Karen Severns and Mori Koichi, producers and directors

*Magnificent Obsession: Frank Lloyd Wright's Building and Legacy in Japan*

Tokyo: Kismet Productions, 2004, VHS, 126 min. (90 min. version also available), www.magnificent-obsession.org

This documentary film explores a well-known but under-analyzed aspect of Frank Lloyd Wright's long and turbulent career, his architectural work in Japan. It draws on widely published and less accessible archival photographs to provide exhaustive coverage of the designs Wright produced there during the 1910s and 1920s.

A key objective of *Magnificent Obsession: Frank Lloyd Wright's Building and Legacy in Japan* is to demonstrate that Wright's Japanese work was of tremendous importance for his career and that he exerted a profound and lasting influence on architecture in Japan. Early on the narrator asserts that “without Japan, there may have been no second golden age for Frank Lloyd Wright. Without Frank Lloyd Wright, Japan may have forsaken its ancient craft tradition and architectural past in the pursuit of modernization.” The film fairly successfully argues that the commission for the Imperial Hotel came at a time when Wright was especially vulnerable due to personal scandal and that the hotel's perceived success reinvigorated his professional reputation. Yet, its claim that Wright should be credited with convinc- ing the Japanese to embrace their rich architectural heritage is problematic, a point to which I shall return.

*Magnificent Obsession* opens with the now-familiar story of Wright's exposure to Japanese architecture through the Japanese Pavilion at the World Columbia Exposition in Chicago and his early interest in Japanese prints. We learn of his first trip to Japan in 1905, his growing collection of and trade in woodblock prints, and the chain of personal connections that led the directors of the Imperial Hotel to choose Wright as their architect. We also are offered a thumbnail sketch tracing the formation of a modern architectural profession in Japan based primarily on Western models.

Without question, Wright is portrayed as the hero in this narrative. Heroes become heroes by overcoming daunting obstacles, and *Magnificent Obsession* lays out the challenges Wright faced in Japan in some detail. Fires, bureaucratic resistance, and corrupt labor bosses hampered the project and drove up costs. The architect was plagued by health problems. He even took on the forces of nature—the ground underneath the hotel was unstable land-fill, a serious hazard in earthquake country, and the film credits his unconventional earthquake planning with saving the hotel during the Great Kantô Earthquake that devastated the city in September 1923. While Wright's achievements are undeniably impressive, Severns and Koichi appear so determined to canonize him that they overstate their case.

The filmmakers mention but are often dismissive of the extensive criticism leveled at the hotel (for example, the viability of foundations and the appropriateness of its hybrid style for its Japanese context). The narrator states the Imperial Hotel put “Tokyo and Japan on every map.” Surely Tokyo's and Japan's rise to world prominence in the twentieth century rests on more than the reputation of one hotel! When assessing the overall significance of the Imperial Hotel, one of the consultants interviewed in the film, historian Yoneyama Isamu, goes so far as to proclaim: “I believe that the impact of the Imperial Hotel was the most powerful of any single building on any city in history.”

For several surviving structures, *Magnificent Obsession* uses panning shots to convey a coherent sense of space far more effectively than still photography. Unfortunately, most of the structures mentioned in the documentary no longer exist, and in those cases Severns and Koichi were forced to rely solely on plans and photographs. To avoid the monotony of a succession of archival photos (many of low quality and in black and white), they resort to gimmicks. In several instances a camera focusing on photographs of Wright buildings violently shakes to suggest earthquakes. Images of flames are superimposed on a black and white photo of Tokyo to visualize the destructive fires that followed the 1923 earthquake. When the narrator recounts the split that developed between Wright and one of his apprentices, a jagged diagonal line appears on a photo of the two men and the resulting two sides are pulled apart.

One of the great strengths of this documentary is its unusually thorough treatment of the contributions made by the architects who worked with Wright on the Imperial Hotel and other Japanese projects. Since Wright was unfamiliar with working conditions in Japan and was in Tokyo for only part of the protracted planning and construction of the Imperial Hotel, these collaborators were especially important to him. Wright's son John was heavily involved in the Imperial Hotel at one stage (until his father fired him!), as was the Bohemian-born Antonin Raymond, who quit because of increasing tensions with his notoriously temperamental boss. Arata Endo worked closely with Wright throughout his stay in Japan and was responsible for finishing several projects that were still incomplete after Wright returned to the United States. As the film acknowledges, some architects who worked for Wright looked elsewhere for inspiration after leaving his office. Throughout his career, however, Endo remained closely linked to Wright both in form and spirit. If anyone is responsible for preserving Wright's legacy in Japan, it is Endo.

In a segment entitled “Asunder,” the film addresses the decline in Wright's popularity after 1930 when some of his former assistants abandoned his approach. Not long after leaving Wright's employ, Raymond turned to Auguste Perret and Le Corbusier as sources of inspiration, and the Taliesin apprentice Tsuchiu Kameki drew from the Bauhaus for the design of his own celebrated home (1935). In a segment
titled “Fellowship,” the filmmakers introduce a younger generation of Japanese students who made the pilgrimage to Taliesin (including one of Endo’s sons, Raku). A not entirely convincing effort is made to recuperate Raymond as a true Wrightian despite his clear European modernist leanings, and several Japanese architects with no apparent ties to Wright are proposed as belonging to the fold. Thus, we are introduced to Kunio Maekawa who entered Raymond’s studio upon his return in Japan after two years in Le Corbusier’s atelier. Kenzo Tange is also mentioned in passing because he worked in Maekawa’s office in the late 1930s. Although it would be extremely difficult to claim that either Maekawa’s or Tange’s designs were indebted to Wright, by introducing them in this context, Severns and Koichi imply that their work was linked to the “master.” Do the filmmakers intend us to assume that someone who worked for someone who worked for someone who worked for Wright is in some sense a disciple of Wright’s?

Although the recognition of Wright’s followers is valuable, the film does not rigorously evaluate Wright’s overall significance for the history of Japanese architecture. There is little information about architectural practices in Japan at the time Wright was active there. We learn nothing about Wright’s most prominent Japanese contemporaries (many of whom embraced the European-derived historical style that Wright emphatically rejected) or about the ambitious young architects who were drawn to European modernists. To be sure, a handful of architects did respond enthusiastically to Wright, but many eventually embraced modernism or were left by the wayside as the modern movement gained hegemony. By narrowly focusing on a small Wrightian circle to the exclusion of other developments, the film distorts the broader trajectory of twentieth-century Japanese architectural history.

More specifically, the film credits Wright with preventing Japan from “forsaking” its ancient craft tradition and architectural past in the pursuit of modernization. In fact, decades before Wright came to Japan, Japanese and non-Japanese architects, including Itō Chūta and Edward S. Morse, passionately argued that Japan should not abandon its architectural traditions. (The thorny questions of exactly what “tradition” means and how it should inform modern practice are beyond the scope of this review.) This includes the first generation of Japanese modernists active in the early 1920s while the Imperial Hotel was still under construction. Wright may well have reinforced a commitment to Japan’s traditions already shared by many architects, yet to credit him with sparking the Japanese rediscovery of older architectural traditions is too strong a claim.

These criticisms aside, Magnificent Obsession has much to offer viewers. It assembles a large body of images documenting powerful designs by a compelling architect and introduces the careers of designers not well known to a non-Japanese audience. If the filmmakers occasionally strain their credibility by indulging in hyperbolic claims for Wright and his work, they are certainly not the first commentators to succumb to the myth-making impulse frequently evident in receptions of the architect and his legacy. Wright’s undeniable charisma, strong personality, and decades of activity in varied professional contexts present formidable challenges for an architectural history that seeks to recognize his accomplishments while avoiding the extremes of hagiography.

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Archigram Movies!
Mito, Japan, 2006, DVD, 31 min., ¥ 3,990,
www.uplink.co.jp

In 1963, six newly minted architects based in London formed what is now remembered as one of the primary experimental architectural groups of the decade. Archigram, the name under which the six became known, was first the title of their polemical magazine and then expanded to incorporate other activities of the participants, whether alone, as a collective, in clusters, or with the help of friends.¹ The composite moniker demonstrated their main conceit: the hybridization of architecture, with all the burdens that term implied for young architects in postwar Europe, with the developing novelty of communications technology. This agenda resonated with young British architects of the 1960s who were dissatisfied with what they described as the retrograde state of professional training and institutions, a situation compounded by the traditional skills dominant in the building industry. Besides the lack of innovation with the curtain wall in commercial structures, postwar domestic architecture in Britain often included pitched roofs, flowerpots, and picturesque touches that were posited to restore humanism to modernism.² The architectural avant-garde of the previous generation had been galvanized into action by what to them was a clear betrayal of principle. From the Archigram perspective a decade later, the worse offense was the boredom evoked by the stagnant built landscape in which even the innovative practices of the 1950s were implicated.

As a remedy, the Archigram group promoted the integration of street culture and digital technology, two overwhelmingly present and mutually dependent conditions, in architectural thinking. The group drew strategies from the comic book, the fashion magazine, photography and film, among other media, to showcase the technology of their counterproposals to the contemporary urban fabric. The influence of their pop art predecessors was readily apparent in this turn to the generative circumstances for mass