



WRIGHT

or

WRONG?

BY DAVID M. BROWN PHOTOGRAPHY BY JERRY PORTELLI

Frank Lloyd Wright left behind a vast collection of unbuilt projects following his death in 1959.

Two of them—Gammage Auditorium in Tempe and the recently constructed Spire at the Promenade Shopping and Corporate Center in Scottsdale—made it out of Wright’s archives and into the Arizona landscape. But both structures vary from Wright’s original designs, so are they Wright—true to the inspiration, genius and intention of the master—or simply wrong?

TEMPE VIA BAGHDAD

During the 1950s, the Iraqi monarchy asked celebrated architects such as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Oscar Niemeyer, Gio Ponti, Alvar Aalto and Frank Lloyd Wright to design a variety of municipal and cultural centers. Wright was assigned the Baghdad opera house.

In May 1957, Wright and his wife, Olgivanna, flew to Baghdad. As the plane descended over the city at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, Wright noticed a small island in the middle of the Tigris and decided it would be an ideal location for the structure. One of his hosts told Wright that Pig Island, as it was locally known, belonged to King Faisal II. Wright requested an audience with the monarch to explain his choice. The story goes that upon hearing Wright’s request, the king placed his hand on the map and said, “Mr. Wright, the island is yours.”

Wright designed not only an opera house but a series of buildings for the island, the adjacent peninsula and downtown Baghdad. Seating about 1,600 for opera and

another 3,700 for conventions and celebrations, the Opera Auditorium was Wright’s vision of a civic hall contemporary in structure and amenities yet celebratory of Iraq’s culture and history. A ziggurat-shaped 1,920-car parking garage wrapped around the exterior of the circular hall, offering entrances and egresses from the building at each of its three levels. The hall rose from a large pool with fountains with a circular copse of trees buffering the ziggurat from the pool. A great crescent arch extended from the building and across the pool. Inside, bronze sculpture scenes from “The Arabian Nights,” a childhood favorite of Wright’s, hung on the walls.

Unfortunately, King Faisal II was assassinated during a July 1958 coup, putting an end to Wright’s plans for Baghdad. Fortunately for Wright, ASU president Dr. Grady Gammage had been pushing for a multi-use arts auditorium for the campus. Gammage approached his friend to design the building. In May 1957, the two decided on its present 15-acre site at the southwest corner of the campus.



Gammage Auditorium

With some modifications for locale and budget, the Baghdad opera house design fit Gammage's vision for the auditorium. But the project was stalled with the deaths of both Gammage and Wright in 1959. Funding finally came through in 1961, and work began May 23, 1962, when the first shovelful of dirt was turned by Grady Gammage Jr.

With its distinctive desert-rose exterior and arched façade, Gammage Auditorium recalls the Baghdad Opera Auditorium. However, Wright's son-in-law William Wesley Peters and John Rattenbury, who served as the resident architect on Gammage after apprenticing at Taliesin West, made a number of alterations. In lieu of the large crescent

arch of the Baghdad Opera Auditorium, two 200-foot-long pedestrian bridges extend outward, providing the welcoming arms Wright envisioned as well as quick exits to the parking lots. With the wide continental seating (no radial aisles), the hall can empty in about three minutes. Additionally, there are no pools or parking ziggurats—as much an accommodation to local mores as the university budget. But Gammage came in at budget—\$2.5 million. Per seat, it was the lowest-cost auditorium of its size ever built in the United States.

Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra opened Gammage on Sept. 18, 1964 with Strauss' "Ein

Heldenleben" (A Hero's Life), in homage to Wright. Rattenbury says that at the concert's conclusion, Ormandy turned to the audience and announced, "This is the second-best-sounding hall in the world. If I say the best, when I get home, I'll get fired."

Apprentices won't speculate as to what Wright would have thought of the final product, but Rattenbury is confident Wright would have been pleased. "It's proved itself over and over again."

A CAPITAL SPIRE?

On Feb. 17, 1957, Wright submitted his vision for a new

capitol to the people of Arizona. Named "Oasis—Pro Bono Publico" (For the Public Good), the spectacular campus was to sit in Phoenix's Papago Buttes and feature two blue copper-plated hexagonal domes, onyx colonnades, mosaic floors, a garden refectory and a 125-foot spire.

Wright's plans also included a 400-foot-wide central building to house the two houses of the legislature and a grand Arizona Hall that would host historical and cultural exhibits as well as Wright's works. The original design called for a television antenna/spire on each of the legislative houses, but Wright eventually replaced these with one large spire. "Mr. Wright was always changing [things]," says



THE WRIGHT LINE

In 1932, Frank Lloyd Wright and his wife, Olgivanna, founded the **Taliesin Fellowship** as an extension of his work and a venture in architectural education. Following his death in 1959, his successors created Taliesin Architects.

Today, **The Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture** offers bachelor's and master's degrees in architecture. Men and women from around the world serve as apprentices, working in the studio with the architects and planners of Taliesin Architects. They also participate in the community activities of the Fellowship: design, construction and landscaping, as well as social events, cooking and maintenance work. Architects-to-be winter at Taliesin West in Scottsdale and spend the summer at Taliesin in Spring Green, Wis.

There are approximately 1,000 former apprentices, a handful living in Arizona, the rest scattered across the globe. Seven members of Taliesin Architects still practice at Taliesin West; eight in Wisconsin. When the last of the Wright-trained apprentices dies, the direct pedagogical link to America's greatest architect will be gone.

Tours are held daily at Taliesin West from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., with evening tours on Fridays, through the end of October. Starting in November, tours are held between 9 a.m. and 4:15 p.m. 12621 N. Frank Lloyd Wright Blvd., Scottsdale. **480.860.2700, www.franklloydwright.org.**

For a selected list of Taliesin's graduates, please go to **www.azfoothillsmag.com**.

Arnold Roy, a 26-year-old apprentice at the time. "He would just have the designer scratch it out, [saying] 'Make those things go away.'"

But this was a project that had no chance of being built in a fiscally and architecturally conservative state. The built cost was \$15 to \$20 per square foot, about \$5 million in 1957, and between \$40 to \$50 million in today's dollars—about one and a half times the cost of a more conventional building.

Now secretary and vice president of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Roy has helped maintain Wright's legacy at Taliesin West for the four and a half decades since Wright's death. He and Rattenbury, another one of the seven Wright apprentices still practicing at Taliesin West,

watched Wright create his capitol proposal. He's concerned that the abstracted Spire takes the structure out of its original setting in an "enduringly beautiful work of art."

"Can anyone doubt what the building of [Wright's capitol] would have done for Arizona?" Swaback says. "The contribution to our cultural prestige and related drawing power would have been incalculable. Unlike our present tendency to spend billions of dollars to preserve the desert, while simultaneously spending billions of dollars to build in a way that violates its character, Wright designed a marriage between the essence of the desert and the creativity of life and work in harmony with that very special quality."

For Swaback, the separated spire misrepresents Wright's intention. "The entire design was a creative, magical

FOR ROY, THE SPIRE CELEBRATES WRIGHT'S VISION AND SPIRIT. "THE SPIRE DIDN'T CHANGE, AND WE ADHERED AS CLOSELY AS POSSIBLE WHERE WE HAD TO MAKE SOME DECISIONS."

recently worked with The Pederson Group to plan and build the 125-foot-high Spire at The Promenade Shopping and Corporate Center in North Scottsdale. Only architects who studied with Wright may work on his projects.

For Roy, the Spire celebrates Wright's vision and spirit. "The Spire didn't change, and we adhered as closely as possible where we had to make some decisions," he says, pointing out that this was a project without final drawings. Many details that Wright would have provided, such as dimensions, were not available.

But not everyone describes the Spire in such uplifting terms. Vernon Swaback, founder of Scottsdale-based Swaback Partners, was a first-year apprentice in 1957 and

environment that could only be at home in the Sonoran desert. It was a magnificent, large-scale sculptural gathering place that would have been as exciting, environmentally appropriate and timeless as the surrounding mountains."

Roy disagrees. "By itself, the Spire is a powerful piece of architecture. You can abstract it from the original design, and it still stands on its own. The most important thing for Mr. Wright was to get projects built." Roy adds that the Spire is the first commercial Wright structure to be built since Madison, Wisconsin's Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center in 1997. "A building on a piece of paper just doesn't have the impact that the built project does."