

# Frank Lloyd Wright's World Heritage throughout Time. The complex compromise between use and conservation in the American approach to architectural restoration

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## Abstract

This essay aims to provide a brief summary of the most controversial restoration realized on four cases out of the eight Frank Lloyd Wright's works listed as Unesco World Heritage (the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Unity Temple, the Robie House, Taliesin West), in a comparative view between the recurrent methods of the American approach to architectural restoration and the shared values of the Italian theory of conservation. In this way, the principles laid down by Unesco to list this valuable heritage (Integrity, Authenticity, Protection) are looked under a critical perspective, showing how liable they are in within the selected cases.

Furthermore, the text will focus on the complex implications deriving from the design intent, the authorship, the architectural history and the use of photography in the restoration process, opposed to the principle of time and authenticity deriving from the Venice Charter and the Nara Document.

## Keywords

Frank Lloyd Wright World Heritage List, Architecture throughout Time, Authenticity, Authorship, Modern Architecture Conservation.

## Introduction

In 2019 eight Frank Lloyd Wright's works<sup>1</sup> were included in the World Heritage, a synthesis to his lifelong research on «new materials and technologies inspired by principles of the natural world»<sup>2</sup>. This categorization, as for Le Corbusier in 2017, opens up to critical considerations for its supposed evaluative nature, that may be perceived as a hierarchy of the highest works of a master architect. Actually, referring to the *Operational Guidelines for Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* of 2021, the inscription of new properties must fulfil stringent requirements. Being considered under criterion (ii), of Outstanding Universal Value, Wright's works must contain the elements of Integrity, Authenticity and Protection. Moreover, the *Guidelines* prescribe a physical boundary making it impossible to consider Wright's legacy as an immaterial heritage of all his works, many of them lacking the necessary authenticity conditions. Therefore, though the absence of many architectures may be justified for this reason, as it shows the D. Martin House (1903-05) in Buffalo, reconstructed to its original shape<sup>3</sup>, it is still little understood the absence of unique types of Wright's experimentation, as the *textile-block* houses, like the Ennis House (1923-24) restored under the criterion of material distinctiveness; or the Price Tower (1952-

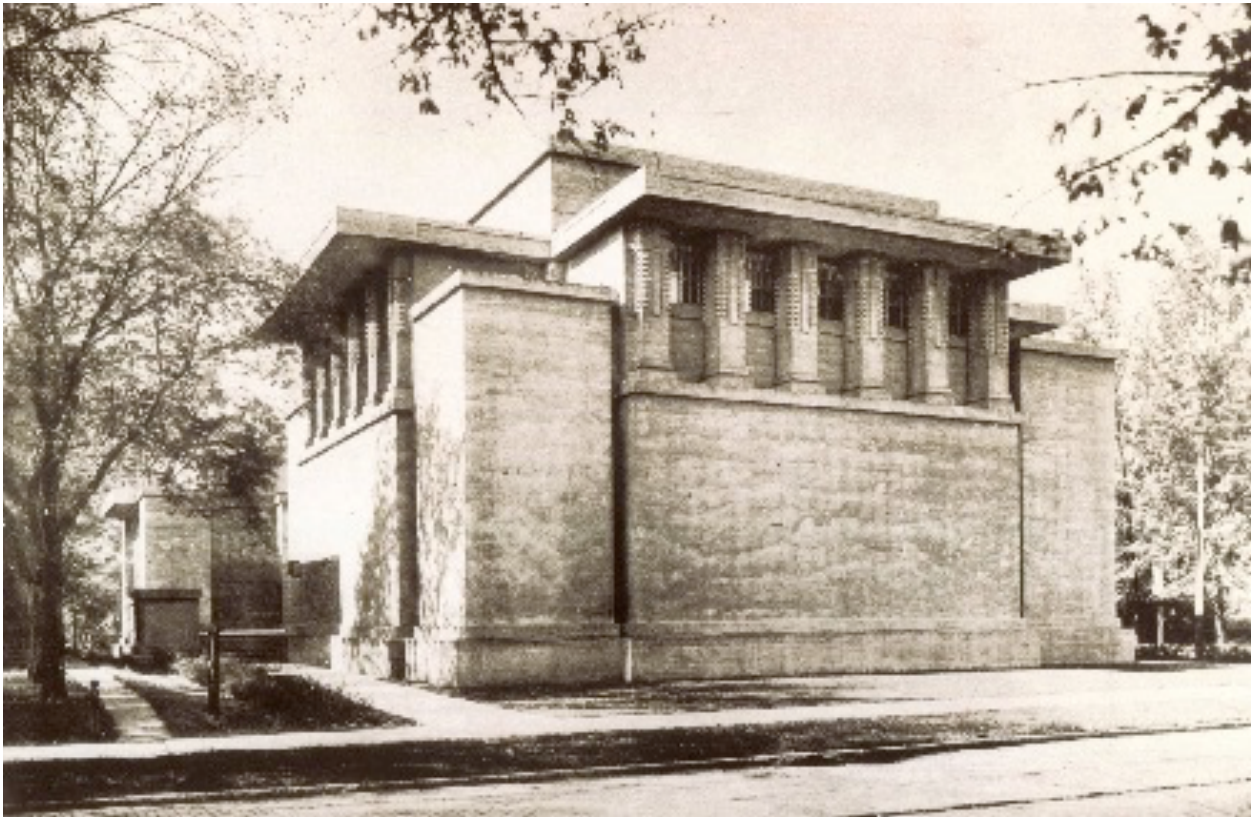


Fig. 1 Unity Temple, Chicago, the construction joint and the gravel pockets in the north elevation a few years after the building was realized, 1910 circa, public domain.

56), enhanced by a rust patina of its brass coverings; or the Johnson Wax Building (1936-39), that perfectly balances a profusion of materials like brick, cement, glass tubing. However, accepting the process which led to a positive result out of the negotiation between the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation and the Unesco, the aim of this text is to focus on the ambiguity dealing with the listed Wrightian Unesco Heritage, in order to focus on the widespread American approach to restoration, in many cases contrary to the principles of the Charter of Venice. Using the example of four listed works - the Guggenheim Museum, the Unity Temple, the Robie House and Taliesin West - it will be evident how liable are the concept of integrity and authenticity and how necessary is to draw the American conservation culture into a wider debate. In order to give a key role to the dichotomy Time-Architecture, this case-studies will also show how knowing the design intents of the architect affects the material document, making the restoration a research of a falsified unity rather than the expression of the events occurred during time.

#### **Authenticity, Integrity and Time in Wright's Architecture**

In the Guggenheim Museum, time is the protagonist of the work not only for the variety of design solution that led to the result<sup>4</sup>, nor for the temporal singularity that involves the viewer in covering the indoor helicoid<sup>5</sup>, but also in the realization of an intentional monument with a clear sense of durability expressed in the accurate pick by Wright of cements, formworks and external paints<sup>6</sup>. In recent years, a survey aimed to the restoration brought



Fig. 2 Unity Temple, Chicago, the grid metal reinforcement placed in the outdoor elevation in the recent restoration works, 2015, Harboe Architects.



Fig. 3 Unity Temple, Chicago, the shotcrete in the recent restoration works, 2015, Harboe Architects.

out many historical information about the Guggenheim, demonstrating that even an authorial example of architecture is a palimpsest of events. On the other hand, the result of the restoration completed in 2008 was of questionable value for the loss of many aspects that document experimentation and construction ingenuity. Even though the restorers<sup>7</sup> showed to know the Venice Charter principle that «the valid contributions of all periods to the building of a monument must be respected» and that the Nara «progressive authenticity» implies that the values of a fabric are not limited to its origins, the outcome of the restoration was the substitution of all the original frame glass walls of the Rotunda for environmental effects, like air condensed on the cold glass in winter<sup>8</sup>. A technological flaw, the non-thermally broken steel frame, led to the slight decision of losing forever these historic elements, an approach quite far from the celebrated intervention at the Pirelli Skyscraper in Milan, whose disassembling, pickling, cleaning and reassembling of the curtain wall was considered an extraordinary conservation result opposed to the Anglo-Saxon replacing approach<sup>9</sup>.

Moving to a different work, the Unity Temple in Oak Park has a complex history due to its pioneering open-faced concrete (fig.1). Ever since the original formworks were removed, in 1910, the façade showed horizontal construction joints and gravel pockets that led to cyclical concrete castings over the years until the comprehensive restoration of 1971. The previous conditions are described by Edgar Tafel: «the concrete [...] was raw. It had weathered badly. A coat of protective paint applied about ten years ago hadn't improved it; cracks showed thorough»<sup>10</sup>. The complex restoration of the '70s held by Wright's oldest son, Lloyd Wright, consisted in recasting the external surface, this time reinforced with a metal grid. After almost forty years, the shotcrete deterioration gave reason for another restoration completed in 2015. In the *Final Outcomes Report* of this renovation it is stated the intention to let the repair of cracks «visually disappear»<sup>11</sup> aiming to display an homogeneous cementitious covering on the entire building<sup>12</sup> (fig.2-3). This approach is based on the neglect of the concept of *patina* and distinctiveness of compensation, refusing to acknowledge the Brandi's principle of «time as an essential component of architecture [...] that distinguishes and separates such structures from the present and [...] continues to shape and define them through weathering»<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, the last surface layer is not perceived as a technological



Fig. 4 Robie House, Chicago, the indoor level of reconstruction in the wooden finishes, the light devices, the window frames, 2019, Harboe Architects.



Fig. 5 Robie House, Chicago, the indoor level of reconstruction in the wooden finishes, the wooden floors, the light devices, the window frames, the ceiling rough plaster, 2019, Harboe Architects.

and historical element, but as a surface of sacrifice resettable without affecting authenticity with its unaltered novelty value.

Remaining in Chicago, the Robie House represents a milestone not only as the final expression of the Prairie Style, but also in the American heritage protection history, being the first built landmark listed in the Chicago legislation in 1971<sup>14</sup>. The threat of its demolition in 1941 caused the reaction of many influential figures to save this invaluable heritage. Averted from being destroyed, the house went through various uses, losing most of its furnishing and finishes. With the birth of the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust in 1997 it was started a campaign of fundraising that led to a restoration from 2001 to 2017 in order to make the house an “archeological site” of the Modern Movement, frozen in the ideal original time. The current Management Plan of the Robie House foresees to replace the damaged bricks under «Wright’s original specifications»<sup>15</sup>, without any reference to the distinctiveness principle. The same can be said on the indoor wooden finishes, lighting devices, window frames, magnesite floors, rough plasters, restored to make them identical to the photographs of 1916, showing how the cultural significance of restoration is subjected to the narration around Wright, using its works to increase the commercial value of its legacy (fig.4-5).

Moving westward, the last case, Taliesin West, shows dramatically the impact of substitution of the inclined redwood beams, the canvas, the notched wooden decoration, that caused the loss of the genuine character of this desert settlement. The current «use of glazing and fixed translucent glass allowed the installation of an air conditioning system, but it also changed the nature of the building. [...] In the first version, the roofs should have looked like something alive and throbbing; today, their rigidity has completely forgotten this effect»<sup>16</sup>. Though the 2015 *Preservation Masterplan of Taliesin West* defined these changes as deleterious, the plan aims to make an



Fig. 6 Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Wright and his apprentices in the studio covered by the original redwood beams and canvas, 1940 circa, Ralph Crane.



Fig. 7 Taliesin West, Scottsdale, the current studio with the new metal beams, the glass windows and a new lighting system, 2014, inexibit.com.

effort «to return the core of the campus back to the period of significance associated with the life of Frank Lloyd Wright»<sup>17</sup>, showing, once again, the subordination of the 11th article of the Venice Charter to the authorship of the settlement (fig.6-7-8).

### Conclusions

The concepts pointed out so far are fully reflected in the criticism toward the American restoration by Donatella Fiorani, that describes the interest on architecture more as an «overall narration than an investigation of the figurative and constructional aspects»<sup>18</sup>. The narration, that is also a tool to «dramatize events into conservational terms»<sup>19</sup>, explicit in the case of Wright, obscures every accident occurred to the material legacy, transforming the «physical concreteness of the historic built heritage into a symbolic element»<sup>20</sup> and considering «architecture as a tool for illustrating history»<sup>21</sup>. This manipulation implies that architecture isn't the historical document but the blank page on which overwrite a new story that erases the past signs. In this perspective, the mythical narration of Modern Movement and photographs have an enormous role to convey different values through restoration, regardless if cultural or commercial. Though the USA approach can also highlight good aspects, as the ability to increase the mediatic interest to facilitate the fundraising campaign for restoration, it is the little awareness of Brandi's theory of restoration that causes the gap with the Italian and European approach. This Atlantic incommunicability on the themes of architectural conservation becomes a serious issue with such a rich modern heritage that, beyond Wright, includes Mies and many other masters.

In this condition, Unesco policy could turn the current bureaucratic compliance of the protection requirements into a concrete evaluation of authenticity, going beyond a management plan fulfillment and entering the merits of the cultural issues relating to material conservation of architecture.

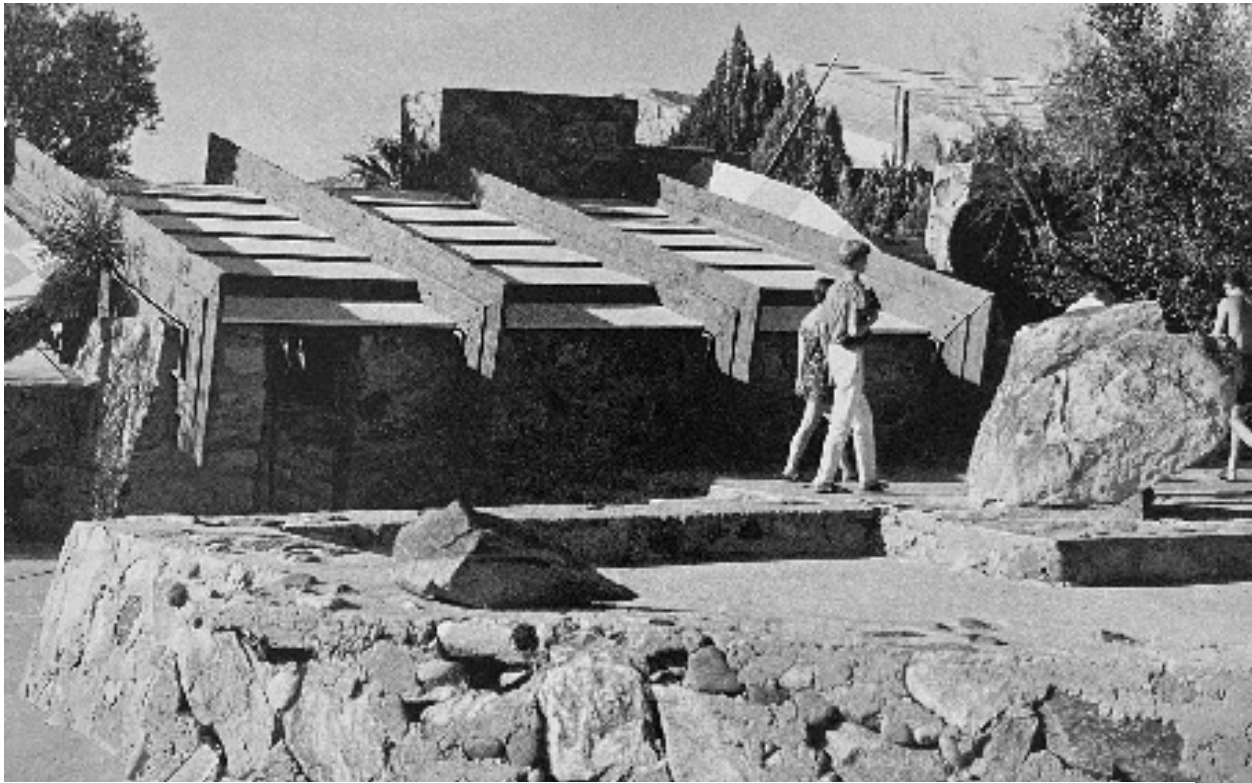


Fig. 8 Taliesin West, Scottsdale, the outdoor view of the redwood original beam and canvas, 1950 circa, G.E. Kidder Smith.

<sup>1</sup> Unity Temple (1905-08), Oak Park; Robie House (1908-10), Chicago; Taliesin (1911-1925), Spring Green; Hollyhock House (1919-21), Los Angeles; Fallingwater (1936-39), Mill Run; Jacobs House (1937), Madison; Taliesin West (1937-1959), Scottsdale; Guggenheim Museum (1956-59), New York.

<sup>2</sup> *The 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright*, World Heritage Convention, whc.unesco.org.

<sup>3</sup> JACK QUINAN, *Frank Lloyd Wright, Preservation and the Question of Authenticity*, «Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians», 67, 1, March 2008, University of California Press, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> FRANCESCO DAL CO, *Il tempo e l'architetto. Frank Lloyd Wright e il Guggenheim Museum*, Milano, Mondadori, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> BRUNO ZEVI, *Temporalità dello spazio*, in *Il linguaggio moderno dell'architettura*, Torino, Einaudi, 1973.

<sup>6</sup> RENATA PICONE, *Il moderno alla prova del tempo. Restauro e deperibilità delle architetture del XX secolo*, «Confronti», I, 2012, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> WASA/Studio A and William B. Rose & Associates.

<sup>8</sup> ANGEL AYÓN, *Historic Fabric vs. Design Intent. Authenticity and Preservation of Modern Architecture at Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum*, «Journal of Architectural Conservation», 15, 3, 2009, pp. 41-53.

<sup>9</sup> MARIA ANTONIETTA CRIPPA, *Il restauro del grattacielo Pirelli*, Ginevra-Milano, Skira, 2007, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> EDGAR TAFEL, *Years with Frank Lloyd Wright. Apprentice to Genius*, Toronto, General Publishing Company, 1979, pp. 176-177.

<sup>11</sup> *Unity Temple – Final Outcomes Report*, Harboe Architects, 2015. p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>13</sup> FRANK G. MATERO, *Loss, Compensation, and Authenticity: The Contribution of Cesare Brandi to Architectural Conservation in America*, «Journal of Historic Preservation», 4, 1, Summer 2007, p. 52.

<sup>14</sup> THEODORE H. PRUDON, *Preservation of Modern Architecture*, Hoboken NJ, John Wiley & Sons, 2008, p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> *Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie Vision. Frederick C. Robie House Conservation Management Plan*, Frank Lloyd Wright Trust, May 2019. P. 98.

<sup>16</sup> HUGH HOWARD, ROGER STRAUS III, *Wright for Wright*, New York, Rizzoli International, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> *Taliesin West Preservation Master Plan*, Prepared by Harboe Architects, May 21, 2015, p. 112.

<sup>18</sup> DONATELLA FIORANI, *The other shore. Preservation and the past in the United States*, «LOGGIA», 26, Valencia, 2013, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ivi*, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> *Ivi*, p. 17.