggering, and often touching, testimony to the fertility and originality of Wright's ideas. They also include some astonishingly beautiful drawings in their own right.

It is the peculiar magic of drawing that it affords the most direct communication of all the arts; it is a shared, personal experience, a straight line from the mind, heart and hand of the artist to the eye and heart of the viewer. In these sketches and renderings Wright speaks to the spectator with a simplicity and immediacy that his buildings, revised, modified, possessed by others, cannot.

The Artist

Wright, as he is revealed in these galleries, is an artist of extraordinary sensitivity and surprising introspection. The delicate precision and lyric loveliness of his vision deny the bombast of his own statements, the distortions of popular propaganda and the perversions of his interpreters. There is no mistaking the evidence; it is his own. This quality of quiet revelation is the surprise and wonder of an unusually important show.

Compare, for example, the painstakingly conscientious development of the spiral scheme in the series for the Gordon Strong project of 1925, culminating in the equally painstaking evolution of the Guggenheim Museum from 1943 to 1959, with Wright's frequently quoted remark about his designs, "I just shake them out of my sleeve!" Or study the group for the Doheny Ranch project of 1921, drawings that make his belief in the calculated beauty of structure and the natural beauty of landscape painfully clear in the lovely fragility of their rendering.

Perhaps it was the shattering of the idyll of the perfect relationship between nature and architecture as he visualized it, or the near-impossibility of its realization, that embittered Wright, as well as more publicized matters. The pattern of architectural development in this country in the twentieth century has been the rape of the landscape, a process that enraged him. The synthesis he sought was achieved only infrequently, in such classic examples as Fallingwater, the famous Kaufmann house at Bear Run, Pa., or his own homes in Arizona and Wisconsin. Other buildings, like the Guggenheim Museum, preserve the architectural concept at the expense of the environment. But this is never evident in the drawings; there are no discordant structures in the backround of the Guggenheim, or they recede into insignificant abstraction behind overwhelming flights of fancy like his visionary proposal for a Pittsburgh Civic Center.

For if the drawings themselves seem dated — and the fact that they are always of the nineteenth century in style and technique is not an insubstantial part of their charm, as is the brownish, almost Oriental, discoloration of paper in the older ones — the ideas are not. There is much pathos in the fact that so large a part of the show is devoted to prophetic, unbuilt designs. There are concepts, both practical and fanciful, to challenge several future generations. In this sense, Wright has not died at all.

The unpretentiousness of his technique, usually colored pencils or ink line with a touch of colored pencil or wash, is another measure of his intentions. These Japanese-influenced, understated sketches were the vehicle of inner convictions developed with the utmost subtlety and integrity; they were never meant for a "hard sell." Wright was still the artist-architect, in the great tradition of history. The flashy commercial rendering, the slick scale model, were devices he abhorred. His public relations act was purely personal dramatics; it never touched the principles of his art.

Small Flaw

There is only one regret to be expressed in connection with a perfect show, and that is the fact that no indication is given of which drawings are solely from Wright's hand, and which are the work, in part at least, of those who worked with him, under his direction. While it is perfectly obvious in many cases, conjecture is a dangerous tool; it would serve history and Wright better if the record were clarified now, while facts are still available.

Arthur Drexler and Wilder Green, director and assistant director of the museum's Department of Architecture and Design, with the collaboration of the Wright Foundation, have performed a Gargantuan task of inestimable importance by selecting the most significant documents of a life's great work, and they have done so with devotion and distinction. Mr. Drexler's book, accompanying the show, published by Horizon Press, puts the accomplishment into permanent form. Mr. Green's installation, free from theatrics, emphasizes the solid scholarship that has always marked the museum's best ventures. It will all be there until May 6—the dreams of a lifetime, the built and the unbuilt, a fitting and magnificent memorial to America's greatest architect.