

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection  
Arthur Drexler on the Architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, 1961

MR. GOLDSTONE

Is this live now?

H. H. ARNASON

This isn't miked. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

MR. GOLDSTONE

There are many familiar faces here I see from the Municipal Art Society's walking tours. But they're in an unfamiliar setting, both the time of day, in the evening instead of the usual Sunday afternoon, and the fact that this is a sitting-down walking tour is also unusual. But the Municipal Art Society has always tried to break new ground in any aspect of New York, whether it's old or middle-aged or a new aspect of New York that has contributed something of [00:01:00] interest to the visual scene in New York. Tonight, we're going to have a very physically relaxed walking tour. I hope your imaginations will be stretched if your legs are not. We've been very fortunate in having Arthur Drexler, director of the department of architecture of the Museum of Modern Art, to give a serious talk on the architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, how it evolved in the mind of one of the greatest American [architects?], Frank Lloyd Wright. This is a three-cornered sponsorship, the Society's walking tour series, the courtesy of the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation let us have it here, and the Museum [00:02:00] of Modern Art and Department of Architecture to have Arthur Drexler as our speaker. I'd now like to introduce to you Mr. Arnason, who is vice president of the board of trustees of the Guggenheim Foundation in charge of art administration, through whose courtesy this evening has been made possible for all of you, Mr. Arnason. (applause)

H. H. ARNASON

Thank you, Mr. [Goldstone?]. May I just ask one question to be sure that this microphone is alive? Can you at the back of the room hear me perfectly well? Fine. Thank you very much. Gives me very great pleasure to have you here this evening, [00:03:00] and on behalf of the trustees of the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation, I'd like to make you welcome this particularly auspicious occasion of, as Mr. Goldstone pointed out, of collaboration between the Municipal Art Society, the Museum of Modern Art, and our own museum. I would like to just take a moment to mention one or two slightly technical affairs. After the lecture, you're invited to come up into the museum and go up either up the ramp or down the ramp as you desire. We have, for this evening, opened up the sixth ramp. Normally, if you've been here before, you know that you only as get as high as the fifth ramp, and you're aware of the fact that there are a couple of ramps above you in which you can see from a distance [00:04:00] certain areas that are used for storage of pictures. And there is an enclosed area, which is used temporarily for our conservation department. But so that you can get right up under the dome, we are permitting the group this evening to go up to the sixth ramp where you can walk around a certain area and get the feeling of airiness in this top ramp. I should say that the installations for storage and whatnot, which are up there, are temporary, and, fairly soon, we hope that those ramps also can be opened up as exhibition space because, of course, they were intended as exhibition space. And they are some of our, I think, most fascinating exhibition areas. So if you get on the elevator, simply ask the elevator [man?] to [00:05:00] take you up to the sixth ramp, and then when you leave that, please leave by way of the elevator going down to the fifth ramp and

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection  
Arthur Drexler on the Architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, 1961

starting your walking tour because you'll observe certain areas where we actually are keeping some of the pictures in temporary storage are sealed off.

The one other technical point, I've been asked to point out that there are various publications about the building, particularly this book on Frank Lloyd Wright and the building, if any of you are interested in following up on the (inaudible) [from?] this evening. Our speaker this evening, as you are very well aware, is Arthur Drexler, the director of the department of architecture and design of the Museum of Modern Art. I won't attempt to go into Mr. Drexler's varied and interesting career. He has lectured at [00:06:00] many universities, including Yale, Harvard, New York University, others. He has been a practicing designer with George Nelson Associates. He was architectural editor for some time of *Interiors* magazine. He was curator of the department of architecture and design of the Museum of Modern Art between 1951 and '56 and has been director of that department since 1956. I think you are all very well aware of the many splendid architectural exhibitions, which he has organized at the Museum of Modern Art, and, in relation to these exhibitions and other contexts, he is the author of many books on modern architecture. Gives me very great pleasure to present Mr. Drexler, who will speak on the museum and its [genesis?], Mr. Drexler. (applause) [00:07:00]

ARTHUR DREXLER

Good evening. Does it work? Yes. I want, first of all, to thank Mr. Arnason for his kind introduction and also for the opportunity to use this very handsome auditorium as a setting for this evening's talk. Most of the time when I'm asked to talk about the Guggenheim Museum, I'm asked, first of all, "Do you like it?" This is a kind of cocktail party question. It serves as the opening wedge, and it is followed up by a list of complaints. [00:08:00] I thought that it would be, perhaps, a good idea to begin this evening's talk by trying to list some of these complaints. I should say, first of all, as I would say at a cocktail party, yes, I do like it. I like it very much, and I know what is wrong with it, just as everyone else does. Some of the things that are wrong with it include the fact that, as a museum, it is, let's say, to begin with, too noisy. Many people have said that from the street as you approach it, it looks too squat, too solid. You can't see in. Many people have said once you get in, it's too bad you can't see out. Many people have objected to the color of the building.

Others have objected to the fact that when, once you are on the ramps, the spectacle [00:09:00] of crowds moving, and often in opposite directions, is distracting, that the parapets are too low. The color is wrong. The light is too bright. People seldom see the office space of the building in this wing. If they did, they might say that it isn't especially handsome and that it doesn't work very well as an office space. Excuse me. They do occasionally see the small service there, the supplementary access that is in back of the elevator shaft. People seldom use it. It's a very interesting feature of the building and one which we'll talk about [a?] little bit later. People seldom see the work space, work spaces of the museum. If they did, they would probably add to the list of complaints, some that have already been voiced by its staff and its previous director, Mr. Sweeney. [00:10:00] This is a photograph of the library. It has rather enough space. It doesn't have very many books but know that it will in time. Here is a view of the temporary conservation laboratory on the ramp. It was never meant to be on the ramp, and, as Mr. Arnason mentioned before, we may hope one day will be removed from that part of the building.

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection  
Arthur Drexler on the Architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, 1961

When you look at the building from a great distance — and this is rather a trick photograph — it seems to me that the real question about it — about this image, the building in New York City — for me, at any rate, the real question is what are those funny objects in the background? I find the building very beautiful. It seems to me, at least at this distance, to have a [00:11:00] quality of repose and almost hallucinatory scale. It throws everything else out of joint. This in itself has often been a criticism of the building. There is a category of criticism which depends on the observation that the building does not resemble any other building. Therefore, it is wrong, and the others are right. Since most of the buildings around it will, no doubt, be removed in the course of the next 10, 20, or 30 years, it is very hard, I think, to base criticism on that as a viable term of evaluation. Well, what are the plausible, what are the useful terms of criticism [of?] this building? How can one make any sense of it? After one has admitted all the things that are wrong with it, in terms of its operation, [00:12:00] especially, and also in terms of its appearance, one ought to have to begin with the idea of a spiral building. This is a photograph of a very small sketch — the original is about five inches high — made by Wright in 1925. It was a project for, what he called, an automobile objective. It was to be built in Maryland on Sugarloaf Mountain.

The original idea was to have some place to go to in your automobile, and it was Wright's thought that you could drive up a building that was itself a kind of hollow mountain. When you got to the top, the ramp would reverse and start you down again on another level of ramp. Wright studied this project in dozens, literally dozens, of drawings. I recently brought back from Wisconsin [00:13:00] — for an exhibition forthcoming at the Museum of Modern Art — no less than five portfolios of drawings relating to this particular project. In this sketch, Wright has studied the form of this man-made mountain, emphasizing the shape by faceting it. It is not a continuous curve but is instead faceted. In other versions of the building, this faceting is dropped as a suitable device, but we will return to this idea later. Inside, the project was to have a gigantic dome, which was to function as a planetarium. There was a garden on the roof, and the ramp, when it reversed itself and started down again, functioned as a kind of bridge, crossing over that roof garden. A [00:14:00] shaft at the left [would?] have elevators and stairs. Here's another cross section of slightly later variation on the same project. Now the dome has gotten much smaller, and the ramp, for the first time, appears inside the building.

This, I believe, is the origin of the Guggenheim Museum as we know it. This is, to my knowledge, the best version of this early project. It is the most carefully realized. It is also the one that contains just about every element that makes its appearance over 30 years later. Here is an aerial view. Wright has begun, in this case, to play with decoration using [00:15:00] a triangular motif. It reappears in this building in the lighting fixtures. Here is a plan of the same project. You can see the way the spiral road reverses itself at the top. You can see the road entering from the bottom of the drawing, going all the way around, reversing, and coming out again at the side. And you can see the triangular shape of the elevator and [stairs?] shaft. This is one of two very carefully studied prospective drawings of the project. The original drawings, incidentally, are in Wright's usual pencil and colored crayon pencils and on tracing paper, very flimsy, very badly [00:16:00] preserved. In this version, the building is given a great deal of emphasis. The shading is [fairly?] heavy, dense. He was trying, evidently, to emphasize its massive, solid quality as sculpture. There is a curious detail. The bottom of the building, the base of the building, rises sheer and then breaks for the first level of the ramp. The next level

cantilevers out. This alternating sheer rise to a parapet, roadway, and then a cantilevered road above that is altered in the next drawing, in the next version of the project.

Here, the cantilever starts at the base. This is an interesting detail. The problem of how to begin a spiral and how to end a spiral is something that preoccupied Wright during all the years that he played with the theme. It continued to worry him [00:17:00] right up to the time that this building was in construction. He did, in fact, make changes on the base of this building after the drawings had been filed with the building department and after it had all been approved and after contracts had been awarded. There is one other project that is worth looking at in conjunction with Wright's designs for a spiral museum. This is not a project by Frank Lloyd Wright. It is a drawing dating from around 1928 by [La Probusia?], life-long enemy of the master. It would be hard to think of two architects living in one century who had more in common — unless, perhaps, in [Baronini?] and Bernini in earlier day — and of two architects who disliked each other more cordially. It is interesting that throughout their careers, they seemed to be [00:18:00] playing leapfrog with each other's ideas. [Probusia?] thought of a spiral for a museum building in 1928, a little before, actually. And in this very earliest version of it, the building is square in plan and forms a kind of ziggurat. It had galleries that were top lighted.

It had cloistered quartz behind each gallery. You can see these in the cross section, and it had very much the effect of a ziggurat in the way exterior stairs are handled. You can see it in the elevation at the center right. Later on, Probusia flattened that building out, and put it down in one level but retained the idea of a square spiral because he felt that that was a version of a circulation pattern that would afford the greatest flexibility, not simply from the point of view of the exhibitor — that is, to say, the curators — but of the people using the museum. [00:19:00] The idea was that they could cut right through the whole building and skip what they didn't want to see. It's interesting to note that what architects have considered to be useful in the idea of this form for a building is that it would enable the visitor to the building to skip a great part of what was in it. Probusia's experience of works of art, naturally, is based on living in Paris, being a European, being familiar with grand galleries in the sense of being noble, axial spaces usually top lighted and also of containing enormous paintings. Wright's sense of what a picture gallery should be is a very different proposition. Here is a project by Wright, drawing, for a very small, private gallery — [it's the Spaulding?] Gallery — done [00:20:00] in 1919. In it, one sees, already, elements that were finally used in this building. The obvious one, of course, is the pitched wall, pitched surface, angled back against which one was to display works of art.

One sees, also, a skylight hovering above the whole space, and one sees storage incorporated in racks, flat, tray-like drawers, underneath the exhibition area. The important thing, however, is that the pictures exhibited are all very small. The pictures are, in fact, Japanese prints. This is what they were supposed to represent in that drawing. Wright, himself, assembled during his life quite a collection of Japanese art. His own drawing style was very much influenced by the Japanese. [00:21:00] He was a connoisseur of Japanese ceramics and printmaking, but I think it would not be unfair to say that Wright liked the kind of art he could make use of for his own purposes. He was not especially sympathetic to painting as painting. Nevertheless, he had a very clear idea of how one should look at works of art, and because he was accustomed to collecting what he, himself, could use and what he, himself, liked and because these things were always fairly small and intimate and very precious, fragile, his sense of the appropriate

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection  
Arthur Drexler on the Architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, 1961

atmosphere, the appropriate scale for an art gallery was that of a small room for the private collector looking at works of art with a degree of isolation and privacy. [00:22:00]

This is one of the first sketches Wright prepared to show Solomon Guggenheim after he had been commissioned to do this museum. It's part of a set of about six drawings. Let us say, immediately, that it is a phenomenally unpleasant-looking building. It has a slightly Parisian perfume bottle look to it. The relationship of parts is exceedingly confused. It is not attractive. It is interesting, however, for one thing. There is no spiral ramp. Wright's first idea for the Guggenheim Museum was not a spiral ramp. There was to be a spiral ramp used only for access from one floor to the next. The original idea was perfectly ordinary floors [00:23:00] with a hole in the center running through the whole building, essentially, the character, the kind of space we now have but without the floors being (inaudible) by a continuous ramp. The hexagon used here, which rotates on itself in order to pinch the space and create alcoves of varying shapes and sizes, is, in itself, an interesting and probably quite workable idea. But there is no necessary relationship between the hexagon and the spiral ramp, although many features are present that were retained right to the end, including the odd shape of the elevators and certain perforations [of?] the lights.

One of the other studies in this group is the building has a spiral ramp that gets narrower as it ascends. That is to say the space itself [00:24:00] contracts. The space enveloped by the ramp contracts. At the top is a bridge covered with glass, and the glass crown at the left was to be an observatory. At the left side of the drawing, one sees what was to be, originally, an apartment for the director of the museum, and there is one other detail, perhaps, worth mentioning at this point. The horizontal bridge that connects the administrative offices on the left with the main mass of the museum at the right is terminated against the spiral. It simply stops, turns in, and hits the beginning of the spiral. This detail was studied by Wright, and in the next version of it, another mass appears on what would be the side street. The same thing happens again. This means that as one [00:25:00] would approach the building from below it, coming up toward it from Fifth Avenue, the building would stand completely free, completely open, and would be flanked by these horizontal bands that go off in the distance to connect with administrative and work spaces. In this version of the building, the dome has become enormous, again, of glass. The ramps expand. The space inside the ramps expand as the thing rises. The separation between levels is emphasized by ever-wider and wider ranges of glass. In the very first versions of the project, this was kept, somewhat, subdued. But now as the ramps cantilever outward, the separation is made more important, and the glass becomes more of an element in the design.

Finally, the scale [00:26:00] changes somewhat. There are fewer floors, fewer turns [in?] the spiral, and everything has been [heavied?] up in scale, quite massive. One notices that Wright's anxiety to articulate the fact of a ramp to make it apparent that there was a continuous floor level and wall surface projected from within, not held up by any visible support, in order to make this clear, he had to do something to separate one level from the one below it. The Gordon Strong project — the planetarium which we looked at earlier — had the after all singular advantage of having the ramp on the outside of the building. The Guggenheim Museum is the Gordon Strong project turned inside out. By having the ramp inside the building, Wright was left without very much to put [00:27:00] outside in order to tell you that there was a ramp. It is this problem that

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection  
Arthur Drexler on the Architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, 1961

constitutes the crux of the difficulties the Guggenheim Museum, as an institution, has inherited because out of this problem grow all the difficulties of lighting the paintings.

Here is a photograph of the model presented to the public in 1946. The mass of the building is at the left in this version. The director's apartment is at the right, the right representing, in this case, the southern end of the site. Throughout most of the studies Wright had prepared, this was the position of these two elements. He had originally preferred to have the great mass of [a?] [00:28:00] spiral at the northern end of the site. This would have given it a slightly different kind of setting as you approached it up Fifth Avenue. It would have had a foreground object of smaller scale and then would have loomed up behind that. One sees the manner in which the horizontal band — the first floor above the street level — grabs hold of the spiral ramp. One can see also that the very top of the building containing, again, an observatory, a glass dome observatory, [off?] at the very top of the photograph, and then a very large glass dome resembling something he had built over the administrative offices of the Johnson Wax company building in Racine. This dome was to be fabricated out of stainless steel hoops and glass tubes and then was to have an additional layer of [00:29:00] clear glass above that, weatherproofing. This would have been an extremely beautiful and jewel-like surface with a marvelously translucent, shimmering quality of light, at least the version of it that exists in the Racine building is extremely beautiful. One sees also a band [of?] bubble skylights. These were, in the original conception, to light studios for artists. And here we come to a very important aspect of the conception of a museum.

We've already seen that Wright began with the idea that a museum was a kind of private preserve. It was supposed to belong to one man, if possible. There weren't to be too many people in it, if possible. And things should be small scale and intimate. Wright imagined that the [00:30:00] Guggenheim Museum was going to be a monument, in the sense of being a fixed, permanent collection without temporary, changing exhibitions. He envisioned a museum as a monument to the man who formed the collection. He hated, and was quite vocal about it, what he called the museum business. He did not care for the idea of shipping pictures in and out of buildings and all around the country and of having changing events and a performance based on the arts. One may or may not share this point of view. The fact is that this is not what the Guggenheim Museum was intended by its directors or its trustees to be. As it evolved, Wright had to reduce [00:31:00] some of the facilities. He had to reduce and finally eliminate some of the features he had thought appropriate to that kind of museum. One of the first things to go was the luxurious apartment for the director, alas. The next thing to go was the observatory on the roof, as no one was quite sure what one would observe that one couldn't observe some place else better. Other things went but for different reasons, having to do mostly with cost.

In this version of the building, one sees that there is an internal courtyard. That is to say that the building surrounds the site. It makes its own backdrop. An apartment house does not look into the backyard. The building itself completely closes off the site. There were ample spaces for offices, storage, and separate, [00:32:00] special kinds of galleries, that is to say galleries with flat walls at right angles on flat floors, because Wright was perfectly aware of the fact that there would be exceptional pictures and exceptional circumstances, and he was cheerfully willing to provide suitable spaces for these pictures. This sequence of photographs does a kind of strip tease. The models become apart, and as we progress in the dismantling act, you can see

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection  
Arthur Drexler on the Architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, 1961

something of the interior as Wright first thought of it. In this photo, the top of the ramp has been removed, and you can see a cut through it. One of the things that's worth noting — [if it works?] (inaudible) — the parapet. In this version of the building, the parapet is still a rolled edge [00:33:00] much more precipitous than it now is.

That is to say it does not form a sharp angle with the floor. It's simply the floor curved up like the edge of a bowl. This was because Wright was intent on establishing the character of the architecture of this continuous surface as a shell. He thought of it as a kind of spring, as a matter of fact. He thought of it as coil spring, and he endeared himself to the magazines and the newspapers by announcing at the time this model was presented, that if an atom bomb hit New York, the building would go up into the air all right, but when it came down it would bounce. Whether or not it would bounce, the fact remains that, at this point, he had not yet figured out how to hold it up. This is an interesting fact because in one version of this [00:34:00] model and in some of the drawings, the ramp is supported by very thin steel columns regularly spaced around the edge. This is a surprise. I think very few people recall this phase [of?] the whole story. Wright, needless to say, did not care for this solution and quickly eliminated it. But for quite a while, he maintained that he could build this structure, this continuous shell without any especially noticeable vertical supports. This proved not to be the case, and with the kind of flexibility and resourcefulness that makes him a genius, he quickly solved the problem. One of the ways of doing it was a series of ribs. They're not yet visible in this drawing, but one can see the curved edge of the parapet.

One can see [00:35:00] the skylight at the edge of each floor slab, and one can see the beginning of that device, which has made it so difficult both to light and to see the pictures, and that is the pitch of the floor at the point where it hits the wall. I don't know if this will be there. It is this particular device, I think, that has made more problems than anything else. In this version of the building, it is not yet as pronounced a feature as it was to become, which shows, I think, the extent to which this problem — as a formed problem, as a strictly aesthetic problem — concerned Wright. In the version that we were looking at, the section of the building, [00:36:00] as the ramp rose, as it ascended, the space expanded. I should have pointed this out while the slide was still on the screen. Would it be possible to put that other slide back again for a moment? Good. The detail I wanted to point out I think is some significance, the space inside the museum gets wider as the ramp ascends. The dome covers the entire space. It expands the central area. This means that as you came into the building and looked up, you would be standing at the bottom of a funnel, and as you looked up the space, it would expand. It would explode into the light. And the dome itself was a system of concentric circles and shimmering glass tubes.

In this version of the building, it literally expands up into the [00:37:00] light. It isn't simply the ramp that is expanding as it rises. The space itself expands. The model, as it shows the view from the street, has a solidity and a weight even greater than that finally achieved by Wright. It also has some very interesting features in the handling of intersections and parapets, which are developed as curved sections, particularly the one on what was then the director's apartment at the far right in this photograph. During these years, — during the time that Wright was preparing this building, revising it, studying it — he was experimenting with the spiral, the ramp. He got several of them built. As a matter of fact, he built an automobile showroom for Max

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection  
Arthur Drexler on the Architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, 1961

Hoffman here in New York City on Park Avenue [00:38:00] that has a, sort of, fragment, a scrap of a spiral ramp jammed into an unsuitable space with a turntable in the middle and a few racy-looking cars straddling the ramp very uncomfortably. Wright would take any opportunity to test an idea that he was interested in, and, for several years, this was it. The Morris store, which this is a photograph of, in San Francisco is, essentially, a remodeling job. Wright was given a shell to fill, and, naturally, he decided that the only appropriate solution to this particular problem would be a piece of spiral ramp.

And so the Morris store was developed as a miniature or practice Guggenheim Museum. This time, the dome instead of being a dome consists of sheets of translucent bowls, of translucent plastic suspended below the skylight. The ramp rises [00:39:00] only for one floor and is very interestingly and sculpturally handled. It seems almost to be pouring out of the top of the building. One notices that the pitch, it's quite sharp, that the side walls are used only as decoration. [They're?] perforated and ornamented but were not given any utilitarian use. Wright simply wanted to see what happened when you started building ramps that culminated in life. There is a set of four drawings that Wright prepared when the criticism began to get loud and heavy — and it got loud and heavy mostly from artists — about what pictures would look like inside a building where the wall leaned backward, the floor pitched below your feet, and on one side you had a low parapet in kind of a vast, empty space. Wright prepared [00:40:00] this set of drawings to show the ease with which the pictures could be installed in the space. It's interesting to note that he imagined that the pictures could be clipped to the wall by means of what is actually a little ledge, an easel shelf. He imagined that the largest of the pictures would go right up against the ceiling and what is, in fact, the horizontal lines we see in the drawing represent the skylight, that band of continuous skylight. This band was equipped with a continuous track for electrical fixtures.

Wright assumed that additional light could be added inside the building, that is to say in the alcoves on a very flexible system. He assumed that the combination of light in the gallery in the skylight — [00:41:00] that is to say artificial light in the skylight — plus daylight would give you enough flexibility and enough weight, enough variety and control to produce just about any effect you might want. He must have known — he certainly knew — that the pitch of the floor where the floor becomes the wall and it is the plane that the very largest painting is shown resting on, he must have known that that pitched surface would reflect all this light in the observer's face and not onto the picture. He knew it, but he persisted with this idea because of what it meant, in my opinion, to the exterior character of the building and also, I think, to the sense it imparts of a continuously modeled, moving surface. He did not want the sharp right angle. [00:42:00] He did not want surfaces to hit each other as sharply as they would in an ordinary room. The drawings continue, showing pictures of various sizes and various qualities.

Wright spells it out for us. We have seen, I think, average. We are now looking at middle of the road. We now are looking at the watercolors society, and they get more and more crowded, and they seem to be very large watercolors on moveable screens, moveable partitions and also shown in this case at the top-most level in the spiral. And, finally, we come to the masterpiece. This is my own favorite drawing because of the little girl with the yo-yo. (laughter) The masterpiece also bears a not-surprising resemblance [00:43:00] to the decorative drawings, the decorative details, Wright had evolved as early as [1915?]. All of the pictures, as a matter of fact, look like



Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection  
Arthur Drexler on the Architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, 1961

Frank Lloyd Wright pictures. And it's interesting to note, in passing, this story may be true — I think it is — that when Wright was kidded by someone about having accepted a commission to design a museum [for the?] crazy modern paintings, he said, "Well, actually they've got one fellow whose work is all right. His name is Bauer." Now you may recall that there was an artist named Rudolph Bauer, whose paintings were a prominent part of the Guggenheim Museum exhibition when the museum existed before the war in office space actually rented in midtown Manhattan. There were also lots of paintings by Kandinsky [00:44:00] and lots of paintings by [Muro?], [Clay?], and a few by Picasso, I believe, the roster of modern art. There were a great many paintings by Rudolph Bauer, who specialized in triangles and circles and squares on gray, grayish backgrounds.

Some of them did indeed bear a startling resemblance to Wright's own ideas of suitable decoration. And so, Wright, from the very beginning, identified himself with a style of painting. He imagined — and he had this image apparently fixed quite plainly in his mind — that they would be the kind of modern pictures in this building, but they would be the kind of modern pictures that he, himself, had always drawn. One of the earlier versions of the building [00:45:00] is interesting as a sketch chiefly because it gives some idea, just a very tentative indication, of texture. The veining on the surface of the building is perhaps intended to show the possibility of its having a surface other than a smooth, painted stucco. For some time, Wright considered the possibility of having marble chips in the concrete so that the whole building would have a finer substance, a more-light surface more receptive to light. This, ultimately, was abandoned because of the high cost. At this point, the [massing?] of the building is still dependent on these two horizontal bands grabbing hold of the spiral at the midpoints and leaving the corner somewhat arbitrarily defined, so arbitrary, in fact, that Wright has resorted to that awful draftsman's trick of hiding it with trees. This is beneath his [00:46:00] dignity and was presently removed. At this point, we can take a look at another section. The edge of the parapet is still a rolled corner.

The cantilever at the outside of the building — the articulation of that skylight and the bump necessary — has gotten heavier and heavier and heavier. The wall surface available for the exhibition of pictures has gotten smaller and smaller. The character of the building as a shell, I think, has gotten much clearer. The ramp, as it ascends, gets wider, but the space inside the museum remains the same. There is no change in the diameter of the interior space from the bottom to the top. [00:47:00] The next version, the ramp does get wider and wider as it ascends, but the interior space gets narrower. As one enters the building and looks up, we are now at the other end of the funnel. We look up toward a narrowing space, and the dome is getting a little bit smaller. Some more variations on the skylights, that pitched floor surface where the floor hits the wall has become, perhaps, a little steeper. And one sees, at the left of this section, an interesting detail, the stairwell. At this point, the building is flopped. The heavy spiral goes at the south end. The [00:48:00] administration wing goes at the north, and now we see that Wright has suddenly provided, at least it seems sudden when one sees the drawings in this sequence, Wright has provided an office building as a backdrop to the museum.

Now, Wright had proposed, quite early in the proceedings, that, he said, a museum should be a museum. It should not be a place of business. It should not be a workshop. It should not be anything but a place in which you exhibit pictures. Therefore, let us put everything that will not

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection  
Arthur Drexler on the Architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, 1961

fit in this shell for the exhibition of pictures in a separate space adjacent to it. He proposed that the Foundation acquire land behind the property it already owned, that it put up a combination office building, apartment house [00:49:00] that would connect with the museum and which would include, in its lower floors, the necessary storage space, conservation, lavatories, libraries, everything else that could not conveniently fit into the spiral, including special exhibition galleries. For various reasons, this did not prove practical. Practical is perhaps not the right word. It did not prove, [let us say?], financially feasible at a certain moment. This, I think, is a great shame. The building would have benefited by having a backdrop provided by Wright. It also would have been considerably easier to handle as a working element had it been equipped with this kind of auxiliary functioning space. The mass of the office unit on the left of this drawing is shown here with a kind of saucer roof [00:50:00] crowning it. It has no particular relation to the spiral. The horizontal band now is shown going completely across the length of the site, and there is a blank wall, an opaque closed wall, below it.

The implication is that the spiral part of the building is rising through this horizontal band, which comprises, incidentally, storage space and other working areas. In earlier versions, that space below the horizontal element was open so that one could see completely in, and, of course, this was, ultimately, largely restored. But at this point, the horizontal element ends at a point on the right. It makes a sharp corner. On the left, it dies. It rolls around the corner. The problem has not exactly [00:51:00] been solved. It has been made, perhaps, even more confused than it was in the earlier versions. Wright knew this and was concerned with it at this point and right until the end. One sees something of this in the plan. One sees, at the bottom, the horizontal, what we saw in the [prospective?] — the horizontal element going [through?] a sharp, relatively sharp, corner. [It has?] a rolled edge. One sees also that the building at this stage is still completely enclosing the site. It surrounds an internal courtyard, an open court. One sees also that there is still, at this point, an auxiliary ramp, a separate, secondary ramp, that goes behind the elevators and was meant to allow you to bypass, for rapid circulation, any part of the exhibition you want to skip.

One sees also that there are more ramps in the lower [00:52:00] left-hand corner. In fact, there are far too many ramps in the amount of space available for other purposes. But one also notes that there is a historical gallery, a grand gallery, and a more, perhaps, convenient setup on storage than was later evolved. All of this had to be reduced and compressed. Here is the final version. The building no longer encloses a courtyard. It has been trimmed, cut down. The horizontal band, which is really the line at the bottom of the drawing, has now been given a bump. It's the semicircle at the lower right. It's labeled in this plan, "architecture archives." One believes that Mr. Wright thought that [00:53:00] it would, perhaps, not be unsuitable to have, in this institution, a collection of his own drawings and photographs of his own work. There is one other most-important change. The auxiliary ramp intended for rapid circulation has been eliminated, and instead there is a stair. It has had to be compressed into a triangle, that is to say it didn't have to be a triangle, but as with the earlier Gordon Strong project that we looked at before, this is the form that Wright finally returned to. In addition to this, as he had to bring more and more working facilities, storage spaces, freight elevators, fire stairs, lavatories, as he had to compress these things into the available space, he made one other [00:54:00] most interesting change.

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection  
Arthur Drexler on the Architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, 1961

You may notice in the drawing — I think you can see clearly enough — you can spot the elevator, the half circle of the elevator just on the axis with [the?] triangle stairs. To the right and the left of the elevators are two circular shafts. These rise to the height of the building. The lavatories connect to them, and these shafts carry ducts and plumbing. By compressing everything, by getting all these additional things in and by cutting down on the overall size of the building, Wright suddenly realized that there was no way to get around one of these shafts. And at this point, he rotated the axis of the main space. Excuse me. In the earlier projects, that internal bump in the ramp, that bay that projects out into the main space, [00:55:00] was on the axis with the elevator. It was what you saw when you came out of the elevator. Wright has suddenly taken that feature and swung it around about 15 degrees to the left and made it straddle one of the columns, one of the ducts. This means that he has taken what started out as a stabilizing element in this space, the symmetry of these two elements flanking an elevator and connected by a bay, a projecting bay on each level. He's taken this element and thrown it off center. He's made it asymmetrical and made it straddle one of the shafts. He took what was, perhaps, the only stabilizing, centering element in the entire space and put even that into a more dynamic relationship with everything else.

There was, perhaps, a [00:56:00] practical necessity to do this, but I think he might have arrived at it even if there hadn't been a practical necessity. I think that it was Wright's intention to make every surface, every plane, every intersection in this building move, perhaps on the theory — or, I should say, perhaps on the intuition — that if you could keep all the surfaces moving, if everything could be at an angle, you would not really be able to sense what should be vertical and what isn't vertical. It's rather like the experience of being in the salon of an ocean liner during a storm. You only know when everything is pitching because something is loose and is trying to stay vertical. When everything is fastened in place and rolls with the ship, you are not so much aware of it, its relative position. It's the hanging chandelier that is trying to remain vertical [and?] this [00:57:00] swaying motion that makes you seasick. Well, it may be that Wright was trying to eliminate the stabilizing elements. In any case, he certainly succeeded. Here is what the building looks like in its almost-final version. There is still some corrections. In fact, this drawing includes an afterthought or a moment's hesitation by Wright. He's made a change on the drawing. He isn't quite sure whether he wants that parapet to go in or out in its pitch. He's drawn it both ways.

The bump, the architecture archives room, which was added after — as I think I mentioned before, after the drawings had been approved and after contracts had been [00:58:00] (inaudible) and produced something of a problem for everybody involved — begins to grab hold of the spiral, especially as one approaches the building from the south. Here it is in construction. One sees some of the startling elliptical shapes as the concrete forms arise. This is a detail of the office block. This is what it takes to cantilever a museum out over Fifth Avenue. Here is the ramp going up, the office block at the top. Incidentally, in this photograph, I think you can see this business of the ducts here. The elevator is here. The other ducts will be here, [00:59:00] and this bay should have been in the center. It was originally but was then shifted to this side. This is an interesting photograph because it shows how very thin the floor slabs are, and thinness and lightness is not the effect that the building generates in its final, as it looks finished. We're looking at the office wing, and what we see that the top-most level is the parapet, the terrace, of the upper floor of the office block.

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection  
Arthur Drexler on the Architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, 1961

These two levels are about to be connected by a wall. It shows in the next photograph looking from the opposite side. The wall, of course, is carried up [through to?] the actual floor levels here. The parapet rises up much higher, and this is the top-level parapet. One notices also the extent of the [01:00:00] cantilever, which, unfortunately, is largely lost by the glass. Cantilevers are enormous. The dome, a surprise and a disappointment, what happened? Well, the original dome cost too much. There were some other problems about fire, safety, but, chiefly, it was a matter of cost, [I believe?]. This version of the dome — I think it must be admitted — is not a success. I think that had Wright been, perhaps, a little less tired at this point, he might have arrived at something more congenial to the character of the building. [01:01:00] Now we come to a detail that sums up, in one image, lots of the problems of Wrightian architecture, and it also explains, I think, one of the reasons why Wright has had no very great following among younger architects today. We have been trained to think of architecture as a sequence of parts, as the assembling of discreet elements, and we think of a successful solution as one that harmoniously combines these elements without doing violence to them. We think of architecture as a matter of joints, intersections, and we think of these intersections in classical terms, which is to say that the articulation of joints, the exact expression [01:02:00] of what is happening.

Are two pieces resting against each other? Is one going through the other piece? What exactly are their positions in space? This is the attitude that dominates most thinking in architecture today, not so with Frank Lloyd Wright. I happen to think, and this is a purely personal response. I happen to think that Wright's attitude is much more profound, much more fruitful, and far more important. His attitude might be summarized this way. A building is not simply a collection of individual parts, but rather a building is, in its totality, greater than its individual parts. Its detail, the intersections of elements, ought to be, if I may paraphrase Frank Lloyd Wright, [01:03:00] these things ought to be an expression of some internal necessity. If there is something inside a space displacing something else, let the chips fall where they may. Let it bump into something else. Let it cut through at an awkward, seemingly awkward, angle. From his point of view, it isn't really awkward. It's the truth. It's fact. It's the way things are, and anything else would, in fact, be a distortion of realities. This means that when a vertical element rises through a series of surfaces that are slanted and occurring on a different plane at each level, the intersections will get to be very strange. [01:04:00] So what?

They may or they may not be very successful or beautiful or photogenic or interesting as sculpture. They certainly horrify most architects today. I think often they bothered Wright, whether he admitted it or not. In some of his work he managed to eliminate the more awkward of these problems. But for the most part, he let it happen. It is the decoration. It is the expression. It is, in a sense, the reality of the building. Something else is evident here. Wright was very proud of his sense, not only of scale and light and space, but also of what he felt was his sense of materials. Before the building was painted, the concrete surface had a raw and heavy, dense quality. The building really looked like something, I think, that had been turned on a potter's wheel. [01:05:00] One really felt this form revolving. One almost sensed finger marks in it. The roughness, the defects in the form, were quite acceptable. Once the building was painted, although these defects do not show in this photograph, many of them do show very strongly, and suddenly the building loses a good part of its weight and certain joint lines pop out. It begins to look like a surface sheathed in Masonite and looks as though it's going to pop loose

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection  
Arthur Drexler on the Architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, 1961

any minute. Time will take care of all these things. One sees them less every year. It helps that the building gets dirty. The color has already faded, and it is much improved. During these years, Wright continued to play with the spiral theme. Here is a version of a — what I guess would have to be described as a — cultural [01:06:00] center for Pittsburgh. I don't mean this in a facetious way.

The idea was to build a vast park with gardens and fountains at the top and inside were to be theaters, a planetarium, all manner of educational and entertainment facilities. The entire building [is as?] vast a thing [was?] formed by a spiraling road. Again, it is a version of the Gordon Strong project and the Guggenheim. What future does the spiral have? Well, here's a version of it in construction now in Caracas. It's a shopping center. It is, literally, a hillside that has been cut and terraced to make a road spiraling up [01:07:00] and then spiraling down again. It's a reverse curve just like the Gordon Strong planetarium. Set back in underneath cantilevered roads are a whole chain of stores. One is able to park one's car in front of any one of the stores and get out and walk, do what one wishes. There are, of course, elevators, escalators, and there will be, at the top, a television station and [an?] exhibition hall with a great glass dome. No matter what problems the spiral seem to have produced for Frank Lloyd Wright and no matter how illogical it may seem to others, I think it has a great future.

Why should this be? Well, one reason is that from the very beginning of his life, of his life as an architect, Wright thought of buildings not only in the [01:08:00] obvious sense, as an extension of the landscape, which is to say as something that you would want to harmonize with the landscape, he thought of them as extensions of the landscape in a very literal, almost simple-minded, way. The landscape includes a road, the road to the building. It's therefore logical that the building itself could incorporate the road, and in some of his earliest projects, this is, indeed, what he did. His famous Booth House project from 1913 [and?] '15 incorporated a bridge going right into the house. The development of this idea with its 19th century overtones of Walt Whitman, open road, a [forced?] march, may or may not seem to you like a suitable theme for a museum. And one must admit, in a museum, [01:09:00] one does expect to pause and to contemplate a work of art, to look at it with a certain sense of fixedness. One does not expect the sensation of continuous movement. At least one would like to have an option on this. It is also true that a Cezanne is worth at least as much as a Frank Lloyd Wright as an experience, and that if one has to choose between the two, one would, perhaps, prefer to see Cezanne under different circumstances. However, many of these difficulties are, I think, conditions that can be altered. I think that they are easily remedied, no matter how difficult it seems to handle them right now.

For instance, Wright was always very much concerned with terminals. He used to make a great thing about this. He once wrote [if you?] [01:10:00] take care of the terminals in architecture, then the rest will take care of itself. He always wore a distinguished [terminus?], a highly cantilevered brim and little dots, circles. This picture of him, I think, is kind of pleasing. He had a long, hard struggle to get the Guggenheim Museum built. He's photographed here watching it going up, and knowing, I think, that a lot would be wrong with it but knowing also that all of these things could and would, in time, be remedied. I think he also knew that no matter what mistakes he made, he had discovered something. He had come up with an idea. He could leave it to others to make it pretty, to make it work, to smooth out all the defects. But he had come up with [01:11:00] the idea. The idea, I think, is something that will live on and on and on. The

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection  
Arthur Drexler on the Architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, 1961

building itself, the individual, the intrinsic work of art as architecture, is, perhaps, in Wright's own work, in his own terms, a defective masterpiece. But it is a masterpiece. Thank you. (applause) (inaudible).

H. H. ARNASON

I think you have already shown your appreciation [01:12:00] of a brilliant analysis, one of the most brilliant talks in architecture that I've ever heard. Rather than ask for any questions at this time, and to sit down here talking about building, the rest of the building, it seemed to us it'd be better to adjourn upstairs. You may find your way to any part of the ramps in any order that you wish. Mr. Drexler has kindly agreed to be on the ground floor of the main lobby for a short while and to answer any individual questions that you have. [I may?] just say one other word, which I forgot to mention earlier, the current exhibition, (inaudible), which is called abstract expressionists and imagists, is a survey of some of the abstract tendencies in American painting today. [01:13:00] The paintings are very large, very colorful, very free, frequently very violent, paintings of a description that, perhaps, Mr. Wright would not have cared for very much. When the building was opened, many of the artists who are represented here were very concerned about how their pictures would look in the museum. And now, however, I'm delighted to say that the reaction on the part of the artists of this particular display is one of rather universal approval. [I?] sense that many of these pictures have never looked better. Thank you very much. (applause) [01:04:00] (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

END OF AUDIO FILE

9009669\_01\_edited-Architecture-of-the-Guggenheim-Museum-Copy-1.mp3

*Architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, introduction by H. H. Arnason / Arthur Drexler, 1961/11/15.* Reel-to-Reel collection. A0004. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Archives, New York