

Frank Lloyd Wright and the Index to his Taliesin Correspondence: A Brief History

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Frank Lloyd Wright was as a man of letters. His published books, lectures, and essays make him one of the most productive writers among modern architects. He was also a prolific letter writer, and kept not only carbon copies of his correspondence, but he also retained the letters he received, both personal and professional. Those letters along with his drawings, are major components of his historical legacy.

Using the letters for comprehensive research, however, was not possible until the late 1980s. My encounter with the material began around 1984 when I started research for my doctoral dissertation, *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Lessons of Europe*. After getting vetted by Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. I traveled to Taliesin West to start my work in the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives. Bruce Pfeiffer, the director and founder of the archive, welcomed me and, after my initial visit, invited me to return and stay at Taliesin West. As I planned to spend long periods of time living at Taliesin West Bruce gave me full access to all the material in the archives, the first such access provided to any scholar. Mrs. Wright was still alive and approved the arrangement. My experience in working with original materials on a daily basis, particularly the drawings, was stunning. Research on my dissertation—Wright’s connections to Europe, the factual history of his Wasmuth publications, and the transformation of his architecture in the teens—went well, but a problem arose with using the vast correspondence. The originals were in manila folders in numerous storage boxes and not organized in any logical way that allowed comprehensive research. Only about half of them had been photocopied or scanned. I realized that beyond the necessity for my dissertation, access to

this material would be invaluable to the future of scholarship on Wright and to the history of modern architecture.

To provide that access I conceived a project to organize the material. It had two components: a complete set of images that would allow consulting the material without disturbing the original documents, and a data base that would list and allow searching for the letters. For the database I wrote a computer program for non-specialists to input the data for the letters. The data categories included author, addressee, (to, from), number of pages, date, general subjects numerically noted, specific subjects, institutional affiliation, project number, and places for indexer comments—a total of 10 fields.

To finance the project I sought support from the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities (known by 1990 as the Getty Research Institute), which was at the time located in Santa Monica and assembling its research collections. Nicholas Olsberg, head of the research archives, facilitated and supported the project with the assistance of Gene Waddell, associate archivist and his colleague. The Getty funded photographing the documents onto microfiche and paid for the data inputting, including my hiring a small staff, supervised by a professional librarian. Cataloguing took place in Cambridge, Massachusetts courtesy of some unused offices loaned to us by Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The staff read the letters from microfiche on second-hand readers we'd found in Boston and input the data into the software template I had created in a now-outdated program, Dbase III. There weren't many software options at that time, and the program allowed indexing in all the required categories. After returning from Taliesin, I supervised the project from New York City where I was based. When the cataloguers had finished their work, I checked the entries against the letters for accuracy. With over 100,000 entries representing over 300,000 page of text I knew some errors would creep in and hoped they could be corrected later.

To disseminate the entries as a series of indices, I approached Garland Publishing, Inc, a specialist in large scale archival publications and catalogue raisonnés. They published the indices in five large format volumes directly from the database. The title, *Frank Lloyd Wright: An Index to the Taliesin Correspondence*, referred collectively to all the indices with me identified as Editor. Garland set a high original price to allow printing a relatively small number of copies.

The Chronological Index was published in two parts: volume one went from 1885-1946. The front matter of this volume contains my essay “Frank Lloyd Wright as a Man of Letters,” the “Guide to the Indices and the Archives,” the “List of General Subject Codes, a “History of the Project” by Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer; a “Guide to the Archives of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation” by Nicholas Olsberg. The general subjects comprised twenty-two categories that characterize the content of the documents, e. g. number 8 for finance or 17 for specifications. The project numbers for Wright’s buildings and designs, provided by Pfeiffer, extend from 1887 to 1959. The specific number represents the year of a project and its sequence, e.g. the number 3812 refers to the year 1938 and 12th project in that year. The numbers were as accurate as Pfeiffer could determine at that time and remain generally reliable. However, some dates continue to be revised based on new scholarship. Much of this front matter was included in the following volumes.

Volume two contains the Chronological Index from 1947-1965. Volume three lists the Index of Authors. Organized alphabetically, it shows who wrote and sent letters. Volume four is the Index of Addressees, organized alphabetically by the people to whom letters had been sent. Volume five contains four indices: Affiliation (companies, institutions, and groups); General Subjects, in numerical order by codes 01-22; Proper Name with full and partial personal names organized alphabetically; and Project Number in numerical order from 8702 to 5913.

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

I included every item immediately available in the Wright Archives. Each letter received a unique identifying number referring to its location on a microfiche card. A few entries included the note “image not available,” which usually referred to an oversize document that didn’t fit the usual fiche format. The collection turned out to be lean for early letters, particularly before 1909, as well as for family letters. Other significant collections lay outside the Wright Archive holdings, including the extensive correspondence between Wright and Darwin D. Martin at the State University of New York in Buffalo, and the documentation uncovered by William Marlin, who was working on Wright’s definitive biography at his untimely death in 1994.

The Getty lists an accurate and detailed description on its finding aid via the internet:

7 microfiche boxes.

Microfiche copies of 103,071 documents in the Archives of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Arizona. Documents include letters, occasional specifications and printed ephemera. Letters are between Wright or members of his firms (particularly the Taliesin Fellowship) and clients, suppliers of building materials, architectural historians, publishers, Taliesin students, fellow architects, and others. Documents are arranged chronologically within each letter of the alphabet and have been indexed by date, author, addressee, affiliation, major subjects and project number.

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USING THE INDEX

Central to the scholarly use of the *Index* and letters was depositing one set of the microfiche at the Getty Center in Los Angeles and one set at the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives at Taliesin West. Anyone interested in the letters could consult the printed index, then read the correspondence at either or both of those two locations, or could order photocopies from the Getty.

It still provides this service as of 2020. Research access to the Wright Archives is now possible at the Avery Library of Columbia University by prior appointment where the second set of microfiche is housed along with the original documents.

The use of the Index is straightforward. By consulting the printed volumes a researcher can compose a list of letters using the various indices of letters to whom, from whom, date, and so forth. The data for each letter can be noted and, in particular, its fiche number. At the research center, the scholar can use the fiche number to locate, read the original the letter on microfiche, and, with the archive's permission, copy it. Or, the scholar can contact the research center to discuss with an archivist obtaining copies by mail. In each case the fiche number is the unique identifier of the document. Digital searching can provide concatenated searches. For instance, an archivist can find all the letters between Frank Lloyd Wright and Philip Johnson between 1929 and 1932 as well as sort data in various ways. Concatenated searches and new patterns of communication offer the possibility of discovering networks for research.

The availability of this material in index and on microfiche fundamentally altered production of knowledge on Frank Lloyd Wright, providing the first scientific investigation of the letters and vastly expanded serious research on the architect and his work. The availability of the *Index* occurred simultaneously with the Wright Archives publishing, notably under Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, dozens of new books of previously unpublished materials, and increasing public access to the Archives. Open access to the Wright archive began, therefore, some thirty year before the Wright Archive was sold to Columbia University and the Museum of Modern Art in 2012.

After the original publication of the *Index* I had hoped it could be expanded and developed. The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, which went through several CEO's after Mrs. Wright's death in 1985, however, had other priorities as did the Getty though it still serves as a main research

source. Because I was visiting all the Wright archives in that period, I knew there were other collections of letters that could complement the major corpus at Taliesin West. They could have been added but this kind of scholarly work grew increasingly uninteresting to institutions as the boom on Wright, Wrightiana, and branding expanded.

The future of the Index raises interesting questions. The hard copy version has been long out of print. I retain the official copyright to the compilation of the index and have not authorized any online digital accesses to the index or reproduction or conversion of the data in any format including spread sheets. Current access at Columbia University and the Getty Research Institute may be quite adequate. But should the hard copy volumes be reprinted to facilitate off-premises research? Or a digital version made available by controlled subscription or open access? Should new material be added to the main corpus? And should all the letters themselves be digitized? Hopefully these questions will be answered in the near future.

The Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy bestowed Wright Spirit Award in 2006 in recognition of this work as “an invaluable reference tool for Wright scholars and researchers the world over.”

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Note: This account is an expanded version of my public lecture, “Frank Lloyd Wright and His Taliesin Letters” for the Avery Friends of the Columbia University, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York City. 8 October 2013.

Source for Getty description: https://primo.getty.edu/primo-explore/fulldisplay?vid=GRI&docid=GETTY_ALMA21140812400001551&context=L

