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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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One of the most useful events of the 1930s to Wright was the January 1938 *Architectural Forum*. On his return from Moscow Wright missed the sailing of the *Normandie* on 7 July 1937 and therefore returned from Europe on the *Bremen*, arriving in New York City the week of 14 July.¹ He began immediately to work on the *Forum* articles.

Probably the result of working on occasional articles about Wright for the *Forum* as a “consultant” to editor Harold Myers, George Nelson had come to know Wright. From 1936 into the 1950s they often visited when Wright was in Manhattan or Nelson would drop in at Taliesin for a few days to unwind; he was always welcome. Nelson wrote a scathing review against the set designs for the 1949 film of Ayn Rand’s novel *The Fountainhead*, making certain that his readers were in no doubt that the designs were not Wright’s.² Anyway, apparently Wright asked Nelson if the *Forum* might be willing to publish the preliminary designs of the Johnson Wax administration building. When put to editor Myers he agreed. In November 1936 he offered—and Wright accepted—\$500 for exclusive publication rights of the Johnson Wax building. Wright was slow in getting the drawings to New York so Nelson visited Wright in May 1937.³ On seeing the drawings for Falling-water, with photographs of its construction and as completed, he asked Wright if it might be included in the *Forum* with the Johnson building, in fact with other projects as well. In a follow-up letter to Wright he implied something like a special issue and offered his opinion that the “collection” would “call attention to the fact that while the so-called International Style has been taking advantage of every possible bit of publicity, the cause of organic architecture” is being “carried on by its first and chief exponent.”⁴ Naturally Wright thought this a splendid idea and agreed to “a number” about and for Taliesin, but he could not put the material together until his return from Moscow; and this he did.

After hearing of Nelson’s plans for the Wright issue Myers was quite “excited” about its prospects and wondered which issue of the 1938 volume would suit: Wright suggested January.⁵ After anxious and hurried preparations at both ends the special was released in mid-January 1938.⁶ Other than front and back matter and advertisements, the one hundred and six pages of the magazine were designed by Wright.

The astounding revelations in that issue showed that the new Wright was creating new architecture and that it was without formula, informal, diverse. Buildings and projects from the first

golden decade were pictured along with those more recent: St. Mark's Towers, the Willey house, the Paul Hanna house, the *Capital Journal* project, Herbert Johnson's mansion, and so on. Also included were drawings for the Johnson Wax building, of course, and photographs of it under construction; beautiful photographs by Hedrich Blessing of Fallingwater; and seventeen pages about and photographic views of Wright's home and the Fellowship facilities.

It was a very important product in the Wright campaign, equal to the autobiography. In fact it was much more valuable to his image as a master architect because it proved his creative abilities were not diminished, still extraordinary, unique. Together with the revolutionary *Architectural Record* article in 1908 and the January 1948 *Architectural Forum*, it forms a triumvirate of architectural journalism in kind and in quality of production unequalled for another American architect. Myers was fully aware of the importance of his January 1938 issue and as early as January 1940 he was pushing Wright for the next "magnum opus."⁷ However, those plans were postponed because of the war.

The *Architectural Forum*—and *Record*—were widely read in Britain and that fact leads to the next event to concern these essays: Wright's acceptance of an invitation to the Sir George Watson Chair.

19 Interest and Preparation

The Sulgrave Manor, north-northwest of Banbury in Northampton, England, was purchased in 1914 by a committee that in turn gave it to the British and American people as a memorial of friendship between the two nations. It is now administered by a board whose purpose is to foster U.S.–British relations.¹ The manor was opened to the public in 1921. It is a fine example of a small, somewhat Elizabethan manor house completed c. 1560 by Lawrence Washington, direct ancestor of America's first president, whose family lived in the house until about 1660. The Sir George Watson Chair, established in 1919 and administered by the Sulgrave board, is meant to be a series of lectures (usually six) by a prominent if not eminent person on a subject of their choosing. There are no other responsibilities except perhaps social.

In March 1938 the board invited Wright to occupy the Watson Chair.² In recollection Wright noted that he was preceded by, therefore in company with, people like Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt.³ (Postwar recipients of the Chair have included Alan Nevins, Marcus Cunliff, and Oscar Handlin.) The year Wright gave his Watson Lectures he received £500.⁴ After mutual agreement about the lectures he suggested a theater at the University of London would be an appropriate venue since that was the traditional location. On the other hand the Royal Institute of