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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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OA Funding Provided By:

National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.

The title-level DOI for this work is:

[doi:10.7551/mitpress/3039.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/3039.001.0001)

Gold

The Sulgrave Manor Board had asked Wright to speak on the “science” of architecture and on his interpretation of “America to England in architecture” as occupant of the Watson Chair of American History, Literature and Institutions.¹ When completed, in at least one polite English opinion the lectures had “greatly contributed to the advancement of good will between [the] two countries,” this “irrespective of any question of politics.”² In Wright’s opinion it was a good show. In early June he returned to the midwestern prairies somewhat chuffed, as his British hosts would have phrased it.

Surrounded by the warmth and relative security of his home at Taliesin West in winter of 1939–40 the septuagenarian architect began to write about his London experiences of the previous spring. He wrote of those “intelligent” audiences and their “fine character.” In retrospect he enjoyed what he called their “purposeful heckling.” He remembered more seriously that the hereditary lords and ladies were “rather a bore, don’t you know.” His association with those London audiences and the RIBA was to culminate the following winter in an episode that reflected the highest level of British cultural diplomacy. He and his work were again weighed in London. If not as broadly as Wright might have wished, nonetheless after their personal experience of 1939 the imperialists were to study more closely America’s feisty living heritage. The episode that engaged Wright’s professional British colleagues was the determination of the 1941 Royal Gold Medal of the RIBA. The affair remained outside Wright’s knowledge and was not of his making: he merely accepted their offer. One immediate result of his award was an optimistic request from an English newspaper asking him to comment on how to approach postwar rebuilding. This aspect of the episode was of his making: a response that dramatically and pompously denounced the war and British society, economics, and their war effort, and supported a vocal and influential stream of intellectual argument in America against participation in the war, an isolationist view.

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In October 1940 it was time for the RIBA to begin the process of selecting a gold medalist for 1941. In March they had given the 1940 medal to English architect Charles F. Annesley Voysey. Now, because of the war, the Institute noted that there were difficulties. Just getting people together was one. More importantly it was feared that some British architects might agree to a suspension of the award for the duration of the war. The president of the RIBA was informed that there had been only two breaks in continuity in the medal’s long history. The first was when Queen Victoria died in

January 1901 and the schedule was put “out of gear.” The other break was in 1924 when Englishman W. R. Lethaby rather dramatically “upset things” by refusing it. The gold award was given right through World War I, so why not through the new war? The president was also informed that there was no rule to say that the award should go to a Britisher for two years running and to a foreigner in the third year. A more or less regular practice to that effect had been established but there was no constitutional requirement as such. In fact the practice had been broken eight times between 1869 and 1912.

William Henry Ansell was the new president. He had just been invested and thought it necessary to be counseled on procedures as well as problems induced by the war, and possible courses of action. When accounting for the “existing conditions abroad,” the number of countries that might have been seriously considered in 1940 was severely limited and by January 1941 even more so. From a political and practical point of view people of German, Polish, Norwegian, Danish, Dutch, Belgian, French, or Italian nationality were excluded. Those of Soviet, Swedish, or Swiss nationality were not easily considered. “Some unimportant countries,” to use their phrase, were dismissed but not named. There remained four possible choices, a Spanish or Portuguese nominee or an easy option of someone from the United States or the British Dominions. Ansell’s counselor offered the view that the easiest thing to do was to give the award to a British architect but cautioned that it might be difficult to find the right man.¹

On 2 October 1940 members of the RIBA Council were solicited for nominations to be received by 12 October. Conditions of the award as approved by the King were:

The Medallist must be a distinguished Architect or man of Science or Letters, who had designed or executed a building of high merit or produced a work tending to promote or facilitate the knowledge of Architecture or the various branches of science connected therewith, or whose life work has promoted or facilitated the knowledge of Architecture or the various branches of science connected therewith.²

Strangely, only the RIBA Council could nominate and then determine the medalist. The Council was large, indeed the better word is enormous.³ The membership was obviously considerably greater, yet it was officially excluded even from offering suggestions. The medal was to be decided secretly by a comparatively small elite, a practice that appears to have been consistent over the years. Before 1940 therefore, those variously formed elites had chosen fifty-six British recipients. To give an indication of the influence of the Beaux-Arts during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

fourteen Frenchmen had been honored. Four each were from Austria, Germany, and Holland; two each from Sweden and Italy; one from Canada and three from the United States.

In 1940 nine nominations were received; seven were British. They were Stanley Davenport Adshead (in his seventies, he had been professor of town planning at Liverpool University for twenty years); the late Earl of Crawford and Belcarres (apparently he died March 1940; his name, his familial identity eludes us but he had held the chair at one of Wright's Watson lectures); Banister Flight Fletcher (author of the classic *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*); E. Vincent Harris; Charles Herbert Reilly (head of the architecture school at Liverpool University during its remarkable development from 1904 to 1933); Albert Edward Richardson (a professor of architecture at the University of London before becoming Director of the Royal Academy School of Architecture in the 1930s); and Thomas Smith Tait, partner of John Burnet. Four were identified as academics; others may have been but were not so designated. Two others nominated were foreigners: Otto Rudolf Salvisberg (architect and teacher from Switzerland who worked for thirty years in Germany prior to 1930), and Frank Lloyd Wright. These were, in pragmatic terms, safe and reasonable nominations. Adshead was a well-known neo-Georgian;⁴ three of the nine were best known as teachers, and one as an historian and eclectic. Only Tait could have been considered a modernist of some—but no extra—competence.

Wright had been nominated by Herbert Kenchington, Norval R. Paxton, and Howard Robertson. Members of the Royal Gold Medal Committee were president Ansell (Chairman), Charles Henry Holden (Gold Medallist in 1936 and a sponsor of Le Corbusier for the Gold Medal in 1953), Howard Robertson, L. Sylvester Sullivan (Honorary Treasurer), Michael Theodore Waterhouse (Honorary Secretary who later became president in 1948–49), and Ian MacAlister, secretary of the RIBA (as differentiated from Honorary Secretary). Of those committee members Holden nominated twice and in so doing diminished the value of his nominations and later his vote. Fletcher was the sole nominee of Ansell. And, of course, there was Robertson's nomination.⁵

Robertson was active in the RIBA, in professional affairs and in debates about architectural theory. He was also a man of considerable influence. An American expatriate and cousin of Morton Shand, he was appointed to the Architectural Association School of Architecture in 1919 and became principal and then director before he resigned in 1935. His little book *The Principles of Architectural Composition*, first published in 1924, went through many impressions (my copy is the eighth, of 1955). It was a preeminent teaching guide for British traditional notions of composition. (In it Robertson included a plan of Wright's Imperial Hotel, Tokyo, suggesting that it expressed its

concrete structure.) One of the first serious presentations in Britain of French modernism was by Robertson and his colleague F. R. Yerbery, whose *Examples of Modern French Architecture* was published in 1928. Together in 1929 they began a series “A Pictorial Review of Modern Architecture in Europe” for the American professional journal *Architecture*, using Yerbery’s photographs. Later Robertson helped to encourage the introduction of modernism as touted by the Central Europeans. His association with their Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) and its English wing Modern Architectural Research (MARS) was not a happy affair, but his influence in England remained notable and steady until the mid-1940s. He not only showed an interest in Wright in the 1920s but reviewed Wright’s publications in the 1930s and 1940s. In September 1940 he authored an article on American architecture for a special issue of the London magazine *The Studio* about America, one of a number of such efforts of that time. Robertson gave Wright plenty of notice as the architect with “the most individual influence in America.” In a general survey concerning “domestic architecture and the second great war” for the annual *Decorative Arts 1940* he again included Wright, erroneously placing him between tradition and the “complete breakaway” of the Central Europeans. As well, Robertson and John Gloag were good friends, as witness the dedication to Gloag of Robertson’s book *Architecture Arising* of 1944. In an otherwise relatively conservative committee it would be safe to say that Ansell, MacAlister, and Robertson would have been the persuasive members; persuasive toward an architect who practiced modernism of a type not too radical.

During Wright’s visit in 1939 to give the Watson lectures, the English public and its press were not interested in his presence in London or his esoteric talks. There were more pressing matters in Poland, Germany, and Italy, matters that attracted nearly all public and political attention. Troop movements, Ribbentrop in Italy or Poland, conciliation moves, Lord Halifax in Russia, Japanese bombing of Chungking—all this and much more took place during May 1939, just before Wright’s visit. And in the same month the King and Queen went off to Canada for a royal tour coast to coast and then, via the New York World’s Fair, to Washington, D.C.⁶ One reason for visiting Washington was to enlist United States moral support for the British position. Then on 1 September 1939 Hitler’s armies attacked Poland, and on 3 September England and France declared they were at war with Germany. By mid-1940 the British were desperate for U.S. physical support—troops, weapons, transport—for full military participation against Germany and Italy. But the American people and the politicians on Capitol Hill were deeply divided between participation in and independence from European problems. Because of isolationist and antiwar sentiment President Franklin

D. Roosevelt was reluctant to act positively and openly and physically support England. In this situation British cultural as well as political figures appealed to their American counterparts' sense of kinship. As president of the RIBA, Ansell sent a long letter "to the Architectural Profession in the U.S." supposedly written while in an air raid shelter. It was published in the November 1940 *Architectural Forum*. It spoke of the British profession's attempt to participate in defense and then in war and then optimistically to look to future reconstruction with the eventual peace to come. About forty percent of the text was about the war and its idiotic ways, of unexploded bombs in innocent villages, the need to protect freedom, and about a link between British and American people and the two professional groups. As with all messages from Britain, and the above is only an example, there was an implied urgency on the need for unity of the two countries against what was surely a common foe and of material activity through engagement.

In view of the desperate situation that faced Britain, it is reasonable to ask whether those that determined the royal gold medalist were reacting to events of the day, more precisely to diplomatic needs. Did the committee receive certain suggestions *sotto voce* from elevated places and people? There is no firm evidence either way, yet the medal committee must have been aware of the potential publicity that would come from recognizing Wright, a man of immense stature in his profession and one so prominent—and newsworthy—in America. Announcements of the medal always received wide publicity in architectural and building circles in both the USA and Britain. Was the committee alert to the international role they were playing when in mid-1944 they decided that the Royal Gold Medal for 1945 would be given to the Soviet architect Viktor Vesnin?⁷ Was it meant to perform a similar role in 1940?

Previous American medalists were given awards during periods when American support, political or military, was of no particular concern to Britain. The socially aggressive Richard Morris Hunt received his citation in 1893, Charles Follen McKim (of McKim, Mead and White in New York City) in 1903, and the last before Wright was the aesthete Thomas Hastings in 1922: all *New Englanders*. Yet in Wright's case the question of diplomatic need, so to speak, is reasonable, while an unequivocal answer difficult. Moreover, those who granted the distinction may or may not have been conscious of any diplomatic pressures, covertly coercive or otherwise.

Wright had been invited to give the 1939 Watson lectures in part to fill a void. "It is almost impossible to name any one man as the leader of modern architecture in England to-day, but it is perhaps Maxwell Fry," said architect F. R. S. Yorke, "who should be given first place by his colleagues. He has been responsible for a number of houses in which rational planning and delicacy

of treatment are combined with a precise selection of materials to produce a fine finish.”⁸ Yorke was not sure; “perhaps” Fry, and only for some nice houses. Housing, single-family or multiple-family units, was the social issue around which many, if not most, theoretical arguments in Europe were focused during the 1930s: housing for the “masses,” for the workers. Its structures were relatively inexpensive on the one hand (single-family) and on the other they were a politically viable proposition (multiple units). But proficiency in their design only is not a sufficient premise to assume leadership in a profession as dynamic and diverse as architecture. Wright was the master house designer (to some) and the leading architect in America (to most) and of world renown.

The obvious aesthetic quality, however it is defined, of Wright’s buildings was extremely important to observers, particularly those not enchanted with architecture as promoted by the Central Europeans. Their architecture was seen by most people as cold, didactic, unresponsive to human needs, and plain awful. Wright’s architecture was indeed romantic, natural, warm, and full of human dialogue. Although the Central Europeans and constructivists had attempted to reject the notion of beauty in favor of an aesthetic tied to socialist ideology, they had in fact invoked the functionalist idea that beauty was an absolute found in necessity and that it was an end in itself. People, the political proletariat, were denied participation in understanding the new aesthetic, or more particularly in developing it. Wright always charged his audiences with failing to understand that function was only a means to better comprehend how beauty might naturally evolve and be clearly understood. And he was unafraid to search for and speak about beauty.

In England there was utter confusion. Many dilettantes flirted (some dangerously as it turned out) with notions of the political left. Others were trying desperately to find some coherence in a modified modernism, i.e., aesthetic dilutions like art deco or similar fashions. Others looked for someone to sort out the true modern architecture from the false evangelists and pretenders; someone to find an architecture that was new yet familiarly English. In short, someone to fill that leadership void. When historian John Summerson tried to identify contemporaries who were leading British architects of the 1930s, his choice was exactly the same as others’ such as Trevor Dannatt or P. Morton Shand. Their choices included Wells Coates, Fry, the firm of New Zealand colonial expatriates Amyas Connell and Basil Ward, the immigrant Berthold Lubetkin, and the European emigrés Chermayeff, Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Mendelsohn. Of these last five only Lubetkin stayed in England. He arrived on British shores in 1931 and had established a modest and respectable international reputation by 1935. But he was single-minded in his commitments (which included MARS for a short time) and outspokenly antiestablishment especially toward the RIBA.⁹ Summer-

son's view and probably that of most observers went like this: Lubetkin's architecture was "oversophisticated for [its] time and even had the war not intervened, it is doubtful if . . . [Lubetkin's] creations would have helped to form an English 'school.'"¹⁰ Oversophisticated is an odd observation and the emphasis should have been on the word "helped." In short, there was no English hero and no indigenous cult. Perhaps someone who had found an American architecture might have ideas about where or how to find a new, truly English and modern architecture. Or was the fountainhead elsewhere overseas?

Architect Lionel Esher recalled the grand tours, so to speak, of the 1930s rather well. Architects traveled to Stockholm and Hilversum; a few visited America and occasionally held audience with Wright. But the vital center was Paris.¹¹ And Paris was the place for avant-garde artists and Le Corbusier. He was best known in England for writings about his own work and his association with Soviet Russia; his dominance virtually depressed international recognition of other French architects. However, in June 1940 Paris belonged not to art but to Hitler. There was confusion among English architects. People were trying desperately to find some satisfaction in a modified modernism, i.e., aesthetic dilutions like art deco or similar fashions. With the Beaux-Arts the route has been clear—eclecticism and its rules of proportion, planning, and ornament. There was added in the 1930s, however, a series of European continental ideas seemingly without order or responsibility to acceptable aesthetic tastes and architectonic properties.

The RIBAs award was not about architectural styles or movements but about people and ultimately one person's contribution to architecture. In 1940 it was also and primarily about nationalism. Howard Robertson alluded to some of the difficulties when in 1940 he wrote about "domestic architecture and the second great war." He believed that in recent years architecture had been "influenced by party policies" and "sociological" developments. Russia had "experimented wildly in a new architecture" and then suddenly reverted to a traditional style, which then became a simplified "modernised classic work not unlike that of Fascist Germany," forbidding all other styles and particularly modernism. Robertson was not optimistic. With "officialdom" ruling the "human roost to-day" he could see collective houses with people sleeping in a collective bed listening to a dripping of collective water in a collective bathroom.¹² Indeed, with bureaucracies in a war mode and in control throughout the western world who could exemplify optimism and a reasonable hope for threatened democracies?

There was a need for Britain to find and then sustain an inner strength and cohesion. At the same time it was necessary to secure and hold allies who would help repel a probable invasion.

The allies at that critical moment in late 1940 were in disarray. The French had again lost face, America was not yet engaged, the Soviet Union was always suspect, and so on. Frenchmen who might have been considered by the RIBA had spent many months, even years, working on projects in the Soviet Union—François Jourdain, Le Corbusier, and Lurçat for instance. Their loyalties were ambiguous, perhaps divided. Those of the political left who openly supported the USSR's international Communism probably were viewed as nonnational, perhaps dangerous. Those even vaguely associated with the Axis nations surely were outside consideration. Salvisberg's many years in Germany tainted his prospects and anyway, what could Switzerland offer Britain in 1940? Some had become almost without national identity—emigrés such as Mendelsohn, Gropius, and Mies. The selection of the architect to receive the RIBA gold medal at this critical juncture in English history had to be one who could in some way serve immediate national needs and who, considering persuasions within the committee, was a modernist.

In horrific national crises perhaps architecture becomes irrelevant. In any event, in such moments motivations become confused or hypersensitized, actions imprecise, intentions either vague or exaggerated. Suffice it to say that the paternal figure of Wright was of interest to the English for a variety of reasons, but he seems to have wholly satisfied none beyond veneration and perhaps curiosity. For most, Wright was still one of the masters; petulant, eccentric, but a master architect. A leader? No; at least not in the manner or degree desired by some in the English profession in the late 1930s, as evidenced by the reaction to his Watson lectures. Yet this lack was not crucial to the nomination; nor was the curiously displayed affection by the British for the American from the Midwest prairies critical, though it was not ignored.

The meeting of the RIBA's Royal Gold Medal Committee to determine the medalist was held on 17 October 1940. After what was described as a "thorough" discussion of only slightly over an hour a resolution was passed. By a vote of four to one Wright received their nomination.¹³ Apparently it was that easy. All lobbying had been done before and outside the committee room. The result was submitted verbally by Robertson to the RIBA Council on 29 October 1940 and they approved the recommendation. The Keeper of His Majesty's Privy Purse was informed that the RIBA Council resolved that "subject to His Majesty's Gracious Sanction" Wright receive the medal for two stated reasons: "for the Promotion of Architecture" and in "recognition of his work as an architect."¹⁴

It is now reasonable to propose that after his return to Taliesin near Spring Green, Wisconsin, in 1939, Wright played another and unsuspected part in Anglo-American diplomacy. Was the medal deserved? Of course. When all is considered, however, it appears fortuitous that he gave

those 1939 Watson lectures just one year before nominations were called and that they were published and released in February 1940.

If the award was not manipulated then it was a fortunate windfall for England, in a small yet not an inconspicuous way. The British public was informed in January 1941 that Wright had received the medal. Most importantly, it was emphatically and widely publicized in the United States in all press media. Further, a propaganda campaign began at the same time that presented America and Americans to the English. For example, America was “introduced” to readers of *The Listener* by among others the American journalist Edward R. Murrow and his English counterpart Alistair Cooke, in a series that ran for many months;¹⁵ Charles H. Reilly wrote on “Modern Movements in Architecture” for the same government-controlled magazine and included Wright;¹⁶ and there was Robertson’s article—one of a number—in *The Studio*. More overt propaganda continued throughout the year in all communication fields: attempts to hold American friendship and win their material commitment. Suspicion coupled with circumstantial evidence suggests that Wright’s award neatly fitted into the British campaign.

Wright said he was “listening to the New Year’s Eve broadcast” at his Arizona hibernacle and heard that the medal had been “bestowed” upon him. He was astonished, he said, but that could hardly be true. Why he would dissemble on such a small matter is a mystery.¹⁷ He had received a letter much earlier, dated 4 November 1940, informing him that the RIBA had decided “to recommend to His Majesty the King that the Royal Gold Medal for Architecture for 1941” should be given to Wright. The decision was confidential until he accepted and the King approved. They obviously did not want another Lethaby affair. The letter called to Wright’s attention the long roll-call of medalists since the award was first established in 1849 by Queen Victoria. It gave particular notice to the thirty-one “non-British architects” and the Americans “Ric.” Hunt, “Chas.” McKim, and Hastings. It continued in a relaxed manner to say that

One of the most interesting names of all is not in the list for a particular reason. Fifty or sixty years ago the medal was offered to John Ruskin. He refused it, not because he was not greatly impressed by the compliment, but because he had just received the news that the Italian government had destroyed a beautiful old building in Northern Italy. He said that at such a time all architects and people interested in architecture ought to be sitting in sackcloth and ashes and mourning their failure to prevent an act of vandalism rather than awarding Gold Medals to one another!¹⁸

Wright replied by cable on 16 December to simply “Macalister” that he accepted, adding, “A culture like that can never lose.”¹⁹ To make it all more acceptable to everyone Wright was proposed by Council as an Honorary Corresponding Member of the RIBA in November 1940.²⁰ Wright did not complete and return his application until after he was officially notified that he was recipient of the medal.²¹

Possession of the royal gold eluded Wright. On 31 December he was informed that the King approved of the award.²² On the same day a public announcement prepared by the RIBA was broadcast especially by the BBC. The statement included the Institute’s view that the honor was the highest “that any architect can obtain” in the world.²³ The Institute then informed the American Embassy of the award.²⁴ Then on 17 January 1941 the RIBA caught up with Wright on a small matter: “You may be wondering when the actual *Royal Gold Medal* is going to reach you.” The explanation offered was that the striking of medals awarded by the King had been “postponed until the end of the war.” (Actually, Wright received a letter from Windsor Castle at the end of December 1940 stating that he was the gold medalist for 1941 but that the Medal was to be presented after the war.)²⁵ This freeze was to help maintain the “Gold Reserve,” a precedent that had been set, it was noted, during World War I.²⁶ For the time being both Charles Voysey and Wright received certificates prepared by the office of the Secretary of the Privy Purse.²⁷

So Wright had to wait and Voysey would never see his gold, for he died in February 1941.

Three British architects nominated or otherwise considered at the same time as Wright were eventually given gold medals: the elderly Charles H. Reilly in 1943, Edward Maufe in 1944 (the practice of a foreign recipient every third year was again abandoned on that occasion), and the aged Albert Edward Richardson in 1947. Viktor Vesnin was picked for 1945 and the durable Patrick Abercrombie for 1946.

Finally, in response to a query the Privy Purse office informed the RIBA in 1946 that restrictions on gold were raised and the Royal Mint was preparing “The King’s Medals.”²⁸ The RIBA then made plans to make presentations to those medalists of 1940 through 1947. A grand party, an “unprecedented event,” took place on 15 April 1947.²⁹ Five medalists attended the ceremony; Voysey’s son accepted his father’s medal. Wright preferred not to attend and his medal was sent to him. Viktor Vesnin did not attend but acknowledged the award with a telegram to the RIBA. It included the message: “In this act I envisage not only such high appreciation in recognition of my modest efforts in the field of architecture but also a symbol of the further promotion of creative co-

operation between architects in Great Britain and the Soviet Union.”³⁰ In June 1945 Vesnin wrote a more formal letter of acceptance saying,

It affords me particular pleasure to find my name included in the glorious roll of Medallists now, at a time when the people of my country and Great Britain are waging a heroic struggle shoulder to shoulder against a common enemy. In this struggle difficult and honorable responsibilities have been laid upon the shoulders of architects. We have to give new houses to millions of people who have been deprived of heart and home by barbaric Hitlerism.

Vesnin’s capitulation to the Communist Party’s dogma and the tortuous eclecticism it favored must have continued to trouble him, for he stated that he was still hoping to “create new forms of contemporary architecture which will satisfy the great demands of the age.”³¹ There is no record of a similar courteous letter of acceptance from Wright, only his quick cablegram. Soviet architect David Arkin (who personally assisted Wright on his 1937 trip to Moscow) was also an Honorary Corresponding Member of the RIBA. He too wrote on the general enthusiasm of all Soviet architects about Vesnin’s award.³² The medal was presented to Vesnin in 1946 in Moscow by the Press Attaché of the British Embassy.³³ Wright’s medal was delivered to Taliesin in July 1947.³⁴

Wright’s son, John, recalled his father’s “open joy” at receiving the Royal Gold Medal and believed that Wright “treasured it above all [awards].”³⁵

It is of interest to note that Wright and Olgivanna next traveled to England in 1950. Again he was a guest. There was brief report to the membership of the RIBA in its *Journal*. The Wrights’ visit to Britain appeared to “have been a great success.”

Age has not enfeebled his acute mind nor dulled the edge of his provocative wit. Both were vigorously exercised at the three gatherings of architects at which he was entertained, namely, the annual prize giving of the A.A. School of Architecture (the original purpose of his visit to the country), the luncheon held by the Executive Committee of the R.I.B.A. Council and the dinner held by the Architecture Club.³⁶

It was a social occasion.

But the story of Wright’s gold award does not end with the RIBA’s medalists’ party in April 1947. There was some interesting correspondence between Wright and an English newspaper that effectively illumines his professional relationship with Great Britain immediately before the U.S. entered the war.